German Indology, Aryanism, and Anti-Semitism

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> "Like some procession of tireless penitents, much of the academic community continues to beat its collective breast and bewail its sins when it comes to Eastern studies. This attitude has persisted at least since 1978, when Edward W. Said published *Orientalism*, a book of which it can (or should) be meekly stated that it has been both influential and deleterious, especially in the credo it spawned—a credo that continues to infuse the field of postcolonial studies with inexhaustible self-righteousness."
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> Roberto Calasso, *Indian Classics: The Big New Vision*; http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/sep/24/indian-classics-big-new-vision/.

"The seer of the Third Reich," Houston Stewart Chamberlain is famous for popularizing the idea of a German master race and for interpreting history as a conflict between the "Aryan-Christian worldview" and "Jewish materialism." Chamberlain's debt to the French theoretician of race Arthur de Gobineau is well-documented. Less widely known is that Gobineau himself had a source: the Norwegian-born Indologist Christian Lassen (1800–76), since 1840 Professor for Ancient Indian Language and Literature at the University of Bonn, Germany. Christian Lassen's philological researches formed the basis of not only Gobineau's racial anthropology but also inspired other anti-Semites such as the German composer Richard Wagner and the French Orientalist Ernest Renan. Because of the Indologists' role in establishing the later science of race, it is vital that we read nineteenth-century Orientalist philology carefully and critically.

In 1837, Christian Lassen published an article on the Sanskrit epic, the Mahābhārata. Lassen's simplistic twenty-five page analysis of the massive epic triggered a frenzy of activity around the epic, which was taken to hold the key not only to ancient Indian history but also to the European past, present, and future. What was Lassen's innovation? An amateur historian who had made his name by compiling Sanskrit fragments, Lassen realized the potential of the Sanskrit epic by combining two of nineteenth-century Europe's greatest obsessions: anthropology of race and the writing of historical decline narratives. German philology, already suspicious of the arid rationalism

of the French Enlightenment and seeking a quasi-mystical *Geist*, provided the perfect intellectual laboratory for Lassen's explorations. Lassen interpreted the epic (which, to most European audiences, would have appeared a forbiddingly long-winded and boring treatise on matters of law, ritual, the ceremonial worship of ancestors and gods, and the ethical governance of the world) as the historical record of a conflict for political supremacy fought between "white Aryans" and "black aboriginals" in Indian prehistory. Lassen was explicit about the racial basis of his philological research into the Mahābhārata:

> "For reasons of length, I omit an investigation of the names *Pându* and *Krīs'na*, white and black, and merely throw out the conjecture that they are to be interpreted as references to the two races that fought each other in Indian prehistory: the originally native black [race] and the Sanskrit-speaking, light-skinned [race] that had immigrated from the north, whose western racial relatives are, even now, successfully fighting a similar battle with similar superiority over the *red* races of America" (Lassen, "Beiträge," 75).

With this simple expedient of treating myth as history, Lassen pulled the Mahābhārata out of its antiquarian concerns, and made it germane to his contemporary readers—an act he followed up, first in successive installments of the same article and then in a massive four-volume work *Indische Alterthumskunde* (*The Study of Indian Antiquity*), with detailed descriptions of the ancient Indian peoples, classifying them according to racial origin, physical appearance, moral and intellectual development, and civilizatory preeminence. One of the most important elements of Lassen's classification was the distinction of the world's inhabitants into two primary races: the Semitic and the Indo-Germanic. He claimed, "the latter . . . are without doubt the most talented." Although he acknowledged the Semitic peoples' contributions to culture, science, and the arts, he claimed, "they are not equal regarding these achievements and, among the Caucasian peoples, we must decisively grant the laurels to the Indo-Germans." Declaring that the Semites "did not possess that harmonious balance of all psychic powers through which the Indo-Germans became preeminent," Lassen described them thus:

> He [i.e., the Semite as a type] cannot separate the relationship of the world to man

> in general from the relationship of the world to his own 'I'; he cannot represent ideas in the mind in pure objectivity; his way of looking at things is subjective and egotistical. His poetry is lyrical and therefore subjective; his spirit expresses its joy and its pain, its love and its hatred, its admiration and its scorn . . . . Philosophy is also not proper to the Semites . . . . Their views and representations dominate their spirit too much for them to be able to calmly raise themselves up to secure the pure thought and to separate the universal and the necessary from its individuality and its accidents . . . . In his religion [too], the Semite is self-seeking and exclusive; Jehovah is only the God of the Hebrews, who alone recognize him; all other gods are false and do not have the slightest share in the truth." (Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde*, vol., 1, 414–15).

Lassen's researches were consumed eagerly by Europeans, grateful to find confirmation of their own views in the (hi)stories of other peoples. Renan, for instance, based his account of the Semite in *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (1858) to a significant extent on Lassen's *Indische Alterthumskunde*. Wagner is known to have possessed all four volumes of *Indische Alterthumskunde*. Cosima Wagner refers in her diary to their reading Lassen's book together. Likewise, when it came to seeking historical foundations for his racial anthropology, Gobineau turned to Lassen: in the first volume of his *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853), Gobineau cited Lassen's *Indische Alterthumskunde* ten times (and over seventy-five times in the second volume). Gobineau based his characterization of the Aryan race extensively upon Lassen's pseudoethnographic researches (it bears pointing out that Lassen never visited India and that his reconstructions were based on his philological investigations into the Mahābhārata, supplemented by travelers' accounts), though he expanded his views of the racial, physiological features of the Indo-Germanic race into the picture of blond, blue-eyed and pink-complected individuals familiar to us today. Like Lassen (and clearly inspired by him as he knew no Sanskrit), Gobineau based his account of racial decline and destiny upon the Sanskrit epics, particularly the Mahābhārata. According to him, the Mahābhārata told the "great history of his late migration [of the Aryan peoples]" (Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, vol. 2, 163). Indeed, when it came to establishing the identity of these invaders he took a

page directly out of Lassen's book: he declared, "as for the race to which these invaders belonged, doubt is not permissible. The word [i.e., Pāṇḍu] means a white man" (ibid.). Bizarrely, he also went beyond Lassen in declaring, "their wives were big and blond and enjoyed the freedom that among the Teutons . . . was a continuation of the primitive customs of the white family."

When Roberto Calasso writes in his review of the *Murty Classical Library* that nineteenth-century Orientalists "had only one driving impulse: to understand. Nothing more, but also nothing less," how does he account for these facts? Does he allow for the fact that many of the German Indologists, "the greatest practitioners in the golden age of Indology," were also anti-Semites and racists? And how are we to uncover, evaluate, and learn from these facts if not through a critical history? Calasso casts the debate as being one between scientists and their critics, that is, on the one hand, the nineteenth-century philologists and translator-critics, whose work makes it possible for us "to access entire civilizations," and, on the other, the postcolonial scholars, whom he characterizes as "influential," "deleterious," and "infused with . . . inexhaustible self-righteousness." But this dichotomy is misleading. We cannot simply accept everything that has been written about India in the nineteenth century at face-value.

Calasso describes the Indologists as "the authors of studies, translations, and commentaries that remain indispensable, though in some cases they date back more than a century." But does that mean that there is no need to adopt a questioning attitude towards nineteenth-century scholarship—indeed, that any criticism of the stalwarts of nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship (Calasso mentions Hermann Oldenberg, Albrecht Weber, Paul Deussen, Heinrich Zimmer Sr., Theodor Aufrecht, and Heinrich Lüders) amounts to a self-satisfied and misleading discourse *à la* Bourdieu? To be fair, there were some scholars of integrity such as Heinrich Lüders (1869–1943), an excellent philologist, who was forced to resign because of his public opposition to the Nazi regime. But others, like Lüders's student Bernhard Breloer (1894–1947), collaborated with the Nazis in pursuit of their careers. Breloer barred Lüders from the university, and was rewarded for his loyalty with a deanship by the Nazis. Calasso's characterization of Orientalist literature as "the most accurate and solid information we now possess about

India's past" is thus a one-sided evaluation, just as his dismissal of postcolonial studies as "inexhaustible self-righteousness" is an oversimplification. For the point here is not of philology versus its critics but of who conducts that philology and how well, and how good the philology is. We can, for instance, point to the Mahābhārata Critical Edition, one of the most outstanding applications of the skills Calasso credits to Western—and only to Western—scholars: "the deciphering, interpreting, and emending of Eastern texts." This edition was completed in the twentieth century under the direction of a gifted textual critic, scholar of Sanskrit, mathematician, and epigraphist named V. S. Sukthankar, and it is widely acknowledged as a critical success. The University of Chicago Press is currently producing a complete translation of this edition, all translated by American academics. Happily, in the United States at least, scholars appear to have transcended the East-West divide to enable a truly critical philology.

On the other hand, there are the unsavory figures of this history, and one of them is the German scholar Hermann Oldenberg (1854–1920). Calasso quotes Winternitz as writing in his Index to the *Sacred Books of the East* series, "The student of religion will look in vain in this Index for terms such as Animism, Fetishism, Tabu, Totemism, and the like. May not this be a useful warning that these terms refer only to the theories and not to the facts of religion?" and he comments: "An admonishment that would be equally useful to anthropologists working today." But as a matter of fact Oldenberg's book on the Veda interprets the "religion of the Veda" precisely in terms of this four-stage process. With sections such as Animism (*Thierverehrung*), Animal Fetishism (*Thierfetische*), and Totemism (*Totemismus*), Oldenberg elevated himself to the authority on "Vedic religion." The worship of non-anthropomorphic forms of deity is attributed to "fetish-like incarnations of the gods," whose origins lay in the cult of the "primitives" "on the other side of the formation of the Indian, indeed, Indo-European essence" (Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda*, 597). Many of the Vedic rituals are explained as being attempts to ward off taboos. According to a reviewer of the volume, the value of Oldenberg's work consists in providing "a help in two lines of inquiry, in Indology or Hinduism, and in anthropology. We now know that all people on earth travel in their evolution on the same path, they pass through the same phases of totemism, animism, and sacerdotalism to the purer religion of salvation from evil by righteousness; and again from external deed-

morality to the highest religious ideal of aspiring after purity of heart. The evolution of the religion of the Hindus is not an isolated but a typical instance of this, and it may be called 'classical' because of the completeness of all the essential features which are here present and have been developed without the interference of disturbing influences" (Review in *The Monist*, 1895, 289–90). Oldenberg interpreted the Veda entirely from the perspective of the reigning "developmental" conception of religion of the time. He also drew extensively on Christian Lassen's thesis of an Aryan migration, racial miscegenation, and spiritual decline to account for the hypothetical development of Vedic religion, though, in the words of one scholar, the account he produced in his book on the Buddha was "more thoroughly racist than the earlier work of Christian Lassen" (McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism*, 164–65). It is doubtful how much Oldenberg really understood of the Veda beyond his historical and anthropological concerns.

Calasso places the blame for the neglect of India's classical traditions on "a certain variety of secular mind in the twenty-first century" that is "complacent in being tone-deaf to all that is religious." But are we really helped by the obsession characteristic of much of the nineteenth-century to go in search of the "religions" of the aboriginal peoples of the world (i.e., basically anyone who was non-European)—especially as many of these religions were secretly constructed on analogy with the Christian faith (for many of the scholars who set out to catalogue the world's religions the only true paradigm of a religion)? And should we forget that oftentimes this cataloguing was precisely in the service of Christian missionary activity, as though to first inoculate against and then eradicate something one had to first know its epidemiology? Then again, how helpful is it to learn to sort the "Indo-Germanic" (i.e., potentially or abstractly Christian) element of Indian religions from the aboriginal?

Without doubt, some German Indologists produced important work such as creating lexica and preserving manuscripts. But it is the interpretive and, ultimately, political ends to which these resources were put that are questionable. As McGetchin notes, in order to "justify and explain their studies to a nonspecialist audience," the Indologists encouraged the idea of a "unique relationship of India to Germany"

(McGetchin, *Indology, Indomania, and Orientalism*, 102, 113). Moriz Winternitz posited a "spiritual affinity" (*Geistesverwandtschaft*) between the Indians and Germans and wrote, "the Indians are the scholarly people of antiquity, just as the Germans are in the present" (Winternitz, *Geschichte der indischen Literatur*, vol. 1, 7). Calasso celebrates the Indologists as free-spirits and free-thinkers, operating "at no one's behest" to produce "studies, translations, and commentaries that [still] remain indispensable." But he overlooks that at no one's *explicit* behest is not quite the same as "at no one's behest." There are always institutional, cultural, political, and ethnic issues in play in scholarship. To read this literature unhistorically amounts to an uncritical glorification of it. Christian Lassen was anti-Semitic, as is attested to by his personal correspondence (in a letter to Heinrich Ewald, he is known to have alleged: "It would be desirable to counter everywhere, the ill effects of the Jews . . . . It is truly a calamity. These people consider literature as a stock exchange where limitless trickeries are allowed and where one uses all possible devices in order to achieve good speculation, that is, to make money through deceit and lies"). Rudolf von Roth wrote in a letter to a colleague, "it is better you not seek an acquaintance with Prof. Goldstücker . . . Formerly he was a Jew, has long since converted, but the inner man has remained a Jew" (Roth, *Letter to Julius Grill*, 24.10.1865), illustrating that while Jews may have participated in Indology, they were unable to overcome their outsider status.

Another Indologist celebrated by Calasso, Albrecht Weber (1825–1901), was deeply evangelical, believing that the "critical analysis and publication of Vedic texts shall . . . put an end to the sorry plight of religious decadence of India and . . . assume a role among the Indians, similar to Luther's translation of the Bible" (Weber, *Letter to Karl Otto von Raumer*, 12.10.1855). Weber not only adopted Lassen's thesis but also suggested that when the Aryans encountered the aboriginal inhabitants of India "of either black or brown skin color, who were at the lowest cultural level and have remained so [ever since]," they (i.e., the aboriginals) would have "aroused an ethical repugnance in the spiritually advanced Aryans, who, as is well-known, belonged to the white race—an ethical repugnance that was almost physical in nature" (Weber, "Brâhmaṇismus," 4). Weber blamed the Brahmans for the decline of the Aryans and the rise of a priest-dominated religion of superstition and cast Buddha as a "the Reformer [Reformator]"

(ibid., 6). But, he argued, "partly as a result of the purification and, in consequence, consolidation that Hinduism experienced due to Buddhism, analogous to the way Catholicism did due to the Reformation, and partly due to the adaptation to different popular ideas of religion, probably largely drawn from the cults of the aboriginals, . . . and partly due to an ineradicable fundamentalism, borne of its own interest, Brahmanism not only succeeded in asserting itself and finally displacing Buddhism from all of India but also attained an even more terrible bigoted and superstitious renaissance, which reached its pinnacle in the so-called Purâṇa and Tantra and in the most loathsome customs, which are in vogue even today" (ibid., 6–7). Not even Islam "with its crude violence" was capable of eradicating Brahmanism: it was left to the effects of colonization that the "ethical and religious decadence that dominates large parts of India today is beginning only gradually to give way to a new life under the galvanizing force of European civilization." Weber promised: "With time, we must and we will bring about a similar revolution in the minds of the thinking Indians, and even of the Brahmans, as was effected among us, in its time, by Dr. M. Luther's translation of the Bible. By doing so, European science will have paid back in a fitting way the tremendous services that it has received from Brahmanism due to its literature and language" (ibid., 6). Of course, these services lay, for Weber, in the fact that "the language of the Indians had gifted us with the most beautiful gift of an Indo-Germanic original people [indogermanischen Urvolkes]" and had so permitted "us, the Germans" to experience "how our ancestors had lived and in what naïve freshness and childlike simplicity they had thought" (ibid., 8).

It may seem to us, living at the beginning of a new century, that the term *Aryan* is only of antiquarian interest—an antiquated concept in philology, a misunderstanding between cultures, and an element of propaganda by the Nazis. But the history of philology illustrates that the obsession with Aryans, contrasting them now with the Semites and now with the Brahmans, is constitutive of this scholarship. As recent research has shown, the contrast was so central to German Indology that the Indologists' analyses of the Mahābhārata and the Bhagavadgītā could not get off of the ground without it. It would also be a mistake to think that only a handful of Indologists were involved. As a class, Indologists so completely placed their science in the service of the dominant ideology (whether Raumer's ultraconservative orthodox evangelism or Hitler's

racist anti-Semitic pan-Germanism) that we cannot correctly evaluate their work without attention to its political, racial, and theological contexts. Thus in 1938, at the members' meeting of the Ninth Congress of German Orientalists in Bonn, a meeting at which such great names of Indology as Erich Frauwallner and Helmuth von Glasenapp were present, the Indologists voted to send the following telegram to Adolf Hitler:

> "The German Orientalists gathered in Bonn on the occasion of the Ninth Congress of German Orientalists think of the Führer with unwavering loyalty and gratitude. They promise to strive with all their strength to enhance German science for the sake of the salvation of the fatherland [Heil des Vaterlandes]."

If the Indologists themselves tell us that their science was placed in Raumer's or Hitler's or, later, the Church's service (compare Paul Hacker's 1971 testimony: "My real profession is the science of India, specifically of Indian philosophies and religions. In contrast to almost all my other colleagues, during my thirteen-month stay in India I sought out contact with the missions, mainly the Catholic but also the Protestant. I wanted to place my science in the service of the Church"; Hacker, "Greuel der Verwüstung an heiliger Stätte," 140, n. 1), can we really overlook its political, racial, and theological dimensions? Victor Klemperer has observed, "the construction of the Aryan man is rooted in philology and not in natural science" (Klemperer, *LTI: Notizbuch eines Philologen*, 141). The inescapable conclusion is that in nineteenth-century philology, Aryanism was a variant form of anti-Semitism. In twentieth-century politics, they became the same thing.

Roberto Calasso is correct to be concerned with an indiscriminate critique of nineteenth-century philology, and we must distinguish between the causes and motives of British, French, and German Indology. He is also correct to note the limitations of Said's analysis, since, as he points out, "Germany had no special national interests in India." And he is also right to wish to preserve for Eastern texts "a place in the canon of books that an educated reader must know." But beyond the Orientalist and postcolonial critiques of philology, the science of understanding texts can only survive if it becomes self-critical and this requires a confrontation with philology's problematic past. That is why, while the criticism of nineteenth-century philology is most often associated with Said, we

find that Nietzsche provides a more thoughtful avenue to understand, critique, and, ultimately, move beyond the specious racist, evangelical, and erastian inheritance of philology. At any rate, it has become clear that it is not "laughable" to attribute "motives of collusion with colonial interests" to the Indologists, as Calasso thinks. Rather, we must we revise our definition of "collusion with colonial interests" to include another kind of colonialism: the systematic domination of Indian minds in the name of emancipation from religion and the systematic collusion with the German state to forge an Aryan ideology. If not for the work of the many excellent historians and scholars of German literature today (Dorothy Figueira, Douglas T. McGetchin, Pascale Rabault-Feuerhahn, Tuska Benes, Stefan Arvidsson, Jakob Stuchlik, Nicholas A. Germana) we would still be ignorant of these details. Calasso's contrast between "the golden age of Indology" and its present-day critics is uninformed and deprives us of valuable perspectives from which to evaluate the past.