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## Post-philological Gestures — “Deconstructing” Textual Criticism\*

“Post-philological” sounds like just another of those “sign-*post*” neologisms devised to mark a supposedly radical break with something, in this case philology. I have adopted it here as a convenient tag for an attitude I find expressed best in the following statement:<sup>1</sup>

Philology is a bourgeois, paternalist, and hygienist system of thought about the family; it cherishes filiation, tracks down adulterers, and is afraid of contamination. Its thought is based on what is wrong (the variant being a form of deviant behaviour), and it is the basis for a positive methodology.

I take this quote from Bernard Cerquiglini’s *In Praise of the Variant*, which claims to be a “Critical History of Philology” – and just the book “Michel Foucault hoped to see,” the author assures in his dedication, although Foucault could have no say in this: the French original came out five years after his death. While the response from Cerquiglini’s fellow medievalists was far from favourable,<sup>2</sup> his stance can be assumed to have gone down well with the numerous schools of contemporary “critical theory” that hark back to Foucault, be it directly, or indirectly, for instance, via Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.<sup>3</sup>

Let me begin with a summary of recent charges against textual criticism in Indology. The postcolonial *leitmotif* “hierarchization” manifests itself in Peter van der Veer’s<sup>4</sup> assertion that<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant. A Critical History of Philology*. Transl. by Betsy Wing. [*Parallax*]. Baltimore 1999, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> What has been considered most “critical” about it is the degree of its selectiveness; see Keith Busby (ed.), *Towards a Synthesis? Essays on the New Philology*. [*Faux Titre. Études de langue et littérature françaises* 68]. Amsterdam – Atlanta 1993; on selectiveness see especially p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. London 1995 (1st ed. London 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Peter van der Veer, Monumental Texts. The Critical Edition of India’s National Heritage. In: Daud Ali (ed.), *Invoking the Past. The Uses of History in South Asia*. [*SOAS Studies on South Asia. Understanding and Perspectives Series*]. New Delhi 1999, p. 134-155; also in: Jackie Assayag (ed.), *The Resources of History. Tradition, Narration and Nation in South Asia*. [*École Française d’Extrême-Orient, Études thématiques* 8]. Paris 1999, p. 113-124; the (third) version quoted here and further below is incorporated in: Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters. Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton – Oxford 2001, p. 106-133.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit., p. 126; emphasis added.

[the] philological project of editing Hindu texts (...) is a construction of a Sanskrit canon that *privileges* a “classical age” before A.D. 1200 and marginalizes or ignores (...) literatures written in modern Indian languages, such as Tamil, Bengali, or Urdu.

Applying van der Veer’s stance to Max Müller’s edition of the R̥gveda, Sharada Sugirtharajah<sup>6</sup> maintains that Müller accorded a *privileged* position to the Sanskrit R̥gveda while ignoring the “Tamil Veda” of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas; that he had *privileged* the written word, marginalizing oral tradition; and that he had *privileged* the Veda, “thus delegitimizing other textual and oral forms of knowledge,”<sup>7</sup> to name just three items from her catalogue of binaries supposed, according to postcolonial theory, to entail “a violent hierarchy, in which one term of the opposition is always dominant.”<sup>8</sup>

By maintaining that beneath all the philological gestures<sup>9</sup> “we may glimpse the nationalist gesture,”<sup>10</sup> van der Veer insinuates a connection between the “colonial, textualizing project of modernity”<sup>11</sup> and a supposed Romantic German search for self-definition. Thus he creates the impression that the search for the “golden age of Indo-European civilization in Sanskrit Ur-texts”<sup>12</sup> ultimately fed into a larger discourse of nationalism, in which Indian philologists like Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, first editor-in-chief of the Mahābhārata, “used philology in the way the Germans used it in their own country.<sup>13</sup> (...) Sanskrit philology provided [Indian philologists] with the tools to dig up the origin and essence of the nation, that is, the Hindu nation.”<sup>14</sup>

They constructed a Hindu nationalist *imaginaire*,<sup>15</sup> a selective archive of India’s past, effectively occluding the Muslim presence,<sup>16</sup> and thus

<sup>6</sup> Sharada Sugirtharajah, *Imagining Hinduism. A Postcolonial Perspective*. London – New York 2003.

<sup>7</sup> See Sugirtharajah, op. cit., 46-49; cf. also van der Veer, loc. cit. (n. 5).

<sup>8</sup> Bill Ashcroft – Gareth Griffiths – Helen Tiffin, *Post-colonial Studies. The Key Concepts. [Routledge Key Guides]*. London – New York 2000, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Such as attributing authenticity to the *lectio difficilior*; cf. van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters* (see n. 4), p. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Van der Veer, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>11</sup> Van der Veer, loc. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Van der Veer, op. cit., p. 122; cf. Sugirtharajah, op. cit. (n. 6), p. 39-41 and 46.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. van der Veer, op. cit., p. 138f.

<sup>14</sup> Van der Veer, op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> Van der Veer, op. cit., p. 122f. and 127.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. van der Veer, op. cit., p. 126.

the critical edition of India's historical landscape, which reached a high pitch in the (...) destruction of Babar's Mosque in Ayodhya, is the site of struggle, the site of difference.<sup>17</sup>

In the above condensed summary I confined myself to statements by van der Veer and Sugirtharajah, and I cannot enter into a discussion of their theoretical background, such as Bernard S. Cohn's notion of philology as a "cultural technology of colonial rule,"<sup>18</sup> Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*,<sup>19</sup> Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Michel Foucault's "power axiom" "exposing the secret complicities between power and knowledge," as Said put it,<sup>20</sup> to name just a few items.

Now, one could counter these charges by pointing out, for instance, that neither Sukthankar's nor Müller's edition claims to establish an *Urtext*; that Müller did take stock of the oral Ṛgveda tradition, as best he could; that a totally unrelated "Tamil Veda," or, for that matter, a "Draupadī Mahābhārata" of similar provenance could hardly have been helpful in coming to terms with a single line of the manuscript traditions of the respective Sanskrit texts; that the nebulous ideas about "German Romanticism" prevailing in regions that have known little, if anything, of the kind may be difficult to square with the empiricist thrust of the "philological project,"<sup>21</sup> and so forth.

But it would be futile to exhaust oneself in the tedious correction of factual errors and distortions, because the postcolonial charge gathers its momentum outside the sphere of prosaic factuality, preferably by means of subtle insinuation. Take for instance the term "philological project": it presupposes an unwarranted degree of "political" intentionality and consensus among philologists, be it of the "paternalist," "colonialist," or "nationalist" variety. It certainly does not provide for the possibility that philology could have a purpose in itself, apart from supposedly serving master plans of another order.

Three principal levels can be distinguished in this summary charge: First and foremost, postcolonial discourse presents itself as a "political" accusation; second, it raises epistemological questions; and third, there is

<sup>17</sup> Van der Veer, *op. cit.*, p. 133. On the term "difference" see below, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> I take this expression from N. Dirks's introduction to Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*. The British in India. Princeton 1996, p. ix.

<sup>19</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. London 1983.

<sup>20</sup> Edward W. Said, Michel Foucault. In: Barry Smart (ed.), *Michel Foucault*. Critical Assessments. Vol. VII. London – New York 1997, p. 268.

<sup>21</sup> Cerquiglini flatly denies this empiricism, at least with regard to German schools of philology (cf. below, p. 22). On "projects" cf. Said, *op. cit.* (n. 3), p. 73ff.

the occasional charge of the postcolonial light brigade into philological territory, such as van der Veer's claim that

[t]he chief difficulty in editing the Mahābhārata, as Sukthankar observed, was that the Mahābhārata tradition was mainly transmitted orally.<sup>22</sup>

I venture to say that Sukthankar's momentous Prolegomena to the critical edition of the Mahābhārata hint at nothing of the kind, and that van der Veer's pronouncement is a bold fabrication, at best a distorted echo of Sukthankar's surmise that both the Northern and Southern recension of the Mahābhārata manuscript tradition "are, in final analysis, *independent copies of an orally transmitted text*."<sup>23</sup> According to Sukthankar, then, *the* major development in the tradition of the Mahābhārata would already have taken place *before* its transformation into writing, along with the genesis of "hundreds and thousands of (...) minor readings," the explanation of which might have been the nearest thing to van der Veer's "chief difficulty." But, Sukthankar points out, if we take "this phenomenal variation" as an inheritance of the oral stage, "all the difficulties (...) vanish,"<sup>24</sup> and along with them van der Veer's fabrication.

Sugirtharajah<sup>25</sup> tries to forge a similar argument against Müller's edition of the Ṛgveda, echoing van der Veer's assertion that<sup>26</sup>

[t]he Vedas were transmitted orally and were only transcribed into written texts by the nineteenth-century Orientalists, starting with Max Müller's six-volume edition of the Rg-Veda.

In fact, the Ṛgveda's extensive manuscript tradition speaks otherwise. More importantly, its oral tradition being fixed down to the last accent by what has been known since Hermann Oldenberg as orthoepic diaskeuasis,<sup>27</sup> there is no room left for "composition *during* oral per-

<sup>22</sup> Van der Veer, op. cit. (n. 9), p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> Prolegomena, p. lxxxviii, here quoted according to: *The Ādiparvan, Being the First Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India*; for the first time critically ed. by Vishnu S. Sukthankar. Poona 1933. Van der Veer refers to the reissue of the Prolegomena in Sukthankar's rare *Critical Studies in the Mahābhārata* (Poona 1944).

<sup>24</sup> Sukthankar, op. cit., p. lxxix.

<sup>25</sup> Op. cit. (n. 6), p. 47ff.

<sup>26</sup> Van der Veer, op. cit. (n. 9), p. 120; see also p. 50 and 117.

<sup>27</sup> Contemporaneous with the beginnings of the Brāhmaṇa literature, i.e., sometime between 1200 and 800 B.C., the hymns underwent the strictest codification imaginable, including the minute details of phonetic/melodic accentuation. It is due to this process that this Saṃhitā has come down to us basically unchanged; cf. Hermann Oldenberg, *Die Hymnen des Ṛigveda*. Vol. 1: *Metrische und textgeschichtliche Prolegomena*. Berlin 1888, p. 370-489.

formance,”<sup>28</sup> the key element of oral literature. This makes van der Veer’s vulgate version of Parry and Lord’s “oral-formulaic theory” obsolete, as is confirmed by no less an authority than Albert B. Lord himself, who observed with explicit reference to Vedic hymns that

sacred texts which must be preserved word for word (...) could not be oral in any except the most literal sense.<sup>29</sup>

Van der Veer’s inappropriate assertion can be read as a combination of the Parry–Lord theory with reflections on the hierarchical relationship between speech and writing, a staple of critical theory since the days of Ferdinand de Saussure. Neither of the two theorems pertains to the case van der Veer tries to make, but I find it tempting to interpret one in terms of the other, with Saussure as the primordial Homeric figure, whose oral teachings survived only in the notes taken by his audience, posthumously transcribed into the *Cours de linguistique général*, and retold in endless variations by latter-day bards, who, as is well known, made ample use of poetic licence.<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, none of these post-philological arguments are really to the point, but that is as close as the critical theorist gets to the real thing. The basic misunderstanding that usually prevents an adequate assessment is the notion that textual criticism is about extracting a certain *meaning* from a text, while textual critics tend to follow the rule that questions concerning the meaning of a given text had better be postponed until its *wording* has been established as accurately as its textual tradition allows.<sup>31</sup> Thus, van der Veer tries to discredit the critical edition of the Mahābhārata not by pointing out editorial shortcomings, but by reading a “political” meaning into Sukthankar’s “philological project” that is unwarranted by anything Sukthankar himself has said, and then “contextualizing” it within Hindu nationalism – an equally unwarranted proposition. Anyone with a genuine interest in what Sukthankar had to say on the meaning of the Mahābhārata will find it in his book with

<sup>28</sup> Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, Mass. 1960, p. 5; emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> Lord, *op. cit.*, p. 280, n. 9, referring to p. 5 (cf. previous quote).

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Roy Harris, *Saussure and His Interpreters*. Edinburgh 2001; John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction*. Princeton 1989, p. 18ff. on Derrida’s twisted interpretation of Saussure; cf. also the liberty taken with Saussure by J. Kristeva and the *Tel quel* group, as noted in: Ansgar Nünning (ed.), *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie. Ansätze – Personen – Grundbegriffe*. Stuttgart – Weimar 2001, p. 570.

<sup>31</sup> This asymmetry is indeed an old one, especially between philologists and social scientists; cf. Marco Schöller, *Methode und Wahrheit in der Islamwissenschaft*. Prolegomena. Wiesbaden 2000, p. 114.

that very title,<sup>32</sup> and certainly not in the Prolegomena to his edition. Either way, van der Veer's political interpretation is entirely unfounded. But hypothetically assuming that Sukthankar had such pretension, are we supposed to think that textual criticism was a necessary precondition for the destruction of Babar's mosque, in other words, that it would not have happened if the Sanskrit epics had not been published in critical editions?

For van der Veer, arguably the least harmful aspect of textual criticism is its being "mechanistic"<sup>33</sup> – which makes it a most fitting occupation for a "pedantic German" like Müller.<sup>34</sup> I see this caricature of textual criticism in terms of mechanistic pedantry as an attempt to discredit its very foundation, namely, what is called "Akribie" in German, from Greek *akribēia*, originally the accuracy of a craftsman in adjusting two workpieces to one another,<sup>35</sup> and as such a fitting term for the textual critic's ambition, typically psychologized by Cerquiglini as "hysteria of detail."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*. [Society's Monograph 4 / T.-C. Parekh Memorial Fund Publication 1]. Bombay 1957.

<sup>33</sup> Van der Veer, op. cit. (n. 9), p. 117f. Here van der Veer not only hijacks David F. Hult by means of selective quoting, he also misinterprets the "mechanical" aspect of what he calls the "Lachmann method." The baselessness of van der Veer's claims is conspicuous, e.g., in Sukthankar's observation that "it will be found for one thing perfectly useless to try to derive *mechanically* one set of readings uniformly from the other" (op. cit. [n. 23], p. lxxxviii). It bears reminding that the "mechanical" evaluation of readings was devised as a means of reducing the influence of subjective judgement (cf. David Hult, *Reading it Right. The Ideology of Text Editing*. In: Marina Scordilis Brownlee – Kevin Brownlee – Stephen G. Nichols (ed.), *The New Medievalism*. Baltimore – London 1991, p. 117f.; Sebastiano Timpanaro, *Die Entstehung der Lachmannschen Methode*. Hamburg <sup>2</sup>1971, p. 93ff.).

<sup>34</sup> Van der Veer, op. cit., p. 112; cf. also p. 107 and 109.

<sup>35</sup> Wolfgang Wieland, *Platon und die Formen des Wissens*. Göttingen 1982, p. 162: "Das Wort entstammt dem handwerklichen Bereich und meint zunächst die Genauigkeit, mit der konkrete Werkstücke aufeinander und zueinander passen. (...) Akribie ist also etwas, das sich vornehmlich dort bewährt, wo es darauf ankommt, auf einen konkreten Einzelfall einzugehen und ihm gerecht zu werden."

<sup>36</sup> Cerquiglini, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 77. — Frank Kolb has recently pointed out the importance of *Akribie* as a prerequisite of *Geisteswissenschaften* in general (*Akribie und Gesellschaft: Zur Notwendigkeit wissenschaftlicher Präzision in den Geisteswissenschaften*. In: *1000 Worte für die Geisteswissenschaften*, [http://1000worte.besign.info/beitrag\\_kolb.html](http://1000worte.besign.info/beitrag_kolb.html)). However, the "Newspeak" of German education politics shows different tendencies in its effort to market its latest invention, the mass-produced *Generalist*. It may be interesting to see how *Akribie* will fare in the frantic deconstruction of *Geisteswissenschaften* according to the political dictate of "international standards," compounded by economization and the impact of social sciences (highlighted at the 27<sup>th</sup> Orientalistentag, Bamberg 2001).

Now, shifting to the political/ideological level, it soon emerges that pedantic German textual criticism is not quite so harmless after all. Van der Veer's allusion to "the way the Germans used it in their own country" clearly echoes Sheldon Pollock, who maintains that the alleged orientalist tendency to "divide the world into 'betters and lessers'" was "vectored (...) inward" by "German indology" to separate Aryans from Jews.<sup>37</sup> By now it will be apparent what this choosy pedantry with variants is all about: elimination of the "lessers"! As if that wasn't enough, van der Veer has discovered that the sinister German master plan has taken hold in other fields, too. Thanks to his exercise in radical thinking we now see the destruction of Babar's mosque for what it really was: an act of textual criticism, an elimination of the unwanted variant.

Eventually, the emphasis on the "Germanness" of textual criticism proves to be just another chip of the philosopher's stone that turns every item it touches into an antithesis of German/Aryan *versus* Jew/Semite, passed off as the essence of German history, as it were. Here van der Veer merely emulates Pollock's "Deep Orientalism," the most notorious example of this kind of discourse strategy.<sup>38</sup>

This brings me to the epistemological level. On the one hand the post-colonial charge associates the "philological project" with *Realpolitik*. At the same time, by reducing its methodology to mere "gestures," affiliating it to "German Romanticism," and eventually making it part and parcel of "the Hindu nationalist *imaginaire*," the factual basis of textual criticism is disputed. Its very reality is called into question by little more than lavish use of inverted commas and words to that effect, such as "construct," *imaginaire*, etc. Consequently, the critical theorist can hardly be expected to enter into a detailed discussion of the actual "philological handiwork of critical editions, etymology, historical gram-

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<sup>37</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj*. In: Carol A. Breckenridge – Peter van der Veer (ed.), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Perspectives on South Asia*. [South Asia Seminar Series]. Philadelphia 1993, p. 76-133, at p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> The influence of Pollock's "Deep Orientalism" is even more obvious in the 1999 *Urtext* of van der Veer's "Monumental Texts" (see n. 4; at p. 137), except with regard to Friedrich Max Müller, whom van der Veer declares "the nineteenth-century Indologist *par excellence*, a representative of a superior German philology" (op. cit., p. 136), while Pollock had painted "Mueller" as a naturalized "British" scholar (op. cit. [n. 37], p. 83). One remove further, Sugirtharajah emulates van der Veer's stance on textual criticism (cf. above), while mutating his German *leitmotif* into a light version of Leon Poliakov's Aryan metamyth, combined with various other bits and pieces of critical theory. This assemblage again shows the formulaic character of postcolonial theorizing.

mar”<sup>39</sup> and the like, because that could be seen as attributing some substance to them after all – which is incompatible with the epistemological premise that reduces any notion of the factual nature of texts to a mere “religion of the text,” as Cerquiglini put it.<sup>40</sup>

Here, then, we have reached the point of intersection between postcolonialism and the discourse strategy alluded to in the title of this paper: deconstruction. Apart from being accused of “secret complicities” with colonial power, knowledge is simultaneously reduced to mere interpretation, and, according to the deconstructionist axiom, *all interpretation is misinterpretation*. Thus, all knowledge is provisional or hypothetical – with the obvious exception of the deconstructionist’s knowledge of this being so; all readings are misreadings, since no reading can escape correction,<sup>41</sup> and, consequently, all texts are subject to deconstruction,<sup>42</sup> critical editions being just one subset.

Taken seriously, deconstruction holds out the prospect of ending all discrimination, because all discrimination is provisional, and potentially harmful, as implied in my choice of this very term. Some may thank Jacques Derrida for his liberating insights which seem to break the vicious circle of infinite and pointless signification, while others take his pronouncements as little more than inscrutable mantras, designed to unfold their curative properties in imitative recitation, rather than genuine debate. Van der Veer’s previously quoted closing sentence, with the term “difference” prominently placed at its end, although not in Derrida’s affected spelling “différance”,<sup>43</sup> can be taken as a case in point here. By and large, his flirtation with deconstructionist theory seems as serious as his grappling with philological practice.

All things considered, there may be more at stake here than textual criticism, something to which textual criticism just provides a tool: it is the faculty of handling texts according to reasonable principles,<sup>44</sup> and,

<sup>39</sup> Van der Veer, *op. cit.* (n. 9), p. 112; cf. also p. 107 and 109.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.* (n. 1), p. 1. In Cerquiglini’s model, empiricism, which he firmly associates with French philologists, is irreconcilable with “positivist” German Romanticism. In his highly emotional chapter on “The Positive” (p. 47ff.), he even conjures up the imagery of the Franco–Prussian war, inflating a supposedly “New Philology” of the late nineteenth century to a French revenge for the defeat at Sedan – a typically Foucauldian over-dramatization (cf. below, n. 53).

<sup>41</sup> Here I avail myself of Jonathan Culler, as quoted by Ellis (*op. cit.* [n. 30], p. 102).

<sup>42</sup> This is how Ellis (*op. cit.*, p. 73) put it, although not in the context of textual criticism.

<sup>43</sup> On the mutations of the term “difference” see Ellis, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> As early as 1990, Peter Gaeffke (*A Rock in the Tides of Time: Oriental Studies Then and Now. Academic Questions* 3,2 [1990] 67-74) had noted as much in his comment



by extension: reason itself, along with – truth, arguably the most heavily contested notion in contemporary critical theory.<sup>45</sup> We obviously have come a long way from Max Müller’s notion of a universal human longing for truth, manifesting itself in language, religion, and philosophy, as well as in the respective “sciences” exploring them,<sup>46</sup> “weapons for the discovery of truth,” to use Müller’s words.<sup>47</sup>

The obvious potential and universal applicability of the textual critic’s “weapons”<sup>48</sup> may explain the vigour of his opponents’ demand for disarmament. And there can be little doubt that a unilateral demobilization is intended here. To give a classic example, “Orientalists” are flatly denied any entitlement to “truth” by Edward Said’s epistemological decree:<sup>49</sup>

Orientalism was (...) a system of truths, truths in Nietzsche’s sense of the word. It is therefore *correct* that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.

The word “correct” already indicates that Said’s own epistemological moorings are beyond any doubt, as asserted in the following statement:<sup>50</sup>

My point (...) is to emphasize *the truth* that the Orientalist, as much as anyone in the European West who thought about or experienced the Orient, performed this kind of mental operation.

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on the academic event that brought forth an impressive amount of distortionist theorizing, including Pollock’s “Deep Orientalism?” (Gaefke, op. cit., p. 73, quoted in Breckenridge – van der Veer, op. cit. [n. 37], p. vii): “(...) the whole seminar seemed to be set up to defame textual scholarship and Orientalist learning.”

<sup>45</sup> Recently highlighted in Richard Rorty – Pascal Engel, *What’s the Use of Truth?* Ed. by Patrick Savidan, transl. by William McCuaig. New York 2007 (French original: Paris 2005).

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., Friedrich Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*. Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain. 2 vols. London 1862-1864; *Introduction to the Science of Religion*. Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution, in February and May, 1870. New edition. London 1893; *The Science of Thought*. London 1887.

<sup>47</sup> See Müller, *Science of Language*. Vol. 2, p. 104, where he uses that expression for the human senses.

<sup>48</sup> See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology*. Dynamics of Textual Scholarship. Urbana – Chicago 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Said, op. cit. (n. 3), p. 104; emphasis added. On Said’s “epistemology” and its “deconstructionist” leanings, cf. the chapter on “Criticism between Culture and System” in his *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge 1983, p. 178ff.

<sup>50</sup> Said, op. cit. (n. 3), p. 60; emphasis added. For another paradigm of this “mental operation” cf. op. cit., p. 228: “Every statement made by Orientalists or White Men (who were usually interchangeable) conveyed a sense of the irreducible distance separating white from colored, or Occidental from Oriental.”

Truth seldom comes more global than that. Thanks to Said, “so-called truthful (...) philological analyses”<sup>51</sup> are finally unmasked as Orientalist untruths, while his own mental operation may be considered “unquestionably true”<sup>52</sup> (to echo his claim for Foucault’s master narrative).<sup>53</sup>

Such epistemological premises make it difficult, if not impossible, to argue. The problem is compounded by the obvious asymmetry between the supposed critical theory and what it claims to criticize/theorize: textual criticism. Is the post-philological charge a theory at all, then, considering its evident failure to advance a verifiable thesis on the item under scrutiny? I think not. Nor can it be considered critical in the sense of “discerning,” I think, because of its formulaic character. Its point of departure being fixed with apodictic statements like “all knowledge is power,” “all interpretation is misinterpretation,” “all readings are misreadings,” etc., the result of the supposedly critical discourse is invariably a confirmation of its premise, repeated *ad infinitum* with the predictability of a pre-recorded message. Thus we may admire the bards of “critical theory” for the style and sophistication of their performance, rather than for their discernment or critical acumen, for which their formulaic narrative leaves as little room as it does for the presentation of verifiable evidence. Seen in a less favourable light, the supposed critical theory is hardly more than a “formality with the purpose of eliciting a favourable response,” to quote the definition the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for “gesture.” As may be assumed from its nature, the formulaic performance of the accusatory epic is directed first and foremost at a favourable audience; an exchange with practising textual critics is not intended, as far as I can see.

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<sup>51</sup> See Said, *op. cit.*, p. 23: “My analysis of the Orientalist text therefore places emphasis on the evidence, which is by no means invisible, for such representations as representations, not as “natural” depictions of the Orient. This evidence is found just as prominently in the *so-called truthful* text (histories, *philological analyses*, political treatises) as in the avowedly artistic (i.e., openly imaginative) text” (emphases added).

<sup>52</sup> On Said’s wielding of “truths”, *cf. op. cit.*, p. 96, 266 and 343.

<sup>53</sup> See Said’s introduction to the English translation of Raymond Schwab’s *Renaissance oriental (The Oriental Renaissance)*. New York 1984, p. xvi), where Said particularly refers to Foucault’s notion “that near the beginning of the nineteenth century we have a period in which philology as well as biology was invented.” Ironically, Foucault’s overdramatized “archeological” narrative of “earth-shaking cataclysmic change” at the beginning of the nineteenth century *has* been questioned very early on (see G.S. Rousseau, *Whose Enlightenment? Not Man’s: The Case of Michel Foucault. Eighteenth-Century Studies* 6,2 [Winter 1972-1973] 238-256; *cf. also* Busby, *op. cit.* [n. 2], p. 38, n. 28, on Cerquiglini). I should like to add that the connection Foucault insinuates between biology and philology holds very little, if any, truth, particularly with regard to Franz Bopp, whose name graces the title of the pertinent chapter in Foucault’s *Order of Things*.

By contrast, as Cerquiglini rightly points out, textual criticism is a “methodology”: It is directed towards achieving a clearly defined, manifest result, such as a critical edition. Since the days of Karl Lachmann, the criteria of that method have constantly been subjected to verification and adjustment – a story that remains untold in van der Veer’s narrative.<sup>54</sup>

But no matter which criteria we apply to an edition in order to call it critical,<sup>55</sup> we shall soon come to the conclusion that textual criticism in Indology has only just taken off: there are still precious few critical editions of Sanskrit texts around, not to mention of texts in other Indian languages. So why all the fuss, and how should practising textual

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<sup>54</sup> By hanging on to the term “Lachmann method” – just another echo of Pollock (op. cit. [n. 37], p. 84) –, van der Veer in a way employs the very binary of “progressive modernity *versus* static backwardness,” which postcolonial theorists habitually depict as an instrument of colonial domination. Cf. Busby, op. cit. (n. 2), p. 38, on the similar discourse strategy Cerquiglini employs against his favourite straw man, Gaston Paris. Similarly, as Ellis points out (op. cit. [n. 30], p. 26, n. 12), Derrida prefers to make his case on “writing” on the dated opinions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, instead of contemporary linguistics. On the supposed colonial binary “static – modern” see Ashcroft et al., op. cit. (n. 8), p. 144, *s.v. modernity*; for numerous applications of this theoretical prefab see Sugirtharajah, op. cit. (n. 6).

<sup>55</sup> Van der Veer recycles the notion that “the genealogical classification of manuscript exemplars into groupings known as families” is the central feature of “the Lachmann method” (op. cit. [n. 9], p. 137; cf. also Cerquiglini’s “Foucauldian” “thought about the family” and “filiation” in my introductory quote). Nothing can illustrate the constant development of textual criticism better than the history of the *stemma codicum*, which, by the way, was not introduced by Lachmann (but by August Wilhelm Zumpt, according to Timpanaro, op. cit. [n. 33], p. 44ff.; revised in the 1981 edition in favour of Carl Johan Schlyter, as Philipp Maas kindly informs me). Michael Witzel has recently reiterated the case for a strict stemmatology, which entails the consequence that “in the past 200 years only about a handful of truly critical editions (...) of Sanskrit texts have been prepared” (cf. Michael Witzel [ed.], *Inside the Texts, Beyond the Texts. New Approaches to the Study of the Vedas. [Harvard Oriental Series, Opera Minora 2]*. Cambridge, Mass. 1997, Introduction, p. vi, n. 4). For recently proposed stemmata see the edition of the Yuktīdīpikā by A. Wezler and S. Motegi (Stuttgart 1998, p. xviii-xx), R. Lariviere’s Nāradaśmṛti (Philadelphia 1989, Vol. 1, p. xxiv), Ph. Maas’s edition of the Samādhipāda of the Pātañjalayogaśāstra (Aachen 2006), and J. Mallinson’s edition of Ādinātha’s Khecarīvidyā (London – New York 2007). In my view, a stemma may contribute substantially to what I consider the ultimate goal, viz., *Nachvollziehbarkeit* of the editorial process, but it is not a *sine qua non*. If it was, Indologists would find themselves without critical editions of the Sanskrit epics, where contamination precludes such pretensions (see, e.g., Sukthankar, op. cit. [n. 23], p. lxxxii and lxxxvi; for general aspects, cf. Timpanaro, op. cit., p. 24). The same holds for various other fields where serious reservations towards strict stemmatology have been voiced; see, e.g., J. Hannerer’s edition of Abhinavagupta’s Mālinīśloka-vārttika 1.1-399 (Groningen 1998, p. 40-45), and the Groningen edition of the Skandapurāṇa by R. Adriaensen et al. (Vol. 1. Groningen 1998, p. 39).

critics react to it? Considering that the postcolonial notion of their activities is not contaminated by overexposure to any of their products (as shown above), and that their critics have yet to explain what to do instead, there is little prospect of a genuine debate, let alone of synthesis, as considered in other fields.<sup>56</sup>

My conclusion should not be misunderstood as an attempt to shut out debate. Like any other field of evidence-based investigation, textual criticism needs constant debate, to some extent on a general level and, first and foremost, with regard to the individual case, as shown by several contributions in this volume. What distinguishes textual criticism in my view is the progression from the individual case to general considerations, and the constant interplay of methodology and practice. By contrast, post-philological critique of the type described here proceeds from utter ignorance of, if not open contempt for, the details of the individual case, and tries to impose its theorizing on a practice it usually has little understanding of, let alone experience with.

The ultimate irony seems to me that textual criticism is far better equipped for epistemological imponderabilia than the critical theorist who has made it his profession to reinvent them time and again. Whereas the dogmatic premise that “all readings are misreadings” allows no “difference,” as it were, textual criticism constantly questions every text, and it does provide for alternative readings: “the variant” is its very business, and what little the critical theorist may know about “the variant” is owed to the very methodology he tries to dislodge. If critical editions are “monumental texts,” as van der Veer’s derisive title suggests, they are monuments of provisionality, not in the “Foucauldian” sense, as temporary theoretic scaffolding, unceremoniously abandoned whenever the theorist finds it opportune,<sup>57</sup> but in the sense that they are open to revisions. This openness, epitomized in Sukthankar’s announcement of the “first”<sup>58</sup> critical edition of the Mahābhārata, makes the deconstructionist charge pointless by its own criteria.

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<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., Busby, op. cit. (n. 2); the question mark in the title indicates the prevailing reservations towards such pretensions.

<sup>57</sup> Here I avail myself of an approving description of Foucault’s attitude in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Cambridge 1994, p. 16. For a less favourable assessment of this attitude in the wider context of French intellectual life, cf. Ellis, op. cit. (n. 30), p. 84f.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. above, n. 23.