

**INTRODUCTION:
THE CRITICAL EDITION AND ITS CRITICS
A RETROSPECTIVE OF MAHĀBHĀRATA SCHOLARSHIP**

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The articles included in this volume were all presented at a special two-part panel on the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata* at the 39th Annual South Asia Conference in Madison, Wisconsin between the 14th and 17th of October 2010. Conceived roughly half a century after the completion of the Critical Edition of the *Mahābhārata*, the panel's aim was to bring together advocates and critics of the Critical Edition to evaluate its impact upon *Mahābhārata* scholarship. Eight scholars from Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, and Mexico met to discuss the future of scholarship on the great epic. Although the authors have had an opportunity since then to revise their submissions (and some have done so substantially), the papers nonetheless represent the collective result of these three days of intensive and immensely fruitful discussions on the *Mahābhārata*.*

Early Beginnings

The Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*, is a complex literary and philosophical project. The epic is structured into eighteen "major books" or *parvans* divided into numerous "minor books" or *upaparvans* and deals with the narrative of creation. It begins with a cosmogony and a theogony and proceeds via the birth of the first humans to a final consummation in an epic battle. This battle, however, is no mere human conflict. In it, the gods triumph over the anti-gods, and an age (called *dvāpara yuga*) comes to an end. Throughout, the epic includes profound

meditations on the nature of human action, the relation of fate to human agency, and the goals of human existence.¹ The epic's main concern is with the problem of existence in time, but this question is not limited to a narrowly subjective perspective. Indeed, the question of being in time is posed against the background of eternity, referred to ontologically as *brahman* and theologically as Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. If one were to summarize the epic in a nutshell, Hegel's statement in his *Science of Logic* that he wanted to present "the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind"² gives some indication of the literary scope of the epic.

Unfortunately, modern scholarship on the epic was long hampered by its historicizing prejudices. Early Orientalists were excited by what they considered to be the earliest historical records from the subcontinent. Here, at last, was a text that seemed to provide glimpses of ancient Indian culture, including stories of noble kings, beautiful princesses, spacious palaces, and, of course, great battles.³ As historical materials about ancient Indian history were few and far between, the text appeared to be a veritable godsend. Indeed, Lassen in 1837 declared that a history of India was "only to be constructed with the help of the *Mahābhārata*," specifically, with those "fragments of ancient history" still preserved underneath its "poesy."⁴ In their eagerness to finally learn something about India's past, early Orientalists barely paused to consider the epic's claim to being literature.⁵ 19th century scholars not only dismissed the explicit statements found in the epic that declare it to be a poetic composition, the "thought entire" (*matam kṛtsnam*; 1.1.23, 1.55.2, 1.56.12) of sage Vyāsa, but also rejected the traditional Indian reception of the text as being "uncritical" or "religious-dogmatic."⁶

To be sure, early Orientalists acknowledged that the epic also contained many other elements—"mythic," "philosophical," "didactic"—etc., but they held these to be later additions to an historical core. "The *Mahābhārata*," writes Hermann Oldenberg, "began its existence as a simple epic narrative. It became, in the course of centuries, the most monstrous chaos [ungeheuerliches Chaos]: besides the main narrative there are true primal forests of smaller narratives, besides that countless and endless teachings about theological, philosophical, natural-scientific matters, law, politics, worldly wisdom and practical advice."⁷ As these early scholars were unwilling to concede that the epic could be literature, they were also convinced that every word in it referring to events, persons, or social conditions had to be taken at face value. Even if later ages had projected their religious and ethical values onto the text, there was nonetheless a core of journalistic truth to these events. The *Mahābhārata* could not be compared to the

great histories of Egyptian or Babylonian civilization,⁸ but there was no doubt that the earliest “layers” of the text must have referred to a historical reality.⁹ The scholar only had to separate out the mythic elements from the text, and he would soon arrive at conditions recognizably similar to those of ancient Germany or ancient Greece.¹⁰

Crucially this set of presuppositions also determined the basic approach to the *Mahābhārata*. Whereas the text is self-confessedly a meditation on the nature of being in time,¹¹ scholars were more inclined to insist on the epic’s historical meaning. Lassen’s researches into ancient Indian history culminated in his outlining a basic approach to the epic that was to be determinative for over two centuries of scholarship. “The *Mahābhārata*,” he declares, is “a collection of old epic poems, which were intentionally added to the poem of the battle of the *Pāndavas*, and not a single great heroic legend, which, in the course of oral transmission, had unconsciously fused other legends with itself. It is not a collection of historical poems in the genuine sense; the historical in the narrations has been retained, so to speak, without knowledge of the compilers.” Henceforth, the task of critical scholarship would be exclusively identified with the aim of excavating this “historical in the narrations,” which had, so to speak, been retained in the text without its Indian readers or scribes being aware of it, while *Mahābhārata* criticism itself would come to be identified with the question of where, when, and how various agencies (Brahmanic, Kṛṣṇaite, Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, etc.) had “interpolated” themselves into the epic.¹²

A “Critical” Turn

In addition to the prospect of a critical understanding of Indian history, many scholars were also motivated by the prospect of helping Indians appreciate their own history. Ever since Hegel, Orientalist scholars had considered Indians to be incapable of history. To these writers, the reception of the *Mahābhārata* as a theological text offered confirmation of Hegel’s suspicions. India’s lack of historical consciousness, they reasoned, was a direct consequence of spiritual excesses. Indeed, the absence of historical consciousness could be directly attributed to the priestly caste’s need to control and to impose their religion on their naïve followers. As Goldstücker wrote in 1879, “When, by priestcraft and ignorance, a nation has lost itself so far as to look upon writings like these as divinely inspired, there is but one conclusion to be drawn: it has arrived at the turning-point of its destinies. Hinduism stands at this point...” But all was not lost. “The cause of the gradual degeneracy of Hinduism,” Goldstücker reasoned,

was no “different from those to which other religions are subject, when allowed to grow in the dark.” “In Europe, religious depravity received its check when the art of printing allowed the light of publicity to enter into the book whence her nations derive their faith.” So, too, “no other means” was capable of imposing a “check” on it “in India than the admission of the masses to that original book which is always on their lips, but which now is the monopoly of the infinitesimal fraction of the Brahminical caste able to understand its sense.”

Historical-critical research into Indian texts thus, from the very beginning, carried an ethical imperative along with it. It was charged not only with the task of enabling a *Klärung* or “clarification” of Indian texts, but also that of an *Aufklärung* or “Enlightenment” of the Indian mind.¹³ In Goldstücker’s words, “If those intelligent Hindus of whom we are speaking” were to have “the will and the energy to throw open that book, and the literature connected with it, to the people at large, without caring for the trammels imposed on caste by the politicians of late ages,” they were sure to attain to a “new vitality” amidst their “decaying life.” Indeed, so potent was the new ideology and so great the expectations associated with the historical-critical method that Goldstücker considered the results to be “foreshadowed.” As in Europe, Indians would ultimately make use of the insights made available to them to do “what their forefathers attempted to do, but did not succeed in accomplishing,” i.e., “break through the artificial bonds which had already in their day enslaved Hindu society.”¹⁴

As tempting as the prospect of being at the forefront of an Oriental Enlightenment was, scholars also had more immediate reasons for being interested in the Sanskrit epic. The realization in the 18th century that German, Greek, and Sanskrit formed a related group of languages was an event of monumental significance for European self-understanding. The study of Indo-European (or, as they were called in Germany, “Indo-Germanic”) languages quickly proliferated across universities. Especially in Germany, research into Indo-German origins became a major focus of academic activity.¹⁵ Theories of linguistic kinship soon gave rise to speculation concerning the racial and physical constitution of the “Indo-Germanic” or, as they were soon called, “Āryan,” races. Although the term “Āryan” was originally introduced as a linguistic category in the work of the French scholar Anquetil du Perron (in the French form “ariens”) in 1763, the term progressively came to designate a particular race (*Volk* or *Rasse*). In 1776, the German scholar Johann Friedrich Kleuker used the term “Arier” for the first time in his translation of du Perron’s work. By the mid-19th century, however, one can note the existence a well-

established discourse on the “Āryans,” including speculations about their physiognomic characteristics, their racial and genetic profile, and their spiritual superiority versus non-Āryan and Semitic races.¹⁶

Given the German obsession with establishing Āryan origins for themselves, it is not surprising that German epic scholars were deeply interested in what the *Mahābhārata* had to say about the Āryan race. Already in 1837, Christian Lassen wrote, “I will leave out here a discussion of the names *Pāndu* and *Kriṣṇa*, white and black, and merely throw out the suggestion that they are a reference to the two races that fought each other in Indian pre-history, the original native black [einheimische schwarze] and the light-skinned [hellfarbige], Sanskrit-speaking interlopers from the North, whose westernmost racial kin [i.e., the European settlers] even now are fighting a similar battle with similar supremacy against the red races of America.”¹⁷ In his 1867 text, Lassen once again distinguishes between the “white Āryans [weisse Arier]” and “black aborigines [schwarzen Urbewohner],” albeit now coupled with a theory about how, as the earliest Āryan invaders moved further into India, they became progressively more “dark-skinned [dunkelfarbiger]” due to “the influence of the climate.”¹⁸ Oldenberg, too, takes a similar approach in his 1922 text, where he writes that the *Mahābhārata* constitutes “the powerful link between old and new India, the India of the Āryan and of the Hindu.” The epic, Oldenberg further declares, arose in “northern India,” “which enters overwhelmingly into consideration for antiquity as the homeland of Āryan culture.”¹⁹

When it came to describing these putative Āryans, German scholars were unambiguous in attributing warlike tendencies to them. As the German Indologist Adolf Holtzmann, Jr. declared in 1891,

Here now, in the first place, the thoroughly warlike worldview [*kriegerische Weltanschauung*] is to be highlighted which constitutes the genuine soul of the old portions of the epic.... Instead of the elegiac wisdom, the resignation, being tired of life, of later Indian literature, the raw warrior-like air of the old Germanic North blows against us here. If we were ever to succeed in determining the oldest cultural phase of the Indian race accessible to research and to dissolve away almost by means of a chemical process all influences of the Brahmanism that is already slowly developing ... we would find conditions before us only a little different from those described by *Tacitus* as unique to the ancient Germans. But even in its contemporary ruined form the *Mahābhārata* often delivers us the best commentary on Germania. [!] Here we read of the passion for gambling of the Germans, of how they wagered possessions and property, wife and child, [and] finally even themselves....²⁰

Even more problematic than these idealized images of the Āryan/ Germanic warrior, however, was the idea that successful scholarship depended on some kind of racial affinity between the scholar and the object of his inquiry. Here, too, German scholars took the lead. Quite often, their polemics were directed not against Indian scholarship, but against British or Continental scholars, whom they saw as their real rivals for authority.

Hermann Oldenberg, for example, argued that German scholars had an inherent advantage over their British counterparts. Although not unaware of the material advantages of the British Indologists,²¹ Oldenberg nonetheless held that these scarcely compared to the advantages of German Indologists. “If we may not feel securing of [possessing] an immediate feeling for the Indian present,” he writes, “we nonetheless see with greater certitude in the distance of the Indian past, i.e., in the period that is, above all, important for us—we who do not have to participate in the administration of India but who seek to interpret the documents of the Indian tradition concerning the problems of human history. We know the Hindu less well than our [British] colleagues who live in his country and breathe his air. But to us is given, I hold, the possibility of knowing the Āryan of old India better than these [colleagues].”²² Indeed, for Oldenberg, German precedence in Indology was ultimately a function of racial consanguinity with the ancient Āryans, as he explicitly claimed in a text from 1886. There, he notes that “There still lies shapeless in these workshops [i.e., German universities] a block or two of uncut stone, perhaps in order to resist the form-giving hand forever, but nonetheless some shapes have also become visible under the active chisel, [and] from their features the distant past, the bygone existence of that strange race [Volkes] looks back at us that is kin with our race [Volke] and yet whose paths have separated, both internally and externally, so far from our paths.”²³

A Question of Introductions

While the foregoing remarks may appear to be “merely historical,” there is a lot more at stake here. One could take refuge in the illusion that no serious scholar today would go to the barricades to defend 18th and 19th century scholarship on the epic. But to do so is to betray the philological method to its very core: it is to say that the truth of a thing is *not* its history. If the truth of philology is not its history, then philology, which rests on history, is guilty of a serious contradiction. By abandoning its scientific commitment to history, the text-historical method becomes another cult: immune to self-criticism, immune to

history, placing its method above its own history, claiming some objective truth that is beyond history and beyond the hermeneutic situatedness of the scholar. Meanwhile the practitioners of this method claim normative, constitutive, and hegemonic privileges for this method. Without creating consensus²⁴ and operating with hypothetical criteria, text-historical approaches to the epic seek to set themselves above the basic principle of philology: the truth of a thing is its history. And, lest anyone should question the method or its correct application, there is always the language of “*Wissenschaft*” (science) and “*Wissenschaftlichkeit*” (scientificity), which is used as a potent rhetorical tool. But even if one were to grant that this approach was only groping in the dark with the two Holtzmanns and Lassen and has since become more “scientific,” the fact remains that the hypotheses of these older scholars continue to contaminate contemporary work. I do grant that the text-historical method is a sophisticated and a useful method, and can create useful results. But in the case of this epic, the prejudices of earlier scholars have not been sufficiently examined or corrected for.

Thus, one finds a naïve acceptance in *Mahābhārata* studies of Lassen’s 1837 thesis that the epic “was primarily intended for the warrior caste,”²⁵ as also of the claim that “What the genuine *Bhārata* is cannot be doubted; it is the breach between the two ancient royal lineages; everything relates to this central point”²⁶ Even today, most introductions to the *Mahābhārata* begin with similar statements. J. A. B. van Buitenen, whose translation of the Critical Edition is perhaps the most widely used English edition today, begins his introduction to the *Mahābhārata* as follows:

The central story of *The Mahābhārata* takes its matter from the legitimacy of the succession to the kingdom of Kurukṣetra in northern India. This kingdom was the ancestral realm of a clan known by several styles, the most common being that of Bhārata.²⁷

Given this prejudice, it is unsurprising that most interpretations tend to privilege the so-called central war narrative and discount the ethical and philosophical aspects of the text. Van Buitenen, for example, distinguishes between “The Central Story,” “The Fuzzy Edges,” “The Second Perimeter,” and “The Third Perimeter” to account for the epic’s present form.²⁸ Such an approach, of course, requires us to assume that the epic’s authors, readers, scribes, and commentators must either not have had any idea of what the epic was about, or suffered from acute memory loss when it came to history. Thus, in order to explain the epic, van Buitenen first posits a putative historical core (“The Central Story”), and then introduces, in succession, “proliferation” or

“growth” (“The Fuzzy Edges”), “inept mythification” (“The Second Perimeter”), and, finally, “Brahminization” (“The Third Perimeter”). One sees how the basic prejudice “history equals truth” in turn necessitates further hypotheses such as the attribution of historical hypomnesia to the ancients and historical paramnesia (i.e., a distortion of memory in which fact and fantasy are confused). Finally, when these memory disorders cannot explain the form of the epic, there is always the catchall: historical perversion by the brahmins.²⁹

Indeed, the main shortcoming of early *Mahābhārata* scholarship was its failure to take the epic’s genre identification seriously. Early Orientalists, as we have seen, were incapable of appreciating the epic’s richness. For them, there was no question that the *Mahābhārata* was a historical narrative—one that was, to be sure, “interpolated” with other kinds of material, but a historical narrative nonetheless. In Oldenberg’s words, “Whether the narrative plays out in the king’s palace or on the battle-field or in the wild forest or the dwelling-place of monsters, giants, pious ascetics: overall there could only exist colorfully embellished, wonder-filled occurrence. There, interruptions [and] ineffectual elements were removed, a context created between what did not belong together, what lay distant was brought close and woven into the presentation, above all, fantasy’s need to see great heroic figures in the central fantasy given satisfaction—all *this historically and unhistorically* alike, beyond truth and falsity.”³⁰ The question of the *Mahābhārata*’s genre identification, however, is a complex one, as Hildebeitel has shown. The epic does refer to itself as an *itihāsa*, a term often translated as “history,” but it also uses a range of other terms to describe itself, as Hildebeitel notes:

Most frequently, the *Mahābhārata* characterizes itself fourteen times as a “narrative” (*ākhyāna*: 1.1.16a; 1.2.29b, 235c, 238a, 239b, 240b, and 241b; 1.53.31d and 32a; 1.56.1c, 30c, 32c; 12.337.10a, 18.45.53a) and eight times as a “history” (*itihāsa*: 1.1.17a, 24d, 52c; 1.2.237a, 1.51.16c, 1.56.18c and 19a, 1.93.46c). But it also calls itself a work of “ancient lore” (*purāṇa*: 1.1.15b, 1.56.15d), a “story” (*kathā*: 1.56.2a), a “collection” (*saṃhitā*: 1.1.19.1c and 61b), a “fifth Veda” (1.57.74ab, 12.327.18ab), the “Veda that pertains to Kṛṣṇa” (*Kārṣṇa Veda*, probably referring primarily to Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa—1.1.205a, 1.56.17c), a “great knowledge” (*mahaj-jñāna*: 1.1.25b and 49a), a “treatise” (*śāstra*: 1.56.21: indeed, in this verse, a *dharmaśāstra*, *arthaśāstra*, and *mokṣaśāstra*; and probably 12.238.13c), an *upaniṣad* (1.1.191a), a “biography” or “adventure” (*carita*: 1.56.1d), a “victory” (*jaya*: 1.56.19a), and, surprisingly, a “subtale” (*upākhyāna*: 1.2.236a)! In addition, while not calling itself one as a whole, the epic is also a de facto “dialogue” (*saṃvāda*), for it sustains the dialogical interlacing of each of its three dialogical frame levels, not to mention the multiple dialogues that the frame narrators and other

narrators report like the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which Saṃjaya can report to Dhṛtarāṣṭra “by the grace of Vyāsa” (*BhG* 18.73 and 75 = *Mbh* 6.40.73 and 75) thanks to Vyāsa’s having given him the divine eye (6.2.9-13; see Hildebeitel 2001a, 56 -59).

Hildebeitel’s careful studies of the epic thus open up an alternative way to look at the epic, one that does not privilege a hypothetical core over the epic’s literary and philosophical aspects. Such an approach requires us to take seriously the epic’s claim to being both a *dharmaśāstra* (a treatise on *dharma*) and a *mokṣaśāstra* (a treatise on *mokṣa*).³¹ The epic, as I have argued, constitutes a profound meditation on the nature of reality and becoming. It addresses the fundamental problem of being in time, which it analyzes under four rubrics: sacrifice, cosmology, genealogy, and war. The narrative presentation of these four “genera of becoming” takes the form of a comprehensive “narrative” (*itihāsa*) of becoming. The poet begins his narration with an invocation of the One as the “Primeval Person” (*ādyaṃ puruṣam*; 1.1.20) and proceeds from the birth of the cosmic egg (*br̥had aṇḍam*; 1.1.27) at the beginning of the eon via descriptions of genealogy to its culmination in a war that signals the ending of an age. Throughout, sacrifice is the model used to organize and understand the remaining three genera. The epic from the very beginning makes a distinction between the cyclical temporality of becoming and the eternity of *brahman* or absolute being.³² The philosophical task, which is not teleological but soteriological,³³ is completed in the twelfth book of the epic. Here we are given a description of how to once again attain the One. But since becoming is cyclical, the epic narrative itself continues for another six¹² books with a description of how the various partial incarnations of the gods, who had descended into becoming, are one-by-one reabsorbed and then concludes with the ascent to “heaven” of its main protagonists. The epic then shifts back to the narrative of the sacrifice at which it was originally recounted. In the final moments of this great sacrifice, “being” arrives³⁴ and the cycle from being to being is complete. “Thus, without beginning and without end,” the poet tells us, “rolls the wheel of existence around in this world, causing destruction and origin, beginningless and endless” (1.1.38).³⁵ However, the cycle of narration has not been in vain: the analysis of becoming in its four paradigmatic genera has yielded the soteriological insight into being as the absolute unconditioned. Further, the sacrifice has yielded a “sacrificial remainder” (*yajñāśiṣṭha* or *ucchiṣṭha*) in the form of the *Mahābhārata* itself.

With the completion of the Critical Edition in 1966, scholars for the first time had a single text reconstituted on the basis of the principles of text-historical criticism that could provide them an overview of the entire *Mahābhārata*

manuscript tradition. Crucially, the Critical Edition was also able to lay to rest many myths about the epic. In particular, as Brodbeck notes in his contribution in this volume, it provided no evidence in support of the hypothesis that “the text was only latterly swelled by the ‘intrusion of masses of didactic matter’ and the ‘addition of Puranic material old and new’” or that “the text only latterly included the frame story that tells of Janamejaya’s snake sacrifice (i.e. ‘the introduction to the first book’).” The Critical Edition thus dealt a major blow to the infamous hypothesis of an oral bardic heroic epic (*Heldenepos*) that later Brahmanic redactors would have “corrupted” through imposing their theology and moral code on the epic.³⁶ It also showed that there was no evidence for thinking the “war books” which recount the story of the Kuru conflict to be more original than the allegedly more Vedic *Ādiparvan*.

The Diremption of a Method

In spite of the evidence of the Critical Edition, however, some scholars continue to resurrect outdated views of the epic. Thus, Andreas Bigger argues that the Critical Edition merely succeeds in recovering what he refers to as the “normative redaction” of the text, but cannot rule out the existence of a more original text behind this redaction. Bigger’s views are typical of the “analytic” school, which frequently argues that the Critical Edition itself provides the strongest evidence for their views. Since the Critical Edition, they argue, shows that the *Mahābhārata* tradition was a dynamic one, with new materials being added to the epic at different times and in different locations, there is no reason to assume that the epic would also have been static in the past. In other words, they wish to posit a manuscript behind the oldest one excavated by Sukthankar.

Yet, this argument is only superficially appealing. As Joydeep Bagchee pointed out at the conference, there is a logical flaw in such arguments. To illustrate this, Bagchee gave the example of Luther’s translation of the Bible. We know that Luther issues his first translation of the New Testament in September 1522. A second revised edition already followed in December of 1522; the text was fundamentally revised in 1529, and a “final” edition published in 1530. But nor was this to be the last. As the historian Philipp Schaff notes, Luther “never ceased to amend his translation,” and, between 1530 and 1545, “prepared five original editions, or recensions, of his whole Bible.”³⁷ The last of these was prepared in 1545, a year before his death, but, in 1546, his friend Rörer prepared a new edition containing a large number of changes, many of which he traced to Luther

himself. Further editions followed, all of which made numerous corrections or even deletions. “Gradually no less than eleven or twelve recensions came into use, some based on the edition of 1545, others on that of 1546.”³⁸ This multiplication of editions and recensions led to calls for a standard German Bible. The foundations for the creation of a new Luther edition were laid between 1861 and 1863 and the New Testament finally published in 1870.

Bagchee furthers points out that one can compare these editions and seek to arrive at a critical edition of the text; in fact, such a project was begun in 1883 and completed more than a century later in 2009 with the publication of the critical edition of Martin Luther’s complete works.³⁹ One can, on the basis of this edition, compare Luther’s editions of the German Bible against each other, and observe how his translations changed over time and what processes were at work in these changes. But nothing in this edition lets us go behind the first 1522 edition. There is simply no manuscript that corresponds or *could* correspond to a hypostatized pre-1522 edition. Attempts to “extrapolate” an older epic behind the Critical Edition are just as absurd as attempting to identify a pre-1522 text for Luther’s Bible, as there is no conceivable manuscript that could correspond to any such hypostatized pre-“normative redaction” epic. Moreover, if Mahadevan is correct, then the Critical Edition does not just capture one possible state of the text, but the text at its origin, i.e., at a moment in time comparable to what the year 1522 represents for the Luther Bible. This is but one example of the dangers of the “hypothetical” model used in *Mahābhārata* studies. Much would be gained if we exercised a certain intellectual sobriety and make for ourselves a simple rule: whereof there is no manuscript evidence, thereof one must remain silent.

Rethinking the *Mahābhārata*

A volume such as this cannot, of course, hope to provide the final word on the *Mahābhārata* or even on the Critical Edition. Yet, the articles published here represent, both individually and collectively, a major contribution to the future direction and scope of epic studies.

The first of those published here, TP Mahadevan’s article, provides near conclusive evidence that the *Mahābhārata* was not a text in free fall, written “one *parvan* here and another *parvan* there,” “but a global literary text, what the *Mbh* tradition itself proclaims as Vyāsa’s *matam kṛtsnam*, ‘entire thought’ (CE 1.55.2).”

Austin’s contribution, which follows, takes up the “inferential mileage” hypothesis: do the Critical Edition’s apparatus materials permit us to hypo-

tatize a more “original” form of the text? Austin considers the main arguments in favor of this hypothesis and rejects them as too unspecific: different books of the epic show accretion to different extents. The “appendix and apparatus materials may bear upon and shape our understanding of the nature of the CE text,” but they do not provide grounds for retrojecting more original texts.

Hiltebeitel then shows why the main criticisms of the Critical Edition are flawed: it is not just that there is a problem of “diminishing returns” the further back (i.e., behind the Critical Edition) one attempts to go, but that all such attempts run counter to what it is we know and can know about the epic.

Bagchee then presents a deconstruction of German “critical” scholarship, undertaken from the perspective of its historical origins. As he argues, “rather than uncritically taking over presuppositions of 19th century scholarship, a critical approach to *Mahābhārata* studies would not only seek a critically constituted text, but also a critical understanding of the origin of so much *Mahābhārata* scholarship. In other words, the focus must shift to asking how and why certain kinds of scholarship on the epic became possible, what were the historical processes at work in these developments, whose and what agendas did they satisfy, what was at stake beyond an allegedly objective textual debate, etc.”

With this critique of obsolete theories of the epic in the background, my own article shows how the text recovered in the Critical Edition succeeds in recovering an essential architecture. In spite of the critics’ misgivings, stemming more from their impressions of *what* the text ought to be rather than any concrete manuscript evidence, the CE editors, I show, remain remarkably faithful to the manuscript tradition. Specifically, I take up the problem of the double beginning of the *Ādiparvan* to show how scholarly expectations of the text often collide with its reality and lead to absurd attempts to “edit” the text to fit our preconceived notions of it. I also provide a detailed analysis of the first four *upaparvans* of the *Ādiparvan*, showing the complex architecture of this text.

This criticism of the modern penchant for editing texts in the name of “critical” scholarship should not, however, detract from the many legitimate contributions philological scholarship and methods can make. As Wendy Rodriguez shows, text-historical scholarship need not be tied to centuries old dogmas about the conflict between the rationalistic and heroic spirit of the Āryans and the superstition, greed, and mendacity of brahmins. Instead, as Rodriguez argues, “textual criticism could make itself more broadly relevant to Indological studies as the final goal of such studies does not necessarily have to be just the editing of texts. Instead, textual studies can allow us to formulate a whole new set of questions about India’s cultural life across the centuries.”

Rodriguez' article provides a whole new way to approach the *Mahābhārata*, one that does not have to accept traditional dichotomies such as those between “synthetic” vs. “analytic” or “synchronic” vs. “diachronic” perspectives.

The final article in this volume is Brodbeck's contribution, which, appropriately enough, turns to the *Harivaṁśa*, a *khila* or “appendix” to the *Mahābhārata*. Long neglected in epic scholarship, Brodbeck is able to show why the *khila* is an integral part of the *Mahābhārata* and, for all we can tell, has always been so. Brodbeck's article thus provides a fitting conclusion to the cumulative insights of this volume. Indeed, his recent book *The Mahābhārata Patriline* is a splendid demonstration of how rich interpretations of the epic can be, once one emancipates oneself from the tyranny of the last three centuries of ideological praxis

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Barbara Sproul, my first teacher in religion, taught me to look at religion intelligently. This year marks her 40th year of outstanding pedagogy and this volume is a tribute to her accomplishment.

* This volume includes all but one of the original eight papers, as Gregory Bailey continues to work on his article for publication at a later date.

Endnotes

1. For an excellent overview of some of these issues, see Julian Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

2. G. W. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge, 1976), 50.

3. For a good introduction to the traditional approach to the *Mahābhārata*, see Hermann Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata: Sein Inhalt, Seine Entstehung, Seine Form* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922); Oldenberg writes that the *Mahābhārata* presents “overpowering masses of images that crush each other, of showers of arrows of endless battles, cries upon cries of heroes that scorn death, overly pious ideal humans, overwhelmingly beautiful women, wrathful ascetics...” *Ibid.*, 2.

4. Christian Lassen, "Beiträge zur Kunde des Indischen Altertums aus dem *Mahābhārata*," *Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, vol. 1 (1837): 85.

5. Cf. Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, 16. "The son of a brahmanic family-head, of Parāśara, who himself is a 'Brahmarṣi' (Brahmin wise-man), Vyāsa is the one, whom the epic describes as its author, and the universal belief in India accepts of him that he completed the monstrous work [ungeheuerer Werk] in three years."

6. Oldenberg's comments in an address to a German congress of philologists from 1906 are typical. Comparing the work of contemporary 19th century scholars to the tradition, he writes: "Does our exegesis have to show respect before this Indian-knowledge [Inderwissen] or does it have to blaze its own trail at its own risk? Whoever stands closer to my discipline knows how sharply the two views relate to each other... To me it can only appear correct to examine the text, as sharply as we can, with the methods of classical philology without all the literal faith in the traditional text: then we learn, I hold, to recognize that the exemplary transmission is not infallible, and, in some places, we learn to improve it." H. Oldenberg, *Kleine Schriften*, part 2, ed. Klaus L. Janert (Wiesbaden: Fritz Steiner Verlag, 1967), 1520. The prejudice unfortunately continues to thrive even in contemporary scholarship, as seen in von Stietencron's statement that "The analytic thinking of Western interpreters who were schooled in historical-philological methods stands in contrast to the traditional Indian commentators, who not only harmonized and freely downplayed all breaks in the text [i.e. the *Bhagavad Gītā*], but, above all, sought to read their own philosophical-theological concepts out of individual textual passages, in order to secure Kṛṣṇa's divine authority for them." Angelika Malinar, *Rājavidyā: Das königliche Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1996), 1.

7. Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, 1.

8. Cf. Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, 11. "Monumental documents that report of the deeds of ancient kings, such as [existed] in Egypt or Babylonia, of course, did not exist in the India of the Kurus and Pāṇḍus and still did not exist there through long centuries after. And historiography in a scientific sense: how many leagues one was, of course, far from that! What purpose would it any way have served for this epoch?"

9. Cf. Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, 6. "One sees that these are all human occurrences, although portrayed mythically, nonetheless, in the last analysis, quite certainly historical. The heroes of the Mahābhārata are herein related to Achilles and Agamemnon of Greek epic, not such primordial and super-human men such as Gilgamesh and Eabani of the Babylonian."

10. One of the most bizarre examples of such an attempt at assimilating the Indian epic to the German *Nibelungenlied* was undertaken in 1888 by Becker, who identified Dhṛtarāṣṭra with Armenrich, Bhīṣma with Rüdiger, Karṇa with Siegfred, Arjuna with Iring, and Kṛṣṇa Keśava and Kṛṣṇa Draupadī with Kriemhilde. Becker's work would appear to be inspired by Adolf Holtzmann, Sr.'s *Das Nibelungenlied in der ältesten Gestalt* from 1857 (Stuttgart: Verlag der Metzler'schen Buchhandlung), in which Holtzmann for the first time presents his thesis that the three "epic races" are originally one. Although neglected in among scholars, Holtzmann, Sr.'s work is crucial to understanding the historical context of early *Mahābhārata* studies.

11. The epic sets up a basic contrast between time (*kāla*) and eternity (*brahman*) at its outset. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, whose hundred sons have been killed in war, voices his anguish at fate and time. His lament provokes a sobering rejoinder from Saṁjaya, his charioteer (*sūta*): "All this is rooted in Time, to be or not to be, to be happy or not to be happy. Time ripens the creatures. Time rots them. And Time again puts out the Time that burns down the creatures. Time shrinks them and expands them again. Time walks in all creatures, unaverted, impartial. Whatever beings there were in the past will be in the future, whatever are busy now, they are all the creatures of Time—know it and do not lose your sense" (1.1.187-190). Saṁjaya's description of the work of time (*kālah*) is then followed by a eulogy of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, who represents absolute being or *brahman*: "In this book, Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana has uttered a holy Upaniṣad... And Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is glorified here, the self-eternal Blessed Lord—for He is the truth and the right and the pure and the holy. He is the eternal Brahman—the supreme Surety, the everlasting Light of whose divine exploits the wise tell tales. From Him begins existence that is not yet and the non-existent that becomes. His is the continuity and the activity. His is birth, death, and rebirth" (1.1.191, 193-195). This distinction between the work of time or "becoming" and being is central to the epic, which unfolds as a universal meditation on the human condition presented in the form of a lament at the horror of becoming.

12. Not all Indologists followed this approach, of course. Scholars such as Biardeau, Shulman, Hildebeitel and others reject the basic premises of this approach.

13. Weber's statement in a letter written to Karl Otto von Raumer, the Prussian Minister of Culture (*Kultusminister*), in 1855 provides the best evidence of this underlying motivation; Weber writes: "The study of Indian antiquity has, in the last fifteen years, with the availability of the oldest holy scriptures of the Indians, the Vedas, gained unimaginably and increasingly in both practical

and academic significance. The practical significance has affected England in particular and has been acknowledged both there and in India, by the Christian missions as well. The entire weight of the religious and cultural structure of contemporary India appears to rest on the Vedas. As soon as they are unveiled from the mysterious darkness surrounding them till now [*sobald nun diese nicht mehr in ihr bisheriges mysteriöses Dunkel gehüllt sind*], and made accessible to all, all the untruths shall be automatically revealed, and this shall, in time, put an end to the sorry plight of religious decadence [*dem traurigen Zustande der religiöser Versumpfung*] of India. The critical analysis and publication of Vedic texts shall assume a role among the Indians, similar to Luther's translation of the Bible." A. Weber, *Letter to Karl Otto von Raumer*, 12.10.1855 (Humboldt University Archives, P. F. 1433); translated and cited in Indra Sengupta, "State, University, and Indology: The Politics of the Chair of Indology at German Universities in the Nineteenth Century," in *Sanskrit and 'Orientalism': Indology and Comparative Linguistics in Germany, 1750-1958*, ed. Douglat T. McGetchin, Peter K. J. Park, Damodar SarDesai (Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 278-279.

14. Theodore Goldstücker, *Literary Remains of the Late Professor Goldstücker*, vol. 2 (London: W. H. Allen, 1879), 77-78.

15. I cannot here enter into a discussion of the reasons why Indo-Germanic studies became especially significant in Germany; Sheldon Pollock provides an excellent overview of the topic in his "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 76-133. See also my recent paper "The Gods of Language in the World of Men: German Sanskritists, Sheldon Pollock, and the 'Postorientalist' Debate," paper presented at the conference on *Cosmopolitan and Vernacular Languages: A Global Conversation*, Ann Arbor, MI 19th April, 2011. I thank Pollock for his comments and encouragement of my work and the Department of Classical Studies for their generous support and invitation.

16. For a discussion of the origins and growth of this discourse, see Rolf Peter Sieferle, "Indien und die Arier in der Rassentheorie," *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch*, special issue titled *Utopie—Projektion—Gegenbild: Indien in Deutschland* 37 Jg. 1987/ 3Vj (1987): 444-467.

17. Christian Lassen, "Beiträge zur Kunde des Indischen Altertums aus dem *Mahābhārata*," *Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, vol. 1 (1837): 75.

18. C. Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde* (Leipzig: Verlag von L. A. Kittler, 1867), 791.

19. Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, 1-2.

20. Adolf Holtzmann, Jr. *Das Mahābhārata und seine Theile* (Kiel: C. F. Haessler, 1891), 45-46; cf. also *ibid.*, 49 for the claim that “Indian and German antiquity simultaneously complement each other,” as “[b]oth races hold the duty of blood-vengeance [Blutrache] to be holy.”

21. Cf. Oldenberg, “Indische und klassische Philologie,” 1518. “Now the others: we philologists, in particular, the German philologists. Many of us have not seen India at all; for obvious reasons we cannot come so easily to Benares as one comes to Rome or Athens. Thus, we are all too exposed to the danger that something of the ultimate vitality of life is missing from the pictures that appear to us, that what we take to be the cloud trails of the Indian sky are ultimately only the vapors of our own study-rooms.”

22. Oldenberg, “Indische und klassische Philologie,” 1518.

23. Hermann Oldenberg, “Über Sanskritforschung,” in *Aus Indien und Iran: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Berlin: Hertz, 1899), 386. Scholars were, of course, not unaware of the problems with these approaches. Claims of racial consanguinity could hardly provide a credible foundation for scientific study of the epic, to say nothing of Holtzmann, Jr.’s claims to being able to discern the “raw warrior-like air of the old Germanic North” in the epic. In the absence of a single, definitive text of the *Mahābhārata*, scholars could posit whatever form of the epic they liked. Since the manuscripts in circulation were relatively late, there was no way to disprove claims of having found the *Ur-Bhārata*. Holtzmann, Jr., for example, posits at least three versions of the epic: a “Kuru epic” in which the Kauravas rather than the Pāṇḍavas are the heroes, a “Buddhist poetic composition” composed at the court of the Mauryan emperor Aśoka featuring Duryodhana as a great Buddhist ruler or perhaps even as the Buddha himself, and a “Brahmanic redaction” that presented Yudhiṣṭhira as the ideal king. Oldenberg, too, followed Holtzmann in this game of identifying more original epics; for him, the epic was originally an oral, bardic composition before it underwent two subsequent redactions. Thus, Oldenberg believed he could distinguish an older “prose-poetry” epic from the later “poetic” epic (cf. Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, 22). Typically, he ascribed this “monstrous transformation” of “the narrative poem into a great didactic poem or even into a heap of didactic poems” to Brahmanism (*ibid.*, 18). In the absence of some consensus on the form of the epic, there was no way to check or refute such claims, the more so as the logic underlying them was almost always circular with the respective author stating his preferred thesis and then proceeding to excise everything that did not correspond to this thesis as “late.”

24. Staal's resumé of German *Gītā* scholars provides a good overview of the problems with this approach. He writes, "The normal occupation of philologists is the analysis of texts, and the most spectacular job a philologist can perform is to take a text to pieces and show that these pieces came from other texts which, when not found, have to be postulated as lost. In the field of Sanskrit philology, the easiest prey for such hunts is the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the crown on the philologists' dissection game was placed by a well-known phenomenologist of religion to whom I shall return in the next section. The original problem which the *Gītā* presents to the Western monotheistic mind is that it juxtaposed so-called theistic and so-called pantheistic elements. The first hypothesis offered by philologists was that it had originally been a pantheistic text, to which theistic passages were added. The German scholar Richard Garbe reversed this hypothesis: according to him the original *Gītā* was theistic, and the "pantheistic" passages were added under the influence of the Vedānta. Garbe was followed by many scholars, including the author of most authoritative history of Sanskrit literature, Moritz Winternitz. But once such kinds of analysis begin, it is hard to stop them. Scholars with neater minds suggested that the original *Gītā* had ended with verse 38 of the second chapter, to which first the chapters III-XII, and later the chapters XIII-XVIII were added. The *Gītā* is indeed plain sailing up to II.39, when the word *sāṃkhya* occurs, for this term means 'number, enumeration,' but may also refer to the name of a system of philosophy. The famous German phenomenologist of religion, Rudolf Otto, put all these earlier efforts to shame by offering a demonstration that the *Bhagavad Gītā* was derived from an original *Ur-Gītā*, to which materials from eight different lost treatises were subsequently added. [But] Even philologists cannot be all deceived. The French Sanskritist, Émile Senart, noted simply in the Introduction to his translation of the *Gītā*: 'Efforts have been made to distinguish pieces of different origin; attempts that are ephemeral as well as arbitrary.'" Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 86.

25. Christian Lassen, "Beiträge zur Kunde des Indischen Altertum," 85.

26. *Ibid.*, 80.

27. *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1: *The Book of the Beginning*, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xiii.

28. J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans. *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1: *The Book of the Beginning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973); xiii-xxiii.

29. The brahmanic hypothesis has many flaws, ranging from the absence of historical evidence to the vicious circle of developing the theory from the epic and applying it back to it. But, most importantly, it also suffers from *ativyāpti*

doṣa: is there any aspect of the epic that cannot be explained by this thesis?

30. Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata*, 11-12; my emphasis.

31. On the latter term, see especially James Fitzgerald's excellent and oft-cited dissertation "The *Mokṣa* Anthology of the Great *Bhārata*: An Initial Survey of. Structural Issues, Themes, and Rhetorical Strategies," Ph.D. Diss., University of Chicago, 1980. Fitzgerald in many ways anticipates the criticism of the "analytic" approach presented here, when he writes: "... analytic scholars of the *Bhārata* were too quick to understand part of the MBh's reality while rejecting other parts of it, and in doing so they forsook the MBh itself for study of the history of the text. While there may be evidence for the existence at some point in time of earlier versions of parts of what is today the *Great Bhārata*, we have only one text and we should study that text thoroughly. And as I have shown above, the text views itself as a complex narrative and didactic monument fully as valuable as the ancient Vedas, so our basic study of the text should direct itself to the entirety of the text, in its didactic as well as its narrative significance. To penetrate the meaning or meanings of the text in its full and complex form is what is required for a proper understanding of the one and only *Great Bhārata* of India." *Ibid.*, 50.

32. This is not to deny the richness of the epic's contents, but to underscore the problem of mortality as the epic's enduring and central concern. Austin rightly points out that the epic is also concerned with "themes of the problem of dharma, necessity of violence, renunciation, the divinity of Kṛṣṇa etc., none of which can simply be reduced to the other" (personal communication). My point, however, is not so much that there is *one* single problem in the epic as that there is a basic concern with being in time expressed in the form of the question "how now to live?" that provides the motive force for many of the issues Austin rightly cites. Questions of *dharma*, of violence, renunciation, etc., only make sense against the background of this basic problem of being in time; which, of course, is not to reduce them to this problem but to acknowledge the infinite richness of the problem.

33. The philosophical task cannot be teleological, because a conception of cyclical time excludes the very idea of absolute ends. As the 11th century philosopher Abhinavagupta, notes "all the deeds of the Pāṇḍavas that are praised come to a painful end [in the epic] and are [shown to be] by nature a manifestation of nescience." Noting that the epic contrasts the finitude of human action to "the Lord Vāsudeva who is praised here [as] ... by nature absolutely real," Abhinavagupta concludes that the epic's message is, "it is only to that Blessed Lord that you should be devoted; do not be enamoured

of empty glories or wholeheartedly attach yourself solely to any one of those [worldly accomplishments] such as policy, training, or prowess." Abhinavagupta therefore argues for seeing the epic's dominant mood (*sthāyibhāva*) as *sāntarasa* or the "flavor of peace," a feeling that is awakened in the reader when he realizes the "insubstantiality of this world." Dhvanyāloka of *Ānandavardhana*, with the Locana commentary of Abhinavagupta and the Bālāpriyā commentary of *Rāmasāraka*, ed. Pt. Pattābhirāma Śāstrī (Benares: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1940).

34. For the story of Āstīka or "he who is possessed of the quality 'there is'," see my contribution in this volume.

35. *evam etad anādyantaṁ bhūtasamhārakārakam / anādinidhanaṁ loke cakram saṁparivartate//*

36. The thesis that the epic was originally the possession of the Kṣatriya- or warrior-class and only later taken over by Brahmins is a fundament of German epic scholarship. One finds the claim throughout 19th century literature, especially in the form that there was an "older" epic (the so-called *Urepos*), to which the Brahmins later added masses of "didactic," "theological," and "devotional" material, ruining the simple noble lines of the former. Although the earliest references to a "*Bhārata*" as opposed to a "*Mahā-*" or "*Great*" "*Bhārata*" may be found in Lassen (1837), it is Goldstücker who gives the thesis its classic form: "The groundwork of the poem, as mentioned before, is the great war between two rival families of the same kin; it occupies the contents of about 24,000 verses. This, however, was overlaid with episodical matter of the most heterogeneous kind.... Nor was this merely matter of accident in the sense in which such a term might vaguely be used. A record of the greatest martial event of ancient India would have emphatically been claimed as the property of the second or military caste, the Kshatriyas.... But such exaltation of kingly splendor and of the importance of the military caste, would as naturally threaten to depress that of the first or Brahmanical caste. Brahmins, therefore, would endeavour to become the arrangers of the national epos; and as the keepers of the ancestral lore, as the spiritual teachers and guides, as priestly diplomatists, too, they would easily succeed in subjecting it to their censorship.... It became thus the aim of the Brāhmanas to transform the original legend of the great war into a testimony to the superiority of their caste over that of the Kshatriyas. And this aim was effected not only by the manner in which the chief story was told, but also by adding to the narrative all such matter as would show that the position and might of a Kshatriya depends on the divine nature and favour of the Brāhmana caste.... Here and there an old

legend or myth might be found in the epos, apparently not betraying such a set purpose.” Theodore Goldstücker, *Literary Remains of the Late Professor Goldstücker*, vol. 2 (London: W. H. Allen, 1879), 97-99. For an analysis of the deep Lutheran resentment this recurring *Gestalt* of German epic scholarship reveals, see my *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology*.

37. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7: *Modern Christianity. The German Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), 348; <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc7.ii.iv.iii.html>.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 120 vols. (Weimar, 1883-2009).