Ways and Reasons for Thinking about the Mahābhārata as a Whole

Edited by
Vishwa Adluri
Dedicated to
Sumati Bhandarkar
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Introduction

Vishwa Adluri

I. The Success of Lower Criticism

The completion of the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata in 1966 constitutes a significant event in this epic’s history. A long and venerable tradition of textual criticism assisted V. S. Sukthankar in forging this edition—thus, at the very outset of this essay this scientific method is to be congratulated. The significance of Sukthankar’s achievement is best illustrated in the following anecdote related to me by Prof. Dhadphale during the 14th World Sanskrit Conference:

Towards the end of his life Sukthankar increasingly had doubts about the sovereignty of the text-historical approach. He began to wonder about the meaning of the text itself. When D. D. Kosambi came to visit Sukthankar on his death-bed, it was quite a sad moment. Kosambi wanted to cheer him up, so he said, “Sukthankar, all your life you

1 V.S. Sukthankar et al., eds., The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933-66).
2 Sukthankar’s stated goal, described in his Prolegomena to the Ādiyaparvan, was to establish “the oldest form of the text which it is possible to reach, on the basis of the manuscript material available.” V. S. Sukthankar, “Prolegomena,” in The Adiyaparvan for the First Time Critically Edited (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933), lxxvi.
3 Personal communication (Kyoto, September 2009).
4 See Alf Hiltebeitel (Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader’s Guide to the Education of the Dharma King [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], 106-7), intuitively sensing something of this dissatisfaction when he writes “... Sukthankar’s posthumously published last work (1957) shows him critical of the ‘European savants’ (25) whose methods he had adopted. Sukthankar says nothing in his last work about his Bhārgava hypothesis. Without renouncing it, he had in any case finally determined to say something about the Mahābhārata as having some literary, religious, and conceptual unity after all.”
have sought to reconstruct the oldest possible version of the Mahābhārata, but what would you have to say if tomorrow it were announced that an even older manuscript has been discovered, older than any of the manuscripts you have seen?” Kosambi probably thought Sukthankar would express regret. Sukthankar, however, was quite a serious fellow. He didn’t understand that Kosambi was teasing him, so he replied, “how old, Damodar?” Kosambi was surprised, but continued, “Let us say, 3rd century or so, definitely pre-Gupta.” At this, Sukthankar looked straight at Kosambi and said, “Damodar, if such a manuscript were to be discovered tomorrow, I can tell you that it will correspond exactly to my manuscript excepting a few padas, and even those padas will be the ones under which I have drawn a wavy line.”

This anecdote underlines something that is often forgotten in Mahābhārata studies: that the critical method has fulfilled its promise and created a workable text—a text ready for a brave new world of interpreting the epic. This is the basic premise of the papers in this volume. Once textual criticism has fulfilled its promise and created not just a workable text, but a comprehensive text that encompasses all the major manuscript traditions, we stand

6 The papers contained in this volume were originally presented as part of the panel Ways and Reasons for Thinking about the Mahābhārata as a Whole at the 14th World Sanskrit Conference in Kyoto, Japan in 2009. (This is true of four of the six papers here. Brodbeck and Wulff, though originally part of the panel proposal, did not present at Kyoto. Bagchee’s paper was presented within the same section, but as part of a separate session.) Conceived by Alf Hiltebeitel, the aim of the panel was to present evidence for reading the Mahābhārata as a whole. But what this “whole” implies is subject to controversy, and requires some clarification—which I hope to provide in this introduction.

7 For a list of the manuscripts employed in the Critical Edition of the Ādiparvan, see Sukthankar, “Prolegomena,” iv-vii. In all, the Critical Edition editors had access to 235 manuscripts of the Ādiparvan (although not all of them were found to be worth collating) and the apparatus represents manuscripts in the Bengali, Grantha, Telugu, Malayālam, Nepāli, Śāradā, Maithili, Kannāḍa, and Nandināgarī scripts. Sukthankar states that “the only unrepresented scripts in our critical apparatus are: Kannāḍa, Uṛiyā and Nandināgarī,” although it would seem that he had access to at least one manuscript each in the Kannāḍa and Nandināgarī scripts. Sukthankar, “Prolegomena,” vi.
before the challenge of understanding this text. Now by
interpretation, I specifically mean a task distinct from
recovering and preserving the text. The Mahābhārata
itself notes these dual tasks of preservation and inter-
pretation: “Learned men elucidate the complex erudi-
tion in this Grand Collection; there are those who are
experienced in explaining it, others in retaining it.”8 The
former task explains the meaning of the text using many
interpretive methods to suit the plural needs of any real
life situation.9 But one method that is directly engen-
dered by the text itself is to use the text to interpret it —
the hermeneutic method.10 Now, the task of explaining
obscure or confusing portions of the text by keeping in
view the larger contexts and aims of the text necessarily
relies on the organic unity of the text. This unity cannot
be first stated positivistically and then applied dogmatically.
Nor can the unity be denied without demolishing
the text. But this unity is not such that one is confident

8 vividham samhitā jnānam dipayanti maniśinah | vyākhyaṁ kuśalāh kecid grantham
dhārayitum pare || Mahābhārata 1.1.51.
9 To acknowledge a plurality of approaches, however, is not to give up the idea
of a correct interpretation, as Gadamer has shown (see Hans-Georg Gadamer,
Truth and Method, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and
New York: Continuum, 2004)).
10 For a useful discussion of hermeneutics in recent philosophy, see Malbon’s
essay on structuralism and hermeneutics in contemporary philosophy.
Malbon notes that the term “hermeneutics” shares “a linguistic root with
the name of the Greek god Hermes, the messenger of the gods and the
inventor or discoverer of language and writing. The three basic meanings of
hermeneuein are: (1) to speak (or express or say), (2) to explain (or interpret
or comment upon), (3) to translate.” The “foundational Hermes process”
at work in all three cases is thus the same: “in all three cases, something
foreign, strange, separated in time, space, or experience is made familiar,
present, comprehensible; something requiring representation, explanation,
or translation is somehow ‘brought to understanding’ is ‘interpreted.’”
Quoting and heavily paraphrasing Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Structuralism,
Hermeneutics, and Contextual Meaning,” Journal of the American Academy of
Religion 51,2 (1983): 212. It is in this latter sense of “bringing something to
understanding,” “interpretation” that the term hermeneutics is used here.
that every word in the text was written simultaneously by a single author. The hermeneutic approach is a living circle, where the text’s unity is presupposed precisely in order to recover and substantiate this unity.\textsuperscript{11}

Even serious scholars who have made profound contributions to Mahābhārata studies nevertheless view any attempt at interpreting the text with suspicion and outright derision. For example, van Buitenen, in his introduction to his translation of the Udyogaparvan, includes an entire section of polemic titled “On Myth and Epic—1. Levels of Criticism.”\textsuperscript{12} He criticizes those who approach “the epic itself as one titanic myth on its own; and they attempt once more to put holistic interpretations on the Epic. The historical dimension of the text, which after all is an event in history, is in the process forgotten, or rather, consciously cast aside.”\textsuperscript{13} van Buitenen’s criticisms are specifically aimed at the French scholars Madeleine Biardeau and Georges Dumézil, although he also includes Dahlmann within the list of unhistorical approaches. But this polemic ends up ascribing views to Biardeau and Dahlmann they neither espoused nor could seriously have contemplated defending. Neither scholar would deny that the text is an event in history, or that this history can be studied—either separately or in conjunction

\textsuperscript{11} The hermeneutic circle is therefore distinct from both the vicious circle and also from \textit{petitio principii} because to do so would be to confuse method with an argument. Hermeneutics is a method, it is not an argument proving or disproving theses.

\textsuperscript{12} The Udyogaparvan was to be the last of the volumes van Buitenen translated before his death and thus can be seen as a mature statement of his views following two decades of translating the text, as he himself notes: “now that close to half of the text lies tractable before me and the reader, I have grown more confident of both my right to speak and my reader’s to answer.” J. A. B. van Buitenen, “Introduction to The Book of Virāṭa,” in \textit{The Mahābhārata}, vol. 3, 4. \textit{The Book of Virāṭa}, 5. \textit{The Book of the Effort} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 143.

\textsuperscript{13} van Buitenen, “Introduction to The Book of Virāṭa,” 142.
with the text. The point of contention, rather, is whether a text can be reduced to the historical processes that have left their trace in it. The text is indeed an event in history, but is it itself a representation of it? Or is the history of texts a complicated affair, where texts attempt to both preserve and overcome their historical facticity?

Apart from the fact that the interaction between texts and history is complex and reciprocal, the “history” a text presents is not necessarily a direct unmediated reproduction of its contemporaneous situation. Add to this the vagaries of histories of texts which are not the same as histories of textual traditions. Indeed, were we to also take our own historical facticity into account, we would use the word “history” with greater caution than scholars commonly do. The equation “history = fact = truth” represents a naïve view of both the Enlightenment project and of Hegel’s philosophy of history.

For someone who insists on specifics and unambiguous events, van Buitenen lumps Biardeau, Dumézil, Dahlman, and Holtzman into one amorphous ahistorical tendency, and attacks them all for their “holistic interpretations.” With the kind of polemic one expects from Hopkins, van Buitenen says, “perhaps I do not see the forest for the trees, but might I not rather be walking among the trees

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14 In her article on Nara and Nārāyaṇa, Biardeau, in fact, relies heavily on the historical method. She tries to understand the Mahābhārata’s meaning through seeing its amplification in the Purāṇas, an approach she calls “doing history in reverse.” See her “Nara et Nārāyaṇa.” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 35 (1991): 75-108.

15 Indeed, the epic explicitly makes a distinction between time and being, where being is the text’s ultimate purport: “And Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is glorified here, the sempiternal Blessed Lord—for He is the true and the right and the pure and the holy. He is the eternal Brahma, the supreme Surety, the everlasting Light, of whose divine exploits the wise tell tales. From Him begins the existent that is not yet and the nonexistent that becomes, His is the continuity and the activity. His is birth, death and rebirth.” Mahābhārata 1.1.93-95.
than overlooking a forest?’”

What response does van Buitenex expect? Does he expect Dahlmann or Biardeau to say, “if you prefer to be lost in the forest, that is a personal choice, but by no means the only one?” Biardeau and Holtzman have different methods that yield different results; they have different backgrounds and specialties. But for all the pollachōs legetai of history, and the many perspectives of the humanities, the fact remains that we do have a text, which overcame history (and moreover created its own history), and, continuing van Buitenex’s sylvan metaphor, has become the very aśvattha tree of Indian history and culture.

II. The Failure of Higher Criticism

In all fairness to van Buitenex, he does make place for interpretation under the rubric of “higher criticism,” but his distinction is not without problems. He writes,

Philology, that bane of the broader viewers, has long ago resolved this ‘conflict’ by making a clear distinction between higher and lower criticism. Lower criticism establishes the text on the basis of the best possible evidence and explains it; higher criticism then may address itself to further questions of influences that have worked on the text as received. While there is distinction, there is also continuity. But lower criticism must of necessity take precedence over higher criticism, for without the former the latter has no basis.... Only when one has the lower truth of a text can a possible transcending truth be hoped for.17

This is reasonable. Let it be noted, however, that with the CE, the task of lower criticism is nearly, if not as completely as possible, accomplished.18 As Sukthankar point-

16 van Buitenex, “Introduction to The Book of Virāta,” 143.
17 van Buitenex, “Introduction to The Book of Virāta,” 144.
18 See van Buitenex’s comments in his introduction to his translation of the Ādiparvan, noting, “the first fascicules of the edition were received with
ed out on his deathbed, there might be a verse here or there that is amiss, but it is surely antediluvian intransigence to insist that lower criticism ought to still play the dominant role in Mahābhārata studies. After the watershed of the CE, large-scale overhauls of the epic using so-called “text critical” arguments do not add to the epic, they only cast suspicion on the critical method.

It is important to distinguish here between textual criticism (in all its variants including classical Lachmannism, Bédierism, and neo- or trans-Lachmannism) and so-called text-historical (“textgeschichtliche”) approaches. The latter are a subset of the “historical critical method” developed in the context of Neo-Protestantism in the 18th century and applied especially to the study of the Old Testament. Few scholars in Mahābhārata studies know anything of textual criticism; when they claim to be applying the “critical method” or the “historical method” what they primarily have in mind is the “historical critical” method. This, in spite of its name, is neither historical nor critical, being in reality a theological method. The confusion of textual criticism, which is a legitimate method with well-developed canons for its use, with the historical critical method explains much of the abuse so-called “text-historical” arguments have been put to in epic studies: merely because certain scholars were not willing to accept the constructed histories of texts advocated by a subsection of scholarship, they were accused of being “against history” and “against histori-

some reservations on the part of a number of Western scholars, but as the work progressed there has grown a general sense of satisfaction that the text presented by the critical edition from Poona is the best attainable. It must be a matter of great satisfaction to Indian scholarship that Indians in the end successfully completed a work at which their Western colleagues effectively failed.” J. A. B. van Buiten, “Introduction to The Book of the Beginning,” in The Mahābhārata, vol. 1, 1. The Book of the Beginning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xxxi.
cal method.”

Gratuitously, van Buitenen goes on to single out Biardeau’s approach and expends much genius on a very small point. Rather than questioning history or historical objectivity, Biardeau merely questions whether imposing “hypotheses d’ordre historique” were sufficient to illuminate the meaning of the text. Although philology defers the task of an interpretation of both humanity and culture to “higher criticism,” we should be careful not to confuse hermeneutic interpretation of texts with “higher criticism.””19 Higher criticism is an artificial construction, where the text dismantled by lower criticism is reconstituted according to wild ideologies.20 Higher criticism creates a “new text” according to the author’s particular ideological preference, arguing duplicitously for a text that never existed while denying the text that actually exists. In doing so, it employs fantastic and unscientific figures of speech: layers, threads, cores, accretions, interpolations, rings, and nodes. But while such theories might have been acceptable in the early stages of epic studies (e.g. in the work of Holtzmann),21 following the

19 My gratitude to Alf Hiltebeitel for underscoring this distinction (personal communication).

20 A good example is the work of Holtzmann, one of the first to advance the view that “the unreservedly warlike world-view [Weltanschauung]... constitutes the genuine soul of the old portions of the epic.” Here, one senses the “raw warlike air of the old Germanic north” “blow[ing] against us here” in contrast to the “elegiac softness, the resignation, being tired of life, of later Indian literature.” Adolf Holtzmann, Jr., Zur Geschichte und Kritik des Mahābhārata (Kiel: C. F. Haessler, 1892), 45. Similar sentiments can also be found in Oldenberg, who says of Kṛṣṇa “when our imagination [Phantasie] is to be relied upon to distinguish reality from legend across such wide distances, then one would like to represent him [i.e., Kṛṣṇa] to oneself as a victorious conqueror [Siegernatur], equally irresistible to enemies and women alike.” Hermann Oldenberg, Das Mahābhārata: Sein Inhalt, seine Entstehung, seine Form (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922), 40.

21 It may still have been possible for Holtzmann to have insisted upon an “original Bhārata,” but history has spoken its verdict: scholarship has
Critical Edition they are an intellectual embarrassment.

Moreover, whereas lower criticism is an honorable endeavor to which great minds have dedicated considerable labor, higher criticism is unscientific and, all too often, ideologically tainted. A recent example of the dubious application of “higher criticism” can be found in Malinar’s book on the Bhagavadgītā.²² Although avowedly not opposed to the “unitarian” viewpoint, Malinar nonetheless argues against the unity of the text, which she alleges is composed of multiple “layers.” I am unclear about the exact number of “layers” Malinar attributes to the text, since she is rather free in her invention and classification of “layers.” She initially distinguishes three layers: 1. a non-theistic Sāmkhya layer, 2. a non-theistic Yoga layer, and 3. a theistic/monotheistic layer in which Kṛṣṇa is proclaimed the highest god.²³ But then, in order to be able to account for the text’s complexity, she is forced to introduce further “layers.” Thus, there are now “ātman-interpolations,” a “theistic interpretation of the Sāmkhya model,”²⁴ a “reinterpretation of saṁnyāsa in the framework of Sāmkhya and Yoga concepts,”²⁵ “classical’ Sāmkhya,” “epic Sāmkhya,”²⁶ “the doctrine of bhakti, which is presented in this [ninth] chapter as something new and unheard of,”²⁷ not to mention Vedic,

sought this original version and unearthed the CE. To continue to insist upon this alleged lost text in the face of this failure to find an “original” Bhārata is dogmatism, and to reject all attempts at interpreting the critically reconstructed text is to argue in bad faith because it is to question the validity of the Critical Edition instead of engaging the task of interpreting the text.

²³ Ibid., 54-5.
²⁴ Ibid., 93.
²⁵ Ibid., 108.
²⁶ Ibid., 115, see also 192.
²⁷ Ibid., 145.
Brahmanic strands of thought, 28 “political and socio-cosmic dimensions,” 29 but this list could be extended indefinitely. Indeed, Malinar herself notes that “in each layer others could be traced,” 30 thus dissolving the text.

But what exactly are these “layers”? Are they historically distinct compositions or are they merely themes? Could the text’s polyphony be due to the fact that it addresses a complex philosophical problem or was the Bhagavadgītā simply a heap of layers into which anyone could go write themselves? But in that case, what would a Gītā without either Sāmkhya or yoga or bhakti look like? Did these “layers” exist as independent texts apart from the Bhagavadgītā? Why did the alleged corrupters/inserters choose the Bhagavadgītā in particular? Did the Gītā already have widespread circulation, so that interpolating their texts into it was a good marketing-strategy for disseminating their ideas? Is piggybacking philosophy onto previous (mythological) texts the most efficient way to disseminate ideas? Furthermore, without these alleged later interpolations, what would justify the Bhagavadgītā’s popularity? These are questions Malinar does not raise, much less explain.

In order to achieve higher criticism, Malinar must now collect these layers and reconstruct the text by relying on an external ideological hypothesis, which she does through introducing tropes from Old Testament criticism. Drawing on Samuel’s hesitation to anoint the king, higher criticism developed the “debates on kingship” hypothesis in OT criticism. This, and Jan Assman’s “cosmological monotheism” to explain Egyptian religion’s interface with Judaism, are the two theses Malinar uses

28 See ibid., 205.
29 Ibid., 224.
30 Ibid., 30.
in her “higher criticism” of the Bhagavadgītā. But the litmus test for higher criticism is this: does the text collapse into chaos once these external ideological hypotheses are removed? As a matter of fact, without the OT debates about kingship and Egyptian cosmological monotheism, Malinar’s interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā falls apart.\footnote{See also my review of Malinar’s work (Vishwa Adluri, Review of Bhagavadgītā: Doctrines and Contexts, by Angelika Malinar, History of Religions 50,1 [2010]: 102-7).} Higher criticism excises the text’s backbone and then provides a prosthetic support. Further, it draws attention away from the text and its frameworks of reception and interpretation to these subjective and unscientific theories. When one thinks of how much ink has been wasted on the pseudo-debate concerning Holtzmann’s “inversion hypothesis,” it is clear that this kind of scholarship has only one aim: to perpetuate itself. The simple dichotomy, which postulates that all research is either lower criticism or higher criticism, not only undermines the efforts of lower criticism, it also pretends that all hermeneutics is higher criticism. This is clearly not the case. Indeed, Sukthankar himself rejected higher criticism as a legitimate method.\footnote{It is mendacious and unthinking to write off Sukthankar’s book as an aberration in a philological career otherwise dedicated to lower criticism. In the posthumously published On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata, Sukthankar looks back on the epic from the perspective of a lifetime of philological expertise, and finally he turns to the interpretive task. In every sense, the present study is a continuation of Sukthankar’s lead.} With unmistakable sarcasm, he notes of Western text-historical approaches to the epic,

The Mahābhārata is in short a veritable chaos, containing some good and much useless matter. It is a great pity that a fine heroic poem, which may even be found to contain precious gems of ancient Indian history, should have been thus ruined by its careless custodians. But it is not
quite beyond redemption. A skillful surgical operation—technically called ‘Higher Criticism’—could still disentangle the submerged ‘epic core’ from the adventitious matter—known to textual critics as ‘Interpolation’—in which it lies embedded. The Mahābhārata Problem thus reduces itself to the discovery of criteria which will enable us to analyse the poem and dissect out its ‘epic nucleus’ from the spurious additions with which it is deeply encrusted.\(^{33}\)

But while he dismissed higher criticism,\(^{34}\) Sukthankar defended the unity of the epic as well as its literary character—thus implicitly acknowledging the need for hermeneutic interpretation of the epic as a literary work. In his words, “there is ... no question whatsoever of an ‘epic core’ that had become gradually incrusted with didactic accretion, an idea which is nothing more than a phantasy, just an obsession of the modern critic. The poem is, as Indian tradition has always implied, a conscious product of literary art (kāvyā) of the highest order, with a pronounced unity of conception, aim and treatment.”\(^{35}\) Thus whereas hermeneutics always tries to “save the text,” higher criticism makes indiscriminate use of the unscientific category of “interpolation” to remove allegedly corrupting passages from the community of a pure Ur-text. But “interpolation” as explanation is a chimera for at least four reasons. One, ancient authors reused material. Two, there is no standard for a unified text, authors modulate their voice to convey their ideas. Three, theistic texts do not begin with a dogmatic statement of divinity.

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34 Sukthankar serially criticizes Oldenberg’s view (the epic was composed as short poetical pieces sewn together with prose), Lassen’s suggestion that the Kṛṣṇaite-elements ought be excised, Sørensen’s suggestion that there is an epic kernel, an Ur-text that could be extracted, Ludwig’s hypothesis (of clumsy versus harmonious joynings in the text), as well as Hopkins’ (the epic is “[a] text that is no text”) and Winternitz’ views.

but unfold the problem of the loss of ontology and build up toward an eventual theophany, so that excising theistic passages as “later” interpolations is neither scientific nor scholarly. Four, the indiscriminate use of “interpolation” as a category only covers over and vitiates the philosophical project of a text. To read the Mahābhārata as a whole requires that we avoid the dichotomy of lower and higher criticism and interpret the text as we have it without excising what we do not understand. The task of understanding the text remains a separate task, and it is for its sake that lower criticism is undertaken.

III. New Perspectives on the Epic

Instead of accusing Biardeau for being ahistorical, van Buitenen would have done better to critique her for naysaying the CE. But even here we ought to be cautious, since eminent scholars such as W. Doniger and D. Shulman have also expressed reservations about the CE. Yet, their criticism of the Critical Edition is meant to enrich the phenomenon of the epic, rather than dismiss it (as is often the case in “higher criticism), and to take a greater history into account: the epic’s roots in India’s cultural history. Aware of the efforts that went into both creating and preserving the epic tradition, they reject the limitation of this creative aspect to a textual history. Indeed, as Hildebeetel shows, the Mahābhārata’s poets embedded a sense of how to read “history” in the text itself, a history that would inevitably be later enriched by redactors and interpreters who understood it and sought to clarify its meaning further.

T.P Mahadevan’s article provides a much-needed buttress to the Critical Edition by shedding new light on the

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36 Which is not limited just to the textual tradition.
likely early history of the Mahābhārata’s transmission. Mahadevan presents evidence of the early integrity of the Mahābhārata by examining early Brahmin migrations to South India and the manuscript evidence behind the Pune Critical Edition. Noting the early migrations to the South of one identifiable group of Vedic Brahmans (Pūrvaśīkhā Brahmans) in the centuries around the beginning of the Common Era, he argues that the similarities between the shortest northern (Śārada/Kaśmīr) manuscripts and shortest version of the Southern Recension (Malayālam) texts suggest that the Pūrvaśīkhā Brahmans brought an early version of the Mahābhārata South with them along with their Vedic praxis as the textual foundation for creating the Southern Recension of the epic. His researches thus provide evidence that the Critical Edition retrieves a text that is certainly pre-Gupta, and more thoroughly “archetypal” than was previously thought.

My own method has been to use the “front-end” material of the Uttāṇka narrative to show how the text is self-consciously aware of its own complex structure. Although it appears “monstrous” to the casual observer, the epic provides a pedagogic and philosophical manual to the reader seeking salvation. In the present paper, I examine the double narratives of Uttāṇka from the Ādiparvan (1.3.86-1.3.195) and the Āśvamedhikaparvan (14.52.1-14.57.56), which the Pune Critical Edition retains in spite of the apparent duplication. Although higher criticism has a field-day with double narratives,37 I argue that only a hermeneutic interpretation that acknowledg-

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37 On the Pauṣyaparvan, see Friedrich Wilhelm, Prüfung und Initiation im Buche Pauṣya und in der Biographie des Nāropa (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965). More generally, on the Ādiparvan, see van Buitenen, The Mahābhārata, especially his comment that “… it is easy, and indeed natural, to be skeptical of the authenticity of many of the beginnings of the true beginning.” van Buitenen, “Introduction to The Book of the Beginning,” 6.
es both versions as equally original and important can do full justice to the epic’s complex philosophical and pedagogic program.

Joydeep Bagchee’s article provides a close reading of one of the narratives from this front-material. In his article, he traces out the non-literal functions of nirukti or etymology in the Mahābhārata. That the epic poets use grammatically unreliable etymologies requires no proof, but Bagchee argues that the reason for this is not mere rhetorical fancy. In the Āstikāparvan, the fifth minor book of the Mahābhārata, Śaunaka asks the bard: “This I wish to hear. Pray tell me the etymology of jāratkāru.” The bard resolves the word into jārā and kāru and interprets the word as “monstrous destruction.”

This passage is important because it throws light on a previous occurrence of etymology in the text, in which the word “Mahābhārata” is etymologically related to salvation: “Once the divine seers foregathered, and on one scale they hung the four Vedas in the balance, and on the other scale The Bhārata; and both in size and weight it was the heavier. Therefore, because of its size and weight, it is called The Mahābhārata—he who knows this etymology is freed from all sins.”

Likewise, we are given an etymology for “Āstika” (“since his father before departing for the forest had said of him, ‘There is,’ while he was still in his mother’s womb, his name was known as ‘Āstika’”) that relates the name to being, hinting at the Upaniṣadic

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38 jāratkāru niruktaṁ tvam yathāvad vaktum arhasi || jārā iti kṣayam āhur vai dāruṇam kāru samjñitam || Mahābhārata 1.36.2-3.
39 ca tvāva ekato vedaḥ bhāratam ca ekam ekatāḥ | samāgataḥ surarṣibhis tulām āropitam purā | mahattva ca guruteva ca dhriyamāṇam tato adhikam || mahattvād bhāravattvāc ca mahā bhāratam ucate || niruktam asya yo veda sarva pāpaiḥ pramucyate || Mahābhārata 1.1.208-209.
40 asti ity uktvā gato yasmaū pītā garbhasthām eva tam | vanam tasmād idam tasya nāma āstika iti viśrutam || Mahābhārata 1.44.21.
tradition of soteriological ontology. Thus etymology functions not merely accidentally as poetic rhetoric, but as an index for what is of ultimate concern to humans: destruction and salvation. Bagchee’s article provides another way of conceiving the Critical Edition text as a unity: a merely historical analysis cannot explain the existence of such a coherent system of significations.

Wulff’s main argument is that the Mahābhārata was written with a great quantity of Greek materials near at hand, using the Iliad as a kind of guide. Brodbeck points out the subtle but important prejudices that underlie seemingly “objective” approaches to the text. Thus, he notes that higher criticism often takes the form of factual statements (e.g., that a particular portion of the Critical Edition must be “older” than others), but these statements are rarely if ever falsifiable. Indeed, justification is normally only available in the form of appeal to a pre-existing scheme of Indian history (religious, political, linguistic, philosophical, etc.) extrapolated from texts, and thus the method might be circular. On the positive side, Brodbeck notes that literary interpretations do not present themselves as factual statements, but as possible perspectives whose “truth value” is intrinsically moot.

IV. The Prejudices of the Historical Method

Between these two approaches to the epic—interpretations from multiple perspectives that take into account their historical situatedness and historically “objective” research—the reader must ultimately consider which of these opens up the text more to him. No one denies that the modern historical sciences in the sense of “Geisteswissenschaften” have provided a wealth of information in diverse fields, but what is often overlooked is that
these sciences are by no means as objective as they claim. Their origin is itself tied to specific historical conditions, to an intellectual climate and to specific needs and aims. When the historical method claims to be the only “objective” approach, it forgets that it too has a history. By believing that it sets itself above all prejudices, it falls prey to the greatest prejudice of all: that of being free of prejudice. The choice, then, is not between purely objective historical inquiry on the one hand, and interpretation on the other—it is between acknowledging one’s own situation and interpretive presuppositions and thus raising them to philosophical consciousness on the one hand, and maintaining the fiction of freedom from prejudice on the other. A glance at the history of the European reception of Indian philosophical texts shows us just how pervasive this fiction has been in history.41

While the articles in this volume focus on the Mahābhārata as a whole, in my introduction I have focused especially on the Bhagavadgītā, because the Bhagavadgītā has been the paradigmatic text of the Mahābhārata for the Indian as well as the European imagination. Not only is it one of the earliest parts of the Mahābhārata to have been translated into European languages,42 but, as Figueira notes, the entire attitude of Europeans to Indian culture in general can be read off from European interpretations of the text. Asking what this literature (i.e., German interpretations of the

41 An excellent analysis of this history can be found in Halbfass’s India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), see esp. 83 on the emergence of academic Indology from the “Romantic fascination with India.”

42 For Jones, commenting upon the first translation of the Bhagavadgītā into a modern European language (Wilkin’s Bhagavadgītā), Western scholars “if they wish to form a correct idea of Indian religion and literature” are to “forget” “all that has been written on the subject, by ancients or moderns, before the publication of the Gita.” Ernst Windisch, Geschichte der Sanskrit Philologie und indischen Altertumskunde, vol. 1 (Straßburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1917), 4.
Bhagavadgītā teaches us, Figueira replies:
In the first place, German nirvāṇa literature reflects the specific tensions that we have identified in the nineteenth-century European employment of India. Indian religious thought could be used to voice hopes for a cultural invigoration from without as well as to confirm or refute current intellectual trends. These writers, like all metaphorical pilgrims to India, appear to be motivated by contradictory impulses: the desire to exercise imaginative expressions fed by a generally exact documentation, and the desire to present faithful pictures of a reality that apparently is radically different from that of nineteenth-century Europe. However, only in the interstices between a presumably original India and the German pretense of filiation could such curious artistic graftings emerge—and only when the positive foundations of the belief in humankind were shaken.43

Now, these attitudes did not unfold in a vacuum, but were also influenced by developments within European intellectual thought at the time. Although the initial reception of the Bhagavadgītā was enthusiastically positive, a backlash begins with Hegel, where India mutates to the “other” against which German thought had to assert itself.

Hegel's analysis of India was intimately bound up with his criticism of the Romantics. He responded negatively to their infatuation with the Orient and sought to demythologize India’s prestige in romantic Europe.44

Although, as we have seen, Schlegel eventually became disenchanted with Indian philosophy, he continued to adhere to the view that India remained a source of spiritual force and orientation. Hegel could not accept this position. What rankled Hegel most was that Romantic Indomania

44 Ibid., 72.
articulated both a sentimental nostalgia for origins as well as a blatant disregard for the present. According to Hegel, the Orient represented vestiges of the past. It was of no use in deciphering the present. Thus, Indian philosophy is embedded within his more general critique of Urvolk, the belief in an Asian origin of European mythology, and the neo-Catholic belief, defended by Friederich Schlegel, of continuous revelation.45

This development then sets the stage for late 19th century and early 20th century German expropriations of the Bhagavadgītā. “‘Buddhist’ pessimism and ‘Hindu’ fatalism, which had been metaphors of Weltschmerz, subsequently became elements in a political agenda. Once more-or-less empty symbols, their appearance announced a conscious search on the part of Germans of their Aryan origins. The body of early German Indological scholarship and the philosophy and popular literature inspired by Indian thought provided models for the formation of a new Germany reconnected with the fictive world of the Indo-Germanen.”46

Hegel’s rejection of Indian philosophy as ahistorical and therefore without truth-value decisively shapes modern text-historical consciousness as it applies to Indian texts in general and the Bhagavadgītā in particular. Hegel’s criticism was motivated partly by his need to break with Romanticism (and especially Schlegel’s neo-Catholicism) and partly by the demands of his own philosophical system, where the movement of Spirit through history ends in the truth of absolute consciousness.47 But this understanding of philosophy had fatal consequences

45 Ibid., 73.
46 Ibid., 121.
for the European reception of Indian philosophical texts. On the one hand, these texts could no longer be regarded philosophical since, in Hegel’s language, they represented a historical Gestalt that had already been overcome.\textsuperscript{48} On the other hand, Indian texts were saddled with the burden of generating a history for themselves if they were to be objects of scientific and objective, i.e., historical research.\textsuperscript{49} Taken together, these two factors ultimately meant that Indian texts became the province of the historian rather than the philosopher—a development whose effects we see even today. This separation of historiography from philosophy had untoward consequences not only for Western philological approaches to Indian philosophical texts, but also ultimately for Western philosophy, which now no longer felt impelled to consider these texts, with the result that the prejudice becomes mutually self-reinforcing. Halbfass notes,

The historiography of philosophy had increasingly turned into a specialized research discipline committed to stringent methodological criteria. There was no room for sweeping world-historical assessments and speculative comparisons. Instead, it was the task of the historian of philosophy to clarify the genetic relationship between

\textsuperscript{48} Indeed, as Halbfass shows, Hegel’s enhanced sensitivity to his historical situatedness did not lead to a greater self-critique, because this sensitivity could be accounted for in terms of his system’s inherent teleology. “Hegel is fully aware of his position and the historical conditions of his thought. But this clear and explicit awareness of his historical position and his European identity appears itself as a manifestation of superior reflexivity; and it adds to his historical and cultural self-assurance and the confidence in the hermeneutic potential of his level and context of thought. In his view, his European horizon transcends all Asian horizons. Asian thought is comprehensible and interpretable within European thought, but not vice versa.” Halbfass, \textit{India and Europe}, 96.

\textsuperscript{49} For the text-historical method, truth-claims can only be made of historical objectivity, not of universal philosophical claims—thus explaining why most contemporary commentators on the Bhagavadgītā reject \textit{a priori} any claims the text may have to being a work of philosophy.
various teachings in a philologically responsible fashion. The internal history of Western, i.e., Greek and Judaeo-Christian thought, provided a suitable domain for this hermeneutical and methodological orientation, and its commitment to historical and philological mastery.\(^{50}\)

Yet ironically, while Western philosophy itself no longer takes Hegel’s construction of the history of philosophy seriously, the text-historical method is unable to break free of its Hegelian inheritance.

It is important to recall this history when discussing many European approaches to Indian texts. Many so-called objective evaluations are not even aware of their tacit prejudices in the face of the text, and the scholar will want to read these evaluations with an open and inquiring mind.\(^{51}\) A case in point is the work of von Stieten-cron, who claims that,

The analytic thinking of Western interpreters who were schooled in historico-philological methods stands in contrast to the traditional Indian commentators, who not only harmonized and freely covered over all breaks in the text [i.e. the Bhagavadgītā], 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. In this manner, several philosophical schools developed their own Gītā-interpretation—a spectrum that has, since the beginning of India’s independence movement been further supplemented by

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\(^{50}\) Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 155.

\(^{51}\) As Halbfass already noted. “The philologists of Indian thought have criticized such commitments to specific Western doctrines and methods, and they have tried to abstain from it. But this does not mean that they were themselves not guided by and committed to more fundamental European standards and procedures. This is obvious, for instance, in R. Garbe’s description of the Sāṁkhya system as ‘Indian rationalism,’ of H. Oldenberg’s presentation of the transition from the Brāhmaṇas to the Upaniṣads in the light of, or in analogy to, the Greek shift ‘from myth to logos,’ or even E. Frauwallner’s ‘strictly philological’ exploration of early Vaiśeṣika.” Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 135.
politically motivated interpretations in modernity.\textsuperscript{52}

Now, von Stietencron’s comment only makes sense against the background of the assumption that the text does in fact contain breaks, but this has been the basic assumption (whether tacit or otherwise) of Western interpretations from almost the very beginning. But even if the “analytic” approach is correct in this assumption, it does not obviate the need to understand these multiple interpretations: how does the text permit this range of interpretations? What is common to them? How is it possible for so many to provide their own interpretations while still claiming to be reading “the Gitā”? Why did this one text in particular exercise such fascination on so many generations of Indian and non-Indian thinkers? What about the Bhagavadgitā could lend credibility or even moral authority to political movements in modernity? And did they all use the text in the same way? By imputing that they did so “in order to secure Kṛṣṇa’s divine authority,” von Stietencron seeks to discredit these interpretations without actually critiquing or even being able to critique them. He merely relies on the power of suggestion that these interpretations are not reliable, that they are tainted by unspecified political or religious prejudices to free himself from having to engage with them, but that is not the same as an engagement with their claims. Von Stietencron’s use of an \textit{ad hominem} argument in place of sound reasons is, unfortunately, not the only example. The same tendency surfaces in Malinar’s work, when she excludes “the later Sanskrit tradition of commentaries” as well as “modern Hindu interpretations of the text” on the grounds that “each author

establishes his own hermeneutics on the basis of the religious and philosophical tradition he adheres to.”\textsuperscript{53} The politically motivated interpretations (von Stietencron) have now become religiously colored sentiments (Malinar), and we are in a situation where, in Figueira’s terms, the hermeneutic project can only be “aborted.”

This initial reception of the \textit{Bhagavad Gītā} foregrounded the hermeneutical problems involved in addressing the Other. In their remarks concerning the translation of the \textit{Bhagavad Gītā}, each of these thinkers questioned how philosophical thought can be understood outside its own tradition. In a critical detour from Enlightenment universalism, which still held sway in the nineteenth-century hermeneutic tradition (and was supported by the work of Humboldt), Hegel foreclosed the very possibility of such understanding when he rejected the notion of a common standard of meaning and inflicted the standards and methodological apparatus of one culture upon another. The impossibility of understanding the Other with a European mode of understanding is nothing more than a movement to colonize the consciousness of the Other. Any hermeneutical project is thus aborted.\textsuperscript{54}

In its place, a project of a quite different nature starts taking shape. At the same time as she cites Hauer (infamous for his Nazism) as an authority, Malinar rejects “modern Hindu interpretations of the text” on the grounds that these are religiously and philosophically colored. Figueira’s point is thus well taken when she suggests that “delectation with some dominant fiction or master narrative may ultimately be more gratifying than mere understanding,” but that does not solve the basic problem of hermeneutic understanding. Let us first consider the options Figueira proposes:

\textsuperscript{53} Malinar, \textit{Bhagavadgītā}, 17.
\textsuperscript{54} Figueira, \textit{The Exotic}, 88.
If, as Hegel maintained in his discussion of the translation of philosophical terms, understanding is impossible, how are we then to interpret any venture into the exotic? We learn from Gadamer that the impossibility of objectively understanding the Other in its own identity. Gadamer posits two essential processes in understanding: the historical reconstruction of the original context as well as the discovery of a message beyond a text’s content. The second step necessitates a willingness to accept the message. In the circular movement of hermeneutical understanding, the text imposes flexible expectations, sharing (in the form of play) in the common meaning of tradition and interpretation. This movement allows for the anticipation of meaning. Within the reader’s desire to communicate with the text, there appears strangeness as well as familiarity in the form of prejudices which facilitate or thwart understanding. Thus, the distance between the reader and the text does not appear as an unbreachable obstacle, but rather as what sets the hermeneutical process in motion. As noted earlier, it is precisely this process that is shortcircuited in these exotic quests. The hermeneutical process does not run full cycle; it stalls at intervals for a variety of reasons. The reader may refuse to engage in the play or in alternative forms of inquiry. Delectation with some dominant fiction or master narrative may ultimately be more gratifying than mere understanding. The ensuing privileging of the self beyond the quotidian may simply be too seductive.55

Of the two processes Gadamer posits, the first coincides more or less with the philological task of lower criticism, but does “higher criticism” fulfill the demands of the second process? Either one acknowledges, with Gadamer, “the impossibility of objectively understanding the Other in its own identity,” which is tantamount to saying that there is a German Gītā or an “analytic” Gītā that is incommensurable with Indian approaches and should be dealt

55 Ibid.
with as a separate text, or one takes the text’s polyvalent complexity as well as the complexity of the interpretative tradition seriously. But this bespeaks a willingness to accept this message, however unexpected or foreign it may be. Unfortunately, the history of higher criticism demonstrates that the practitioners of higher criticism more often sought to impose their preconceptions on the text than they engaged with it. In other words, they did not let themselves into the “play,” the mutual and sympathetic back-and-forth between the text and the reader in which the text itself determines the horizon out of which we understand it. Nothing abrogates this process so much as the excision of “didactic” passages (e.g. the Bhagavadgīṭā or the Sanatsujāṭīyaparvan) in order to arrive at a “more original” text or a purely “epic” original. The vague insistence on a purely Indo-European “heroic saga” co-opts the epic into serving the needs of the Aryan myth.

But if the hermeneutical process “stalls” at various intervals, what hope is there for a serious engagement with Indian literature such as the Bhagavadgīṭā? Having either rejected or deferred the task of understanding to an allegedly scientific method, an engagement with the epic can only take place under the aegis of the pseudo-scientific discipline of “higher criticism.” In such criticism, the entire Romantic longing for and horror of India is tamed but not expunged, simultaneously retained and rejected. As Figueira notes,

An examination of the initial European reception to the Bhagavad Gīṭā bears witness to these procedures. Advancing

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56 Hiltebeitel’s work is an example of this sense of “play,” whereby he uses his research into much later ritual (the cults of Āravāṇ and Draupadi) as well as literary adaptations (the Venīsārīhāra) to understand the Mahābhārata. Nearly all of Doniger’s work focuses on such interpretive play, which includes especially exchanges of gender.
the truth claim of Western philosophy is inseparable from defending the preeminent position of the individual Western philosopher and translator. An unfortunate result of this ambition was that the scholarly reception of Indian philosophy was repressed and marginalized. The resulting lacuna could only be filled by popular notions of the esoteric and occult East. Scholarship abrogated its responsibility when it capitulated and codified Indian philosophical concepts in a bastardized form. The field was opened for a revitalization of Romantic irrationalism with an important difference. The Romantic emplotment of India had not been effectively legitimized by science (in the form of philosophical and philological discourse), as subsequent master narratives on India would be.57

This lengthy digression into one central text of the Mahābhārata demonstrates the problems with so-called “higher criticism” while underlining the need for a hermeneutic and philosophical approach. Although this volume is only a preliminary foray into the demonstration of the Mahābhārata’s unity, the authors are united in their conviction that, following lower criticism, a hermeneutic approach that takes the text’s unity seriously is the most promising avenue for progress in Mahābhārata studies. Not only is hermeneutics the richest among textual approaches, it is also the most scientific and the most gentle(wo)manly.