

WORLD PHILOLOGY

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What Was Philology in Sanskrit?

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EVEN READERS who know little else about the history of traditional Indian learning, at least Sanskrit learning, are likely to know that grammar was the queen of the sciences, with Pāṇini (fourth century B.C.E.?) at the head of a very long and distinguished list of *dramatis personae*. Over the past two centuries, an impressive body of Western scholarship has been produced exploring the structure of this intricate and sophisticated system of language analysis. What is astonishing, however, even to specialists in the field, is how little scholarship we possess—at least scholarship that is historically deep, systematically ordered, and conceptually rich—on the other traditional Indian forms of language-and-text analysis, beyond the phonology and morphology constituting the sphere of traditional grammar, that take us into domains we would include under any reasonable definition of philology—one that demands, not a specific set of methodological or theoretical features invariable across all time and space, but the broader concern with *making sense of texts*.

Under such a definition, “philology” is certainly the appropriate designation for a range of textual practices and interpretive protocols in the Sanskrit tradition. What is puzzling is that such practices and protocols were never identified as a separate “knowledge form” (*vidyāsthāna*)¹—indeed, that no covering term exists in Sanskrit that even approximates “philology.” But it is not after all surprising that people can have a conception of the parts of a thing without a conception of a whole; recall Bruno Snell’s old argument that in archaic Greece, although there were words for limbs and muscles and frame and skin, there was none for the body as an organic

unit.² Or perhaps philology too thoroughly pervaded the Indian thought world even to be identified, for there can be little doubt that Sanskrit, as the language of the gods, was the most densely philologized language in the premodern world.

A comprehensive account of the history of Sanskrit philology in that broad sense would address not only grammar but also lexicography, metrics, rhetoric (*alaṅkāraśāstra*), and hermeneutics (*Mīmāṃsā*), among other things, all richly developed to a degree of complexity virtually unknown elsewhere in the ancient world. For no other language do we have, for example, a complete grammatical reconstruction of sound changes, verbal roots, primary and second derivatives, and the like; nor, at the other end of the spectrum, so systematic an analysis of meaning as that offered by Sanskrit hermeneutics—the “science of sentences” (*vākyaśāstra*)—which, although developed for the exegesis of scriptural texts in the late centuries B.C.E., found new and wide application to secular literature from the ninth century onward,³ while providing the exegetical logic of later jurisprudence. In lieu of that comprehensive account of Sanskrit philology, I propose to examine here its most representative subspecies, the commentary. Commentators concerned themselves with interpreting texts—and often with establishing and editing them—by so broad a range of criteria that commentary may fairly be taken as a part standing for the whole enterprise of making sense of texts in traditional India. The scholarship devoted to commentarial practices, however, stands in inverse proportion, in both quantity and quality, to the materials themselves. It has been estimated that commentaries constitute as much as 75 percent of the Sanskrit written tradition,⁴ and they embody some of its most insightful thinking about texts. But we have as yet a poor grasp of what this thinking consisted of, or of how the various genres of commentary developed historically or differed among themselves.

I narrow this already limited object of Sanskrit philology yet further by restricting my study to commentary on two genres, secular poetry and Vedic scripture. Commentary on philosophical and other scientific works has a notably divergent history. The core *śāstras* of grammar, hermeneutics, and logic, whose foundational texts took shape in the last centuries B.C.E., had received their initial written commentaries already in the early centuries C.E. But those were far more concerned with the ideas of the base text than with its realization as a form of language or text, since for many centuries commentary was the one genre in which doctrinal intervention and innovation could be offered, until the rise of the independent treatise (*prakaraṇagrantha*) in the early modern period.⁵ By contrast, systematic

exegetical attention to secular poetry and to the Vedas was in both cases a remarkably late phenomenon, appearing at the end of the first millennium and gaining broad cultural traction only in the following centuries. And while these commentaries often demonstrate remarkable intelligence, they obviously never sought to usurp the place of the primary text; unlike a philosophical commentary such as Kumārila's *Exegesis in Verse* (*Ślokavārttika*, c. 650 C.E.), literary and scriptural commentary was always a secondary, not a primary, form of thought.

I first try to characterize what it meant to establish, edit, and interpret a literary text (both epic and courtly), pausing also to consider a remarkable defense from the mid-seventeenth century of nonstandard (or, rather, "non-standard") Sanskrit in literary and other texts that has important implications for text editing. I turn next to the history of scriptural commentary, and follow this with an account of the contextual arguments that the greatest Vedic commentator used to frame his works. These data, taken as a whole, increasingly incline me to the hypothesis that a transformation in Sanskrit culture occurred around the beginning of the second millennium that was epistemic, not simply technological. The rise of philological commentaries represented a new, or newly standardized, form of knowledge, and not simply a new desire to commit already existing oral knowledge to writing. Since my concerns throughout this overview are more than historical, I conclude with thoughts about the pertinence of this traditional philology to contemporary philology's own ongoing quest to make sense of texts.

Literary Commentary

The early history of *kāvya*, or secular Sanskrit literature—"secular" (*laukika*) being typically employed to distinguish such language use from that of the "supermundane" (*alaukika*) Veda—has long been a matter of dispute. Inscriptional evidence from the beginning of the Common Era should probably be taken as indicating only the date after which (*terminus post quem*) we can assume the existence of *kāvya*—and not, as long believed, the date before which (*terminus ante quem*) it must have existed in full flower. Moreover, *kāvya* is constitutively dependent on writing, but in India this did not become widespread before the end of the first millennium B.C.E.⁶ Whether or not this dating is off by a century or even two or three, *kāvya* at some point clearly *began*, whereas written commentary on *kāvya* is separated from that beginning by what, even conservatively estimated, is a gulf of ten centuries.⁷

The first preserved commentaries on *kāvya*, those of Vallabhadeva of Kashmir, date from the first half of the tenth century.⁸ While Vallabhadeva refers to some predecessors, they are mostly unnamed, and all their “works,” quite possibly because they were oral rather than written, have vanished without trace.⁹ As for immediate successors, Vallabhadeva had none we know of.¹⁰ A work like Bhoja’s literary-critical masterpiece, the *Śṛṅgāraprakāśa* (Light on passion, c. 1050), certainly breathes the air of intense literary analysis and actually refers to exegetes of the early poets Kālidāsa and Bhāravi (late fourth and sixth centuries, respectively),¹¹ but the real boom in literary commentary came only several centuries later. This seems to have started in the twelfth century among the Jains of western India, but they were quickly followed by Kerala scholars in the thirteenth century, who had clearly learned from the Kashmiris; the practice then moved eastward, to Andhra by the early fifteenth century, and then Bengal (though there were earlier commentators in Mithila).¹² A remarkably similar history is presented by commentary on the epics, texts likewise excluded from the realm of scripture. The first such work on the *Mahābhārata*, the *Jñānadīpikā* (Light of knowledge) of Devabodha, a Kashmiri, dates from the early eleventh century; in the thirteenth century Udāḷi Varadarāja inaugurated what was to become a dynamic *Rāmāyaṇa* exegetical tradition in south India; in the east, commentary on the epics appeared only in the late fifteenth century, with Arjunamiśra. (He was born into a family of professional epic expounders, but they seem to have been oral performers since he never refers to written works of theirs.) We have no evidence of commentaries on the epics antedating Devabodha and Varadarāja—and vast production after them.¹³

Whatever more systematic research may show to be the true history of the later development of the philological commentary, there is certainly no reason to think that anyone before Vallabhadeva, Devabodha, Varadarāja, and the rest had attempted to do what they did: provide rational recensions, a more or less comprehensive inventory of variant readings, verse-by-verse exegeses, and, sometimes, coherent interpretations of entire poems (and, later, dramas) and epics. And even if the early second millennium is thought to have marked not a moment of intellectual inauguration, when scholars first began to direct serious attention to philological commentary, but instead a new moment of textual conservation, when the tradition began preserving and reproducing such works, the status of such commentary had clearly still changed: it had acquired a new cultural salience by mediating textual understanding in a way now deemed worthy of recording and

preserving, and its elevation as an intellectual practice would influence the entire future of Sanskrit learning.

Scholars who have examined the traditional definitions of types of commentary in general have pointed to their often quite divergent functions—as simple glosses, linguistic exegeses, substantive argument and polemical correction of false views, and the like—as well as to their various discursive formats.¹⁴ But we know next to nothing about how their three most important tasks of philological commentary were executed: text constitution (commentators were often also editors); emendation (they were also text critics); and analysis (they were also interpreters). These matters have been unstudied largely because they are unthematized in the tradition itself; the data to understand them were never assembled in any work of systematic thought but only exist dispersed in the commentaries themselves. What is more, commentators rarely describe what they were doing when they redacted, edited, and interpreted, or how they did these things; we must infer their precepts from their practices.¹⁵ Such silence in what presumably were matters of tacit understanding can be found elsewhere in Sanskrit culture—as for example in the case of translation¹⁶—and of course is not unique to that culture. But the absence of an organized discourse on commentarial protocols, however we explain it, presents a serious obstacle to writing the history of Sanskrit philology. With this caveat, I will try to characterize some editorial, text-critical, and reading practices, to give a sense of what Indians—exemplified by a seventeenth-century scholar in eastern Bengal, a tenth-century scholar in Kashmir, and a seventeenth-century scholar in Tamil country, respectively—were doing when they did philology.

Recension

Some of our best (among largely bad) data regarding practices of recension, or the examination of manuscripts in order to select the most reliable witness, come typically from commentaries not on court literature but on the Sanskrit epics, especially the *Mahābhārata*.¹⁷ Early *kāvya* commentators were often editors as well, though not invariably; manuscripts of commentaries often circulated without the target text (as was the case in Greek antiquity), suggesting the absence of dedicated recension. While clearly aware of variant readings, they never mention collating manuscripts, though there is a lot of evidence, direct and indirect, that they compared them. Dakṣiṇāvartanātha, a twelfth-century commentator on the court epic *Raghuvamśa* (Lineage of Raghu), tells us that he “pre-

pared his commentary after examining variants in manuscripts from various regions, adopting the correct readings and rejecting the others." Indirect evidence is offered by Mallinātha in his commentary on the *Meghadūta* (Cloud messenger), where he identifies a half dozen verses as interpolations, something he can only have done by comparison of manuscript traditions.¹⁸ Epic commentators, by contrast, often offer clearer testimony, especially those who worked on the culturally foundational *Mahābhārata*, a work that was repeatedly edited and—by a process not yet clear to us—"published" in the early-modern era (1400–1700).

There is a tendency, especially among scholars who have contested the claims of the critical edition prepared in Pune, India (1933–1971), to think of "the vulgate" as some sort of natural formation, a kind of alluvial deposit at the mouth of a *Mahābhārata* river of tradition. It is nothing of the sort, but instead the conscious construction of Nīlakaṇṭha Caturdhara, a Maharashtra Brahman who worked in north India in the last quarter of the seventeenth century.¹⁹ In the introduction to his edition of and commentary on the *Mahābhārata* (repeated in its supplement, the *Harivaṃśa*), Nīlakaṇṭha writes that he gathered "many manuscripts from different regions" and "critically established the best readings."²⁰ He seems to have done a substantial amount of editing in the process, since he frequently discusses variation in the sequence of verses or in individual readings (rarely does he indicate where, let alone why, he has emended the text), and even once admits failure, exclaiming "only Vyāsa [the traditional author of the epic] himself knows the true reading here."²¹ Moreover, the text he established differs markedly from that of Devabodha, the earliest known commentator, who, given his location in Kashmir, established a recension affiliated with the northwest tradition. The opening section of Devabodha's *Jñānadīpikā* (Light of knowledge) itself offers no clear account of its critical method, and it is not easy to infer what this may have been from the available portions of the work. But Nīlakaṇṭha's explicit acknowledgment of the transregional dissemination of manuscripts, and his tacit recognition that these are all versions of the same text and must be compared with each other to attain textual truth, are important markers of a theory of textuality in general as well as of an understanding of this particular text's mode of being. And these beliefs were shared by every editor who cared to explain his editorial procedures.

Consider one edition prepared in the eighteenth century by a scholar named Vidyāsāgara in what is today Bangladesh. In his introduction Vidyāsāgara intimates something about his editorial method and his

conception of the *Mahābhārata* as a textual phenomenon. He describes the edition as being based on “the traditional text of Bengal,” the “manuscripts of the Bangalore-region traditional text,” and a version found in “manuscripts from the West.” He identifies additional copies, presumably not constituting recensions (*saṃpradāyas*), from various places in Bengal, Assam, and north and south Bihar. He also made use of at least a dozen earlier commentaries, including Devabodha’s by then ancient *Jñānadīpikā*, several of whose verses Vidyāsāgara borrows for his own introduction.²²

The transregional search for materials, along with the new geocultural consciousness it attests to, following a long-term regionalization of recensions (largely owing to the growth of regional scripts) that is observable across the history of Sanskrit literature, was clearly an early modern phenomenon. So too was the popularity of epic commentary itself, which experienced a striking upsurge during this period. This is especially the case with *Rāmāyaṇa* commentaries, which began to appear in the thirteenth century in south India and attained encyclopedic amplitude by the eighteenth, when Tryambaka Makhin of Tanjore produced his mammoth works. Indeed, the first of these commentaries, authored by Uḍāḷi Varadarāja, already referred to the corruptions introduced by “scribes unskilled in the various regional scripts” and the resultant need to establish “the correct reading” (*samyakpāṭha*) by “examining multiple manuscripts from multiple regions.”²³ Never before had works such as these been written in India, and never before had such thinking been voiced about texts and how they were to be established.

Emendation

With respect to the procedures to be followed in text editing—the criteria for determining the correct or the best reading—scholars then as now differed, but they differed, then as now, on the basis of principles and not whim, however tacit those principles may have been. That Indian scholars were fully aware that the textual condition required editorial principles is clear from one of the very few general discussions available. The religious reformer Madhva (d. 1317) argues that the meaning of texts such as the *Mahābhārata* “has to be determined by way of the sentences of the text themselves,” that is, as his sixteenth-century commentator Vādirāja explains, “rather than by way of sentences invented by our own cheeky imagination.” But people interpolate passages of their own making in the body of the text, suppress passages that are there if they find them objectionable,

transfer them to elsewhere in the text (in such a way as to interrupt the story, according to Vādirāja), or misinterpret them through ignorance.²⁴ “Many thousands of manuscripts have disappeared, and those that are extant have become disordered. So confused can a text have become that even the gods themselves could not figure it out.”²⁵

Given the lack of programmatic statements on editorial principles, we can discover them only by sifting our commentators’ texts.²⁶ Vallabhadeva, the tenth-century literary scholar, wrote basically word-for-word commentaries, which required him to address very closely the textual state of a work.²⁷ From his commentary on Kālidāsa’s celebrated court epic, *Kumārasambhava* (Birth of the war god), for example, we have several dozen text-critical discussions on the various manuscripts he compared.²⁸ These show how multifarious his criteria were: readings (or passages) could be judged as grammatically or contextually “correct/reasonable/proper/right” or “more correct/more reasonable”; “authoritative,” “false,” “mistaken,” “corrupt,” “unmetrical,” “ancient”; “what was intended by the author,” “interpolated,” in need of “emendation,” “obscene”; and last but not least, “lovely,” “beautiful,” and “more beautiful.”²⁹ At least once he adduces paleographical (or at least graphical) criteria, as when he notes that a variant “results from confusing two similar characters” and rejects it on the grounds that it would contradict the narrative.³⁰ When evaluating readings he would occasionally make use of the familiar principle of difficulty and the antiquity or authenticity it implies: “this must be the ancient reading precisely because it is unfamiliar.” Sometimes principles of antiquity could be combined with those of aestheticism: “the old reading in this verse is more beautiful.” But antiquity can be too ancient, as it were, if it produces a grammatical (or lexical or metrical or rhetorical) irregularity such as a Vedicism. Here and elsewhere, like other commentators, Vallabhadeva shows himself ready on occasion to suggest a revision in order to save his author from a supposed solecism, but he hesitates to actually alter the text and winds up transmitting the offending lection.³¹ The tension manifest here will mark the whole long history of Sanskrit philology (and is not unknown elsewhere). On the one hand, as the manuscripts show, some scribes and editors were highly attuned to text-critical problems and fully prepared to alter the text, whether on the basis of grammatical deviation or supposed aesthetic or logical fault (this was a source of worry to poets, as one from twelfth-century Kashmir declares: “noble learning, however pure in itself, / should not be applied to emending the works of good poets. // Holy ash is not scattered, in hopes of purification, / on water one is about to drink”).³² On the

other hand, some scholars explicitly rejected emendation. Mallinātha, a prolific fifteenth-century commentator from Andhra, took care to assure readers that he was transmitting exactly what he found in his manuscripts.³³ And generally, it seems, editor-commentators did seek to establish as coherent and authoritative a text as they could on the basis of manuscript tradition as received (*āgata*) rather than as conjectured (*kalpita*). Yet even Mallinātha sometimes adopted a conjecture that his predecessors had only suggested while they themselves preserved the received text.³⁴

The text-critical practices followed by Vallabhadeva are common among commentaries on all kinds of Sanskrit literature, both court literature and epic, and have something significant, if complicated, to tell us about the philological standards at work. Consider the question of interpolation. Arjunavarmadeva (fl. 1215), editor-commentator of a celebrated sequence of love lyrics from the seventh century called the *Amaruśataka* (A century of poems by Amaru), rejects a number of verses as insertions by a second-rate poet hungry for even the anonymous fame of having his work included in Amaru's collection. Editors clearly understood the idea of interpolation and its close twin, forgery (something well attested in the world of literature and not just epigraphy, as shown by the "completion" of the *Kumārasambhava* by a later poet), but the criteria employed are typically subjective. In Arjunavarma's case, his judgment rests entirely on personal taste; the interpolated poems are inferior, he says, the sort of thing that might be produced by second-rate logicians, metricians, and grammarians, in whose hands the *rasa*—or emotional impact—of the work disperses like so much quicksilver in the wind.³⁵ But like every other editor, Arjunavarmadeva continued to include the interpolations in his edition, however convinced he was of their inauthenticity.³⁶

The evidence of Sanskrit text criticism as a whole, then, indicates a model of textuality at once historicist-intentionalist and purist-aestheticist—standards that, if obviously contradictory, are perhaps not fatally so. Texts were held to be intentional productions of authors and were not to be altered without reason; the original intentions could be recovered by a judicious assessment of manuscript variants, supplemented by subjective criteria, especially in identifying interpolation. At the same time, literary texts were *lakṣyagranthas*—instantiations of the rule-boundedness (*lakṣaṇa*) of Sanskrit literary production in terms of grammar, lexicon, prosody, and the poetics of sound and sense—and when conflict arose, editors sometimes felt compelled to yield to the superior claims of the rules and correct, or even emend, the original.³⁷

Aside from the fact that secular Sanskrit text criticism arose, or appears to have arisen, so dramatically around the beginning of the second millennium, we are far from being able to impose any kind of developmental narrative on its subsequent history. No one like Lorenzo Valla, for example, ever appeared in early modern India to transform the rules of the text-critical game. While archaism, for example, could be invoked to discriminate among readings, the sense clearly implicit in this principle that the language of the past was different was never developed into a science of historical glottology. But the absence of a sense of language change comparable to Valla's assessment of Latin can be easily explained: change in Sanskrit itself (after the Vedic period) was impossible according to Sanskrit language ideology, which to some degree wound up producing in fact what it appeared only to represent in theory.

That said, one seventeenth-century scholar did begin to pry open the doors of ahistorical language purity, which in principle could have fundamentally altered text-critical practices. Among the works of Melpputtūr Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatīri (d. c. 1660), the most remarkable intellectual of seventeenth-century Kerala, is a small treatise, today almost wholly forgotten, called *Apāṇinīyapṛāmāṇyasādhana* (A proof of the validity of nonstandard Sanskrit), which he published along with an open letter to the scholars of "the Chola country" (Tamilnadu), who were his intellectual opponents.³⁸ Far more fundamentally new thinking is contained or implicit in this little text than is obvious from the title. By the middle of the seventeenth century in various domains of Sanskrit thought a kind of neotraditionalism had begun to manifest itself, reasserting the absolute authority of the ancients in the face of challenges from those known as the "new" (*navya*) scholars.³⁹ Nowhere was this clearer than in grammar, where Nārāyaṇa's contemporary to the north, Bhaṭṭojī Dīkṣita, vigorously reaffirmed as incontrovertible the views of Pāṇini and two other ancient "sages," Kātyāyana and Patañjali. Nārāyaṇa may not have sought to overthrow those views, but he certainly sought to supplement them. As he put it, "We are perfectly willing to accept that the school of Pāṇini has unique merits; what we do not accept is that others have no authority whatever."⁴⁰ The upshot of his arguments goes beyond mere supplementation and is in fact radical, since what he is actually doing, however tacitly, is restoring to Sanskrit at once its historicity and its humanity.

Many scholars of the epoch had come to view the old authorities as *avatars* of the deity; in the eyes of one eighteenth-century scholar, the eleventh-century poetician Mammaṭa was an incarnation of the goddess of speech

herself.⁴¹ For Nārāyaṇa, however, a core contention is that Pāṇini was not a mythic personage but lived in time. Prior to him, he argues, there must have been other sources of grammatical authority—Pāṇini may have improved grammar, but he did not invent it—and therefore those coming after him (such as Chandragomin in the fifth century, Śākaṭāyana in the ninth, or even Bhoja in the eleventh and Vopadeva in the thirteenth-fourteenth) can be counted authoritative, since the basis of authority is knowledge rather than location in a tradition.⁴² Even if the grammatical tradition were to be held as authoritative per se, the basis of its authority ironically relativizes it, as when Nārāyaṇa contrasts the grammarian Patañjali and the legendary epic poet Vyāsa (in respect to a particular usage): “One might object that since Patañjali is a supreme authority, his statements cannot be negated. But by the same token, Vyāsa is a supreme authority too, and since we are not prepared to negate his statements either, alternative grammars should be possible.”⁴³ All of this Nārāyaṇa establishes not just abstractly but through an empirical analysis of the practices of respected poets and commentators.

The text-critical implications of this treatise are significant. Much of the variation in Sanskrit literary manuscripts derives from judgments on the part of scribes and commentators about the cultural authority of works on grammar, metrics, and rhetoric.⁴⁴ Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa reverses the long-standing authority principle of Sanskrit culture whereby theory dictates practice (poetry is rarely cited in grammar and never to justify a usage—grammar alone can do that—but only to illustrate it); here practice can dictate theory.⁴⁵ He cites from the classical poets Murāri, Bhavabhūti, and Śrīharṣa, along with grammarians and philosophers, to establish this point. As he puts it in a verse cited from his grammar, “We reject the notion that [the forms cited] are a solecism as claimed by [*Kāikā*] *Vṛtti* [an eighth- or ninth-century Paninian grammar].⁴⁶ Who would dare to assert that the poets Murāri, Bhavabhūti and the like are not themselves authorities?”⁴⁷ Or as he proclaims more generally near the end of the work: “It is by relying on established usage and previous grammars but also by reasoning that intelligent people establish authority.”⁴⁸ The implications here for text criticism are clearly substantial; whether they were put into practice by later commentators remains, like so much else, to be determined.⁴⁹

Reading

What it actually meant to read and interpret Sanskrit literature—another, indeed a key, component of “making sense of texts”—is no less underthe-

matized in the Sanskrit tradition and thus no less dependent on the extraction of data from actual practices. This can be especially laborious in the case of interpretation, where it is rare to find the fuller demonstration of expert reading of the sort offered by Aruṇagirinātha (also known as Śivadāsa), a fourteenth-century Kālidāsa commentator from Kerala.

At the end of his commentary on the *Kumārasambhava*, Aruṇagirinātha notes that his work is intended for three types of readers: those who have pedagogical needs (who “have difficulty understanding the meaning of the sentences”); those who have aesthetic needs (who “are addicted to bathing in the deep waters of aesthetic emotion [*rasa*]”); and those who have religious needs (who are “devotees of Śiva and the goddess”).⁵⁰ And he seeks to provide for all three throughout his work. The sort of purely grammatical and rhetorical exegesis on offer here—glossing individual words, analyzing complex grammatical forms, establishing the correct syntax, citing sources, adducing parallel passages to establish meaning or usage, identifying and explaining figures of speech, in all of which vast learning, remarkable intelligence, and highly sensitive appreciation are in evidence—is standard in Sanskrit commentaries, and has been described elsewhere.⁵¹ More relevant to our purposes here are Aruṇagirinātha’s interpretive concerns. Unlike most commentators, whose attention is restricted to the individual stanza, the building block of Sanskrit versified literature, and who leave us in the dark about their understanding of any greater part of the work, let alone the work as a whole,⁵² Aruṇagirinātha now and then offers a glimpse into the larger interpretive aims of Indian philologists.

Consider his exposition of chapter 1 of the *Kumārasambhava*. The poem narrates the union of the great god Śiva and Pārvatī, daughter of Mount Himalaya, to produce a son capable of destroying the cosmic demon Tāraka. It begins with a sixteen-verse section, construing (with the opening verse) as a single syntactic whole and therefore meant to be understood as a whole, that contains a eulogistic description of the mountain. To a contemporary philologist, whose first task would be to understand the unitness, so to speak, of this unit, its purpose appears to be double, replicating the double character of Himalaya in the poem. On the one hand “he” is a theophanic figure, father of the goddess heroine of the poem, and thus a subordinate hero (*patākānāyaka*) of the story, who must accordingly be described in a way commensurate with her grandeur. On the other hand “it” is also the location of the action of the poem, and in this aspect the mountain is, in the technical terms of Sanskrit literary theory, the “stimulant factor” to the creation of the character’s basic affective state—that is, what we would think of as

the scenery. It is thus the place arousing the erotic desire with which the story is concerned. But this too must be a stimulant commensurate with the nature of the erotic at issue: desire of the most transcendent sort, between the mother and father of the world. From this double perspective, we perceive how the section begins and ends with the enlivened aspect of Himalaya—the divinity on which the opening verse lays stress (“a deity in essence,” v. 1) and to whom a share of the sacrifice has been assigned by the creator god (v. 17)—whereas the intervening verses emphasize the magical erotic qualities of the mountain in its stony aspect. Every sense organ is fully satisfied—by the scented breeze, the whistling reeds, the brilliant minerals that serve as makeup, and the magic plants that glow at night and do service as lamps. And every other accoutrement for romance is made available without effort and in abundance, from heaps of pearls to birch bark for love letters to the puffy clouds descending to act as screens during lovemaking. It is the perfect place—the only place, in fact—where the divine couple can join in union to beget the god who will counter the cosmic threat.⁵³

While the traditional Indian reader was not insensitive to this sort of thinking—Aruṇagirinātha does observe how the verses sequentially describe the mountain’s various virtues, including its beauty, which furnishes the various requisites for the erotic *rasa*—the poet’s choice to produce a single textual structure and, associated with it, a single large-scale argument is of less concern to him. Even the logic of *rasa* aesthetics that shapes the narrative—a good part of the meaning of larger text structures was thought to lie in their emotional construction and (for later theorists) their impact on the reader⁵⁴—holds surprisingly little interest.⁵⁵ What concerns Aruṇagirinātha is the larger narrative argument of the chapter as a whole. Here is how he presents it:

In this chapter the great poet has alluded to the section on attracting a husband in the *Kāmasūtra* chapter on an unmarried girl’s marital relationship. . . . The first scholium⁵⁶ is as follows: “An adolescent girl if (a) she is slow at learning though otherwise virtuous; or (b) impoverished or orphaned and living with relatives; and/or (c) has received no marital propositions from suitable partners, should seek to bring about her marriage herself.” The defining condition for a girl’s “seeking to bring about her marriage herself” is failure to receive a suitable proposition when she reaches adolescence; and the usual reasons for this are, as the sutras tell us, a girl’s dimness, poverty, or orphaned state, which is what we typically find to be the case in everyday life. The reason in our case, accordingly, has to be something different, namely the nature of the supreme lord, which has no parallel in worldly life. The absence of a proposi-

tion is mentioned in v. 51 of the poem, and the absence of any other suitable groom is mentioned in v. 50. The goddess's "seeking to bring about [a union with Śiva]" is expressed in v. 20, where her innate desire for him is shown to be dimly awakened by her youthfulness, then to be more fully awakened by the explicit prophecy of the demigod Nārada. The *Kāmasūtra* is corroborated by the law books, which permit a "self-choice" for a mature girl. . . . The fourth scholium on the *Kāmasūtra* is that the girl's mother should have her approach the potential groom in the company of her friends and nurses. Here the friends are for assuaging her embarrassment, and "mother" stands for "elders" including father, and thus the service that her father has the goddess do for Śiva mentioned in v. 57 fully conforms to the sutra's prescription. The fifth scholium concerns her bringing fragrances, flowers, and betel nut and serving the groom in a private place at the appropriate time, and this is expressed in v. 59 of the poem.⁵⁷

Making sense of Kālidāsa's text for Aruṇagirinātha, thus, meant above all embedding it in a set of intertexts, a body of ancillary knowledges, that pre-exist the poem. Philological reading was an exercise in reconstituting this intertextual network. The traditional reader could accordingly be said to have made sense of the first chapter of *Kumārasambhava* when he understood the paradigms—in grammar, rhetoric, the moral sciences, logic, erotics, law, and the like—the poet was striving at once to suggest and thereby to reaffirm, all in service of the reader's *Bildung*.⁵⁸

Scriptural Commentary

With commentary on the Vedas we enter a domain of philology that, while differing to some degree from literary commentary in its methods and objectives, is surprisingly and unexpectedly similar in its historical shape. Although textual variation assuredly exists in the works included in the Vedic canon, and the texts themselves show traces of substantial editorial efforts in the early period,⁵⁹ they also exhibit an invariance in transmission that is virtually unique in world cultural history. The doctrine first argued out in *Mīmāṃsā* in the last centuries B.C.E., that Vedic texts are forever unchanging, clearly had some real basis; and it just as clearly militated against text-critical intervention. Moreover, given that the language of the Vedas was held to be at once archaic and unique, it is hard to see by what possible criteria variants even if recognized could be assessed.⁶⁰ This editorial difference aside, the historical parallelism between scriptural and secular commentary and their conceptual symmetry—why commentary came to be deemed necessary at all, what purposes it was intended to serve, and

what methods it developed to serve them—are striking, and offer additional evidence for the literary-cultural innovation posited here for the early centuries of the second millennium.

The lateness of Vedic commentary appears all the more curious when we consider the long-standing interest among Buddhists and Jains in scriptural exegesis. Even leaving aside those kinds of scripture in both traditions that are themselves exegetical, we find commentaries from a very early period. Exegeses of “the words of the Buddha” (*buddhavacana*) are in evidence in the oldest part of the Pali canon, and Pali exegetical handbooks date from the beginning of the Common Era.⁶¹ While full-scale Pali commentaries are known only from the fifth century, they are translations of earlier Sinhala texts, which were themselves supposedly translated from Pali works from the third century B.C.E. With the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism, commentarial activity became even more intense. Many major scholars of the second through fifth centuries contributed commentaries on the (newly) canonized sutras, including thinkers of the stature of Nāgārjuna, Aśaṅga, and Vasubandhu. In Jainism, the tenet was long held that scripture without commentary remained “asleep.” Commentary in Prakrit, which occasionally was also elevated into scripture, dates to the first century, if not earlier (the works of Bhadrabāhu), and came into real prominence by the sixth, with full-blown treatises in Sanskrit being produced from the middle of the eighth century onward.⁶²

With few exceptions, virtually all of this exegetical literature is concerned with the authority or authenticity of scripture, and is entirely indifferent to (if even aware of) its philology.⁶³ But it is the very precedent of scriptural commentary I want to emphasize here. No doubt much of this exegetical fervor derives from the fact that both Buddhists and Jains from an early date confronted disputes about what counted as the word of the founder—given the fact that there was a historical founder to have a word—and these disputes grew even sharper when Mahāyāna proposed a whole new class of texts as *buddhavacana*. To all this, and no doubt in reaction to it, the Vedic tradition as represented in *Mīmāṃsā* offers a very sharp contrast: not only was the Vedic tradition theorized as founderless but its texts were viewed, uniquely, as authorless. This ideological difference, however, seems inadequate to explain why Vedic scriptural commentary, like its literary twin, should be largely an early second-millennium phenomenon, which, given the date of the primary texts (c. 1400–800 B.C.E.), is breathtakingly late.⁶⁴

“Editing” the Vedas

Although exegetical procedures for the Vedas were discussed already in the fourth century B.C.E. in the *Nirukta*, a work on etymology (it begins “Vedic tradition is to be interpreted [*samāmnāyah . . . sa vyākhyātavyah!*]”), and narrower philological problems were addressed in the early grammatical tradition and of course in *Mīmāṃsā*, commentary more strictly construed on the Vedic corpus more strictly construed (that is, *mantrasamhitās*, the collections of liturgical formulae, and *brāhmaṇas*, the compendia of ritual prescriptions) was exceedingly rare before the beginning of the second millennium. Prior to the mid-seventh century no commentary on any Vedic text is known, leading more than one scholar to puzzle over this millennium-long exegetical “break” after the end of the so-called Vedāṅga period, around 300 B.C.E., when exegeses of core Vedic knowledges such as grammar were produced.⁶⁵ The sudden appearance in the seventh century of several scholiasts all in one place (Valabhī in Gujarat) and all connected with each other⁶⁶ seems to have been not the tip of an iceberg but an anomalous snowflake, for it was followed by four centuries of philological silence. Only at the beginning of the second millennium, precisely as in the case of literary commentary, did a historically meaningful density of exegesis appear that, like literary commentary, built to a critical mass in the thirteenth or fourteenth century.⁶⁷ The acme of this scholarly development, and a philological initiative without precedent in India for its ambition and scope, lies in the commentarial gigantism of Sāyaṇa (d. 1387).⁶⁸

The absence of written commentary in the early period—if nothing else, the absence of a perceived need to commit oral exegesis to written form and to circulate it widely—and its sudden efflorescence in the late medieval period are questions as puzzling in the case of the Vedic corpus as they are for secular literature, and no easier solutions are available. One could easily point toward the philanthropic aspirations of regional kings, and their patronage (though by no means exclusive patronage) of Vedic learning. South Indian inscriptions provide substantial evidence to support this connection, and it is precisely the context in which Sāyaṇa achieved his success.⁶⁹ But this does little to clarify why such patronage manifested itself first when and where it did.

Whatever the true social-historical or intellectual-historical explanation, Sāyaṇa’s achievement is staggering. First, he established or at least collected editions of a very large segment of the Vedic corpus—all four *samhitās*, or collections of liturgical formulae; the *brāhmaṇas*, their attendant ritual

explanations; and the *araṇyakas*, or “forest books,” in all eighteen very sizable texts—an act of *recensio* comparable to but far exceeding what Nīlakaṇṭha and Vidyāsāgara were to achieve some three centuries later for the *Mahābhārata*.⁷⁰ To these texts were added extensive commentaries, making use of such earlier commentators as were available, as well as a very broad range of traditional learning.⁷¹ The whole corpus in its printed form is to be measured, like carpet, in running yards.

Scriptural Philology

What Sāyaṇa attempted to achieve philologically in his work is no less complex a question than the sociocultural reasons motivating it. As already noted, textual criticism as such was largely irrelevant: the putatively changeless text needed in theory only one manuscript—or indeed, one living reciter—for each Vedic work. (Acknowledgment of variation appears, so far as I can see, only in Sāyaṇa’s commentary on the, comparatively speaking, late *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*.)⁷² But the range of commentarial purposes beyond the text-critical was very broad, as a wider glance at Vedic commentaries shows. In the first rank stood the precise determination of grammar, syntax, and semantics, given the archaic register of the works. The genial twelfth-century commentator Ṣaḍguruśiṣya puts it this way:

Do desire and anger and greed cease just because the *śāstras* prohibit them? Does the ocean grow sweet just because a man is thirsty? How impossibly difficult it is to describe the meaning of the *brāhmaṇa* text. No more quickly comes the desired meaning of the Veda than the moon comes to a child who cries for it from his mother’s lap.⁷³

Hardly less pressing were the etymological, ritual, and mythological aspects of the text, which were exegetical concerns from the oldest period of reflection on Vedic meaning in the *Nirukta*. Finally, beginning with the religious proselytizer Madhva in the thirteenth century and intensifying in the partial commentaries of Ātmānanda, Rāvaṇa, and others into the sixteenth century, the spiritual ends of Vedic commentary were newly formulated for adaptation to the ever more powerful theistic religious movements of the early modern period.⁷⁴

The history of this last development can be briskly suggested by reference to two examples, from the two ends of the historical spectrum. For the seventh-century scholar Skandavāmin, the purpose of commentary was straightforward enough: “The meaning of the *Ṛgveda* must be grasped to

ensure that the proper ritual application for all the different mantras is achieved.”⁷⁵ Contrast with this the *Ṛgbhāṣya* of Ānandatīrtha (Madhva), whose purposes his subcommentator Jayatīrtha (late fourteenth century) explains as follows:

The Vedas are meant to provide knowledge of Viṣṇu’s grace, without which it is impossible for those who seek that grace in order to reach the ocean of transmigration’s farther shore to do so. But the Vedas cannot achieve that efficacy if there is miscomprehension, let alone incomprehension. It is for this reason that the teacher decided to produce a commentary on some Vedic verses in order to demonstrate the variety of the ways they express the supremacy of Viṣṇu.

It is the purpose of Rāghavendratīrtha, a sixteenth-century sub-subcommentator, to show how, within the interpretive horizon of *Mīmāṃsā* (which seeks to constrain the proliferation of meaning), it is possible that all the verses in the Vedas should have Madhva’s sectarian reference.⁷⁶ And though it is impossible to say for certain, since Sāyaṇa seems nowhere to mention the name of Ānandatīrtha/Madhva, it might have been precisely this sort of philological excess—or what appears to positivist philology as excess—that his own commentaries were meant to arrest.

As important as these purposes is the basic conceptual framework Sāyaṇa erected to house the vast exegesis he set out to provide. That this framework was central to Sāyaṇa’s goal is indicated by the fact that he reproduced it, to varying degrees, in the introduction to every one of his commentaries on individual Vedic texts. Here is how he starts the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, working his way through the four prerequisites (*anubandhas*) for inaugurating study of a particular *śāstra* (declaration of its subject matter, its purpose, its authorized reader, and its connection with an antecedent knowledge or preparatory activity):

How do we define this thing we call “Veda”? What is its subject matter, its purpose, who is authorized to study it, and what relationship does the work bear to the person? And what kind of epistemic validity does it lay claim to? Absent answers to any of these questions, the Veda cannot be a fit object of commentarial attention.

The Veda is defined as a supermundane text (*grantha*) that provides the means of attaining the good and avoiding the bad, themselves supermundane phenomena for which only such a text is suited, and not mundane perception or inference. So much for the propriety of its definition and the nature of its content. Its purpose is the awareness of this content; the person

authorized to study it is the person who desires that awareness; the work's relationship to him is one of benefactor to beneficiary.

While desire may be a primary qualification authorizing study, it is not the only one, and Sāyaṇa proceeds to argue out a restriction on women and people of lower castes: only someone properly inducted into Vedic study may study the Veda, and thereby actualize his desire for awareness. As for epistemic validity (picking up the problem of "supermundane means"), the Veda, as eternal, changeless, and unauthored, is subject to none of the epistemic failures of everyday discourse: its validity is accordingly intrinsic. One last question, which will be remarkable to contemporary readers, concerns the very propriety of commentary on mantras, or ritual formulae, whose actual meaning, according to one ancient school of Vedic thought, it was entirely unnecessary to know in order for them to be efficacious; it was sufficient that their wording be exactly enunciated in the course of the ritual. Sāyaṇa offers an elaborate account of why understanding the Veda—hence having a commentary on it—is not only necessary but commanded by the Veda itself.

Despite the novelty of Sāyaṇa's commentarial framework in which they are contained, all the topics he addresses reach back to the oldest levels of organized reflection on the nature of the Vedas at the start of the hermeneutical tradition in the *Mīmāṃsāsūtras*. The exclusion of women and low castes is an old problem in the sutras and in the dharma texts coeval with or perhaps even earlier than them; the intrinsic validity of the Veda is a received postulate of the hermeneutical tradition, going back again to the sutras; doubts about the efficacy of the Veda being contingent on its comprehension are found as early as the *Nirukta*, and, as Sāyaṇa himself states, were decisively settled by Kumārila a thousand years before him.⁷⁷

What is worth registering, however, is how these old values were being insistently reasserted in the fourteenth century, a paradoxical return of the archaic in the early modern, unparalleled in any of the older commentaries. And these values were to be restated in various ways after Sāyaṇa, especially from 1550 onward, as Vedic hermeneutics experienced its greatest flowering in half a millennium—until the whole thought structure began to crumble, of its own accord, at the end of the eighteenth century.

Envoi: For a Critical Philology

Sanskrit philologists were concerned with a wide range of problems entirely familiar to philologists today. They wanted to survey the distribution

of manuscripts and determine how the text as a whole was to be constituted. They were keen to collate their sources and to frame principles by which they could decide among variants. They thought about what it means to read, usually at the level of the given utterance, but sometimes over larger textual structures, including the work as a whole. They were interested in the contexts within which texts were read, and the kinds of pedagogies suitable for those contexts. And like members of any discipline worthy of the name, they recognized that they were part of a tradition, cultivated that tradition (which sometimes stretched back, like that of the epic commentaries before Vidyāsāgara, nearly a millennium), and built on the work of their predecessors.

We are only beginning to understand any of these concerns in a general way, and their particulars, a fortiori, await serious attention, viewed both synchronically (what precisely were the stable norms?) and diachronically (what changed over time?). And even when these matters are better understood, a range of additional questions awaits us. Are we right, for example, to posit a commentarial revolution at the beginning of the early modern era? The sudden appearance of commentaries on both secular literary and Vedic religious texts, the remarkable synchrony of the two developments, and the ensuing routinization of a commentarial habit across South Asia certainly seem to be no mere artifact of preservation (the fact, namely, that, generally speaking, manuscripts from before the twelfth century have disappeared). We have quite a good understanding of the antecedent cultural practices, and neither literary nor Vedic commentary is prominent among them. The appearance of these new forms in the early second millennium would, therefore, seem to mark an actual intellectual-historical transformation. More than ever before, and in some ways as never before, two genres of text, *kāvya* and Veda, both culturally central, came to be mediated by a philological apparatus that with growing sophistication emphasized the need for careful recension, the dynamic changeability of transmission (at least for secular texts), the requirement of purification, and the systematicity of reading, an apparatus whose growing density and broad distribution bespeak new pedagogical needs and possibly new reading publics.

To the degree one is prepared to make something of it, the Indian date for this transformation broadly correlates with early modernity in western and eastern Eurasia, if that epoch is taken to start with the twelfth-century Renaissance in Europe and the Song dynasty in China, rather than with the beginning of global modernization (something quite different) around 1500.⁷⁸ Then again, another stage of early modernity certainly seems to

have commenced in the seventeenth century. This is exemplified in India by Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa's new and disruptive understanding of grammatical authority, and he was not alone. Recent work on the intellectual history of seventeenth-century south India has identified an array of new philological concerns, such as the textual instability of sectarian scriptures or standards of interpretation, and similar tendencies have been discerned in the north as well.⁷⁹ These concerns may never have included the critique of authority or of metaphysical foundations that marked early modern philology in Europe, but they were new concerns for India.

Hardly less consequential than questions of Indian periodization (let alone global synchronization) are the broader intellectual-historical issues. How far if at all did the epistemological model of Sanskrit philology have effects beyond its own domain, as was the case for the early modern European sciences? Did the *ars critica* of someone like Vallabhadeva in any way share in, let alone shape, other kinds of scientific practice, or come to be shaped by them? How far do Sanskrit philological practices parallel those of other high traditions like the Greek and Latin, whether in small matters, like the place of the lemma/*pratīka* and the *quaestio/sāṅkā* style of exposition, or in large ones, like the adducing of authorities, the analysis of rhetoric, concepts of interpretation, modes of reading, or rhythms of historical change?

Beyond such historical and comparative matters, little understood at present but important for a global history of philology, there is a discipline-theoretical problem that needs attention. Why should the practicing philologist, and not just the intellectual historian, want to know any of this past? What place, if any, should philology's past occupy in philology's future? Does it resemble that of mathematics or chemistry—have Vallabhadeva and Sāyaṇa become history for modern philologists, the way Laplace or Lavoisier have become history for modern scientists, and thus have no further role to play in the truth seeking of the discipline? And what, after all, is the truth of the discipline? Does past philology have value only in a Whiggish-historical way, as a record of the stages of progress that have brought us to our present moment of textual mastery, of once-useful but now permanently superseded ways of making sense of texts? Or, on the contrary, do the reading practices of a Vallabhadeva and a Sāyaṇa continue to affect our own? Should they?

These last questions at least, on disciplinary theory, have been raised before in Indology, especially in the late nineteenth-century controversy over the interpretation of the Vedas. Whereas some scholars (Otto Boetlingk, A. B. Keith, Hermann Oldenberg, Richard Pischel, and Rudolf von Roth,

among others) sought to recuperate a portion of the tradition's philology in a positivist spirit, the dominant view was that of W. D. Whitney, the pioneering American Sanskritist. For Whitney, a fourteenth-century C.E. reader like Sāyaṇa of a fourteenth-century B.C.E. text like the *Ṛgveda* had nothing of any possible philological importance to tell the modern scholar: "There are, in fact, in my opinion, few figures more absurd than that of 'Sāyaṇa' posing as one who comprehends, and can teach others to comprehend, a difficult Vedic passage—perhaps among the few exceptions is to be reckoned that of the Occidental scholar who professes to listen to him with admiring reverence." He refers to the commentator's "false etymologies and false constructions," "philological monstrosities," and "suggestions which . . . simply outrage universal human sense."⁸⁰ Whitney's view was not only dominant, it was also triumphant.

The judgment on how the practice of philology should relate to the history of philology that finds expression in Whitney's scholarship was the outgrowth of a particular history of Enlightenment views on textual truth that we can reconstruct. The conceptual transformation of crucial importance begins not, as usually supposed, with the distinction drawn by Giambattista Vico (c. 1725) between *certum* and *verum*—between the certitudes that people, such as commentators, accept in everyday life and the ultimate verities of the philosophers and scientists—but with the distinction between philological truth and commentators' truths introduced by Benedict de Spinoza (1670). Whereas for Vico *certum* and *verum* were two separate, if equally valid, domains of human consciousness, with *certum* the preserve of a hermeneutical philology,⁸¹ for Spinoza—most pointedly, if not for the first time—philological truth was made distinct from and transcendent of not only the reader's own subjective response to the text but also the entire foregoing history of understanding.⁸²

In line with the pluralism, discussed in the introduction, that should form part of a new philology for a new disciplinary order, I want to suggest that both positions, Vico's and Spinoza's, are at once true and false. There is no doubt always a deeper, ever truer textual truth to be obtained for historicists like Whitney, and contemporary philologists cannot but continue to strive toward it along that scientific path. But that is only one of the text's truths: what the text says to us (as philosophical hermeneutics teaches us) and what it has said to readers of the past (as philological history teaches us) are truths too. The "real meaning of the text" can only reside in the sum total of meanings that have been accorded it in history at all three levels, authorial, traditionalist, and presentist.

In the particular case of Sāyaṇa or Vallabhadeva or Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa, we encounter in even more direct a fashion than earlier how a new philology might function—why we should care not only whether one or the other commentator is right according to some transcendent truth, or *verum* (what Whitney called “the true Veda” with its “true meaning, which must have been one, and not many”) but also why the commentators thought what they thought was true, their *certum*, and what that would mean for a history of making sense of texts.⁸³ This method seems to me conceptually compelling, even a potential candidate for inclusion among the foundational principles of the twenty-first-century human sciences. And the premier site for its exposition and demonstration is critical philology, with its global history, its conceptual pluralism, and the massive, kaleidoscopic archive of methods and interpretations in the making sense of texts to which it gives access. But if the rich materials from traditional India are ever to be included in this new philological discipline, we Indologists have our work cut out for us.⁸⁴