Kitabkhana

A Discussion with Sheldon Pollock, Karla Mallette, Alexander Beecroft, Jesse Ross Knutson, Anna M. Shields, David Lurie, Alexander Key, and Rebecca Gould

Innovations and Turning Points: Toward a History of Kāvya Literature
Edited by Yigal Bronner, David Dean Shulman, and Gary A. Tubb
New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014
816 pp., $39.95 (cloth)

SMALL PHILOLOGY AND LARGE PHILOLOGY

Sheldon Pollock

Even as the humanities shrink in public estimation and university support, and broad competence erodes in the languages that constitute some 90 percent of the literary humanities—the literatures of the non-West up to 1800—a new day in global classical literary studies seems to be dawning. In a gloomy moment one might attribute this counterintuitive trend to anxiety in the face of a looming catastrophe, as in the Indian vision of apocalypse, where day is brightest—with two suns rising at dawn—before the final night. But whatever its cause, a dynamic reengagement with the classics is clearly in evidence.

Just in the past decade the scholarly world has welcomed a trove of major collaborative histories of non-Western, in particular premodern non-Western, literature. Off the top of my head I can think of one of African and Caribbean literature, two of Japanese, three of Chinese, a vast multivolume history of Arabic literature, and an even vaster one of Persian, aside from innovative, single-author works on more restricted periods.[1] In addition, new series of classical literature have recently been founded that aspire to make major texts in new translations available to the general no less than the scholarly public: the Library of Arabic Literature (New York University Press, 2012); the Murty Classical Library of India (Harvard University Press, 2014); the Library of Chinese Humanities (De Gruyter, 2015); and the Library of Judeo-Arabic Literature (Brigham Young/University of Chicago Press, 2017). And that is just literary histories and editions. The range of important new monographic work in the field is equally impressive.

1. Irele and Gikandi, *The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature*; Kōno et al., *A New History of Japanese "Letterature"*; Shirane et al., *The Cambridge History of Japanese Literature*; Mair, *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*; Chang and Owen, *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*; Denecke et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Classical Chinese Literature*; Allen and Richards, *Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*; Yarshater and Ashtiany, *Persian Poetry in the Classical Era*, the most recent volume in a history of Persian literature projected to cover (depending on how you count) eighteen or twenty volumes; Mallette, *The Kingdom of Sicily*; and Sharma, *Mughal Arcadia*. South Asian literary studies include Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History*; Orsini, *Before the Divide*; and Bruijn and Busch, *Culture and Circulation*.

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East
Vol. 38, No. 1, 2018 · © 2018 by Duke University Press

The ambitious new synthesis of classical Indian literature under review here, *Innovations and Turning Points: Toward a History of Kāvya Literature* (*ITP*), certainly fits this trend. The book represents an attempt to think—across time, space, language, and genre—about the ways that *kavya*, the Sanskrit term for expressive writing in general, grew and changed over some two thousand years. It does this not in the usual way of literary histories, rethinking eras and areas and audiences. The major periodizations, for example, which have in fact become scholarly consensus only in the past decade or so, largely structure the book's exposition: the origin of an entirely new form of expressivity—*written* expressivity—in the last centuries before the Common Era; a continuous and highly reflexive development through the first millennium and into the second; and an early modern moment, where regional-language literatures, from Gujarat to Tibet to Java, are newly invented, often by adopting the transregional paradigm of Sanskrit (a process that is chronologically, linguistically, and even politically parallel to what occurred in early modern Europe). Where *ITP* itself innovates and marks a turning point for the study of South Asian literature is the method of analysis: close reading of the texts themselves—insightful and accomplished in a manner almost without precedent in the field—and the revelation of historically innovative artistry.

While not itself explicitly comparative, *ITP*, by its careful exhumation of the key characteristics of a classical literary tradition, implicitly issues a strong invitation to comparison to classicists from other regions. Indeed, that this can be taken as an invitation at all comes from a second powerful impulse, in addition to a renewal of interest in the classical, that marks the contemporary literary humanities: a revitalization of the theory and practice of comparativism but now on a global scale. Even as European comparative literature itself has stopped comparing and the very idea of global forms of consciousness and culture have come under attack from nationalists everywhere from India to Turkey to the UK and US, the need for making sense of literary life as a planetary whole, of finding new sources of solidarity by way of thinking difference together—analogous to the unified planetary response required by climate change, for example—seems to have taken on a new kind of urgency.

This revitalization of comparativism is evident in the readiness, even eagerness, of the seven contributors to this Kitabkhana to assemble from their different locations on the literary planet to reflect on the meaning of classical South Asian literary phenomena, whether for their particular worlds—Arabic (Alexander Key), Chinese (Anna Shields), Japanese (David Lurie), and Sanskrit (Jesse Knutson)—or their interworlds—classics and Chinese (Alexander Beecroft), Italian and Arabic (Karla Mallette), and Persian, Arabic, and Georgian (Rebecca Gould).

We begin our collection with two general reflections, proceed to views from inside the Sanskrit or structurally analogous traditions, and end with two wider assessments for a new comparativism.

Karla Mallette brings Sanskrit into conversation with two other "cosmopolitan" languages, Latin and Arabic, to assess the morphology, so to speak, of the three literary cultures. Rome may have defeated Greece, but Latin was long defeated by Greek until it made Greek literature Roman via translation (again, analogously to the relationship of Sanskrit to South and Southeast Asian regional languages). Arabic's beginnings were different, and they played out on a public stage. But it too to some degree translated its way to fame (via Greek and Pahlavi, among other languages), while, unlike Latin, it has never receded. Sanskrit's history is far more clouded; like Greek it was not kick-started by a translation project, and like Greek it acknowledges no literature outside itself. But unlike Greek and virtually every other language, Sanskrit can appear reluctant to acknowledge anything *outside* of language—thus perfectly fitting Mallette's definition of the cosmopolitan code, which "situates itself outside time and space." Sanskrit, or at least the Sanskrit of *ITP*, can thus disconcert readers like Mallette who, rightly, are keen to plot the imaginative against the actual; who, rightly, want to ask, what is the relationship of literature to *life*?

One of the purposes of a literary history, Alexander Beecroft argues, is to inspire readers to actually read the literature, something especially critical for classical texts in the age of a "world literature" that often seems to be coextensive with the modern and postcolonial eras (and of course their mostly Western genres). But if, with David Damrosch, we define "world literature" as work

that gains in translation, how can it incorporate literature like Sanskrit, so much of which refuses translation because it is *about*, precisely, the Sanskrit language itself (phonology, lexicon, grammar, and the like) and the specific history of its literatures (later variations on earlier epics, for example)? This latter phenomenon leads Beecroft to the insight that "world literary" texts are those that not only gain in translation but have the capacity to produce later textual adaptations that can only lose in translation. Yet exposure to the techniques of such works, their rhetorical structure, for example, may offer strong inducements for comparison, as can the commitment to understand works by their own (rather than our) principles of literary creation—that is to say, to take seriously what their authors (and audiences) took seriously.

Looking from inside the field of Sanskrit literary studies, Jesse Ross Knutson acknowledges how often verbal density, conceptual complexity, and intertextual subtlety define the tradition of *kavya*. At the same time he gestures toward the actualities that their apparent artificialities address, in particular forms of kingly power and presence. If Sanskrit sometimes seems forever to be banished from the kind of literature Beecroft finds translatable, it might well embody precisely features of late modern literature that might speak to us most directly, not the least of which is the very dissolution of language's pretensions toward stable meaning that it is one of *kavya*'s principal goals to produce.[2] While acknowledging the virtues of the sort of virtuoso readings offered by *ITP*, Knutson, like Mallette, also perceives its limitations, in its tendency to neglect the world outside the text, and offers suggestions of how to reach it.

Looking from outside the field of South Asian studies but within a classical literary formation homomorphic with Sanskrit—in its cultural centrality, for example, its longevity, its learnedness—while radically different in so many particulars, Anna Shields discovers exciting opportunities everywhere for thinking the Chinese and South Asian traditions together. She is sympathetic to the editors' concern with finding innovation in a tradition long held by Orientalists to be unchanging (except of course when "degenerating," as they always invariably claimed to do). Yet the Chinese experience, far more via difference than via similarity, raises questions crucial for the South Asianist about, for example, a tradition's *resistance* to innovation and the rewards for conformity; the decadence and vulgarity of novelty in the eyes of the elite custodians of tradition; the cultural value of imitation; the "ideological power of 'antiquity' as a concept," where the new could be constituted by returning to the old; and the apparent interest traditions evince in masking, by the use of familiar forms and themes, the very impulse to innovate.

David Lurie's perspective is that of a regional literary culture, Japan, that was powerfully influenced by a globalizing one, that of China. He discusses a wide range of phenomena—everything from lexical choice to metrics to patronage and social status—found in East Asian literary cultures that can profitably be linked with the processes of vernacularization in South and Southeast Asia, and that would make terrific comparative projects in their own right. Rarely does *ITP* itself, however—a missed opportunity for Lurie—provide the kinds of support needed for enabling such comparison. It makes few concessions to outsiders by failing to elucidate chronology, technical terms, and the historiography of South Asian literature that *ITP* positions itself against and the historical factors that have determined that position, for instance why we may be "generations away" from a history of Sanskrit let alone South Asian *kavya* (26). Rather, like Shields, Lurie asks why a classical tradition should be thought to care only for innovation. What about the conventionalism that so often marks the classical? Are the conventional works any less important for literary history? And is it really so straightforward to differentiate the innovative from the conventional? Yet the narrative of innovation that emerges in *ITP* has "a power and grandeur apparent even to the outsider," Lurie writes, while the "regional *kavya*" section of the book opens up rich areas for a comparative study that has hardly begun.

A more explicit examination of the possibilities the book offers for elements of a theory of

2. See Bronner, *Extreme Poetry*.

comparative literature—hitherto a resolutely European form of knowledge and extending only a grudging welcome to non-Western traditions—is offered by Alexander Key. The scholarly purposes of such an undertaking as *ITP*, he rightly perceives, must include comparison, but what prospects for comparison does it offer? Comparison across literary domains with no history at all to connect them, such as South Asia and the Arab world, requires thoughtful reconceptualization. Key looks at style, technique, and form, starting (like Shields and Lurie) with the very idea of innovation, which works as an engine of creative change in both traditions. His focus is on the individual line, tropes such as paronomasia and hyperbole, and, intriguingly, their embedded syllogistic logic. Comparison, he argues, gets better the closer one gets to the actual poems, which is precisely what *ITP* shows, and formal features have the ability to transcend historical difference.

Comparison and its travails—the realization that all literary study is inevitably comparative but that the method of such comparison, global comparison, still, at this late date, awaits clear and persuasive formulation—form the core problem explored by Rebecca Gould. Foregrounding local forms of understanding through which we first make sense of the local forms of literature seems methodologically sound until we approach the boundary where the emic becomes the autochthonous, frozen forms of culture celebrated by nationalist delusions. But still bigger problems await us. Can we even grasp the local without some reference to nonlocal categories, or even communicate it without making such reference? Answers to these questions form part of a theoretical apparatus, still under construction, for doing global literary studies. More basic theorems must also be included: that literatures are always intertextual phenomena, given that every literary culture is determined by interactions with others; every literary language is always multilingual for the same reason (and not because authors employ more than one language, which is rarely the case). Last, Gould reflects, as other reviewers have done in their own way, on the tension between aesthetic appreciation and historical reconstruction, the latter referring not to the mere chronological concatenation of works but to something more consequential: the making sense of the historical context of literary production. Gould recognizes the pitfalls of this (long-lamented) "binary" that privileges one kind of comparison over another and rightly insists on the need to synthesize knowledgeably.

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In closing it may be helpful to reflect on a few suggestions for future practices set out by the reviewers.

The very existence of this particular Kitabkhana, and indeed of the journal in which it appears, demonstrates the increasing importance scholars attribute, both for epistemological no less than political reasons, to fostering comparative global studies across disciplines. Aside from trying to address the rich theoretical challenges posed by this aspiration (what kind of new knowledge, for example, does comparison in the humanities actually produce?), we are becoming aware of better ways to reach our colleagues in cognate fields, first by making our implicit comparative enterprises more explicit, and second by writing and explaining accordingly. In the case of literary studies, the readership that can forgo the roadmap and guidebook of a specific tradition—the timelines, the glosses of technical terms, the critique of the received literary histories against which we position our own contribution—is vanishingly small. We need to do more to ensure that those located outside our specialism but eager to help construct a truly global (and no longer peripheralized) object of study will not find the entryway blocked by unfiltered particularist knowledge.

Closure of that sort is not, as some might hold, an inevitable product of philology, the discipline concerned with making sense of texts. Or rather, it is not the product of what I would call large philology, a critical practice that Giambattista Vico and Friedrich Schlegel, its greatest European theorists, envisioned for modern Europe, and that was actually in evidence in interpretive traditions around the world from virtually the beginning of the discipline, where scholars of small philology were always complemented by those of the large sort. Meaning held to be immanent in the text was everywhere complemented by mean-

ing held to exist in reading as historically constituted. An important challenge for contemporary global literary studies, as I see it, is to fully combine that small philology of the word with the large philology of the world, and demonstrate that this combination is not optional but necessary.

By "historically constituted" reading I mean both interpretation as expressed in presentist interpretive practices (pejoratively called "allegorical" for earlier eras but in actuality an assertion of the text's historicality, and found in philologists from ancient Pergamum to medieval south India to Song China) and the larger historicity of the text, the latter half of the binary touched on by Gould and that a number of reviewers wished to see more often addressed in *ITP*. Its absence there does not mean the sources required to understand the historicity of context are lacking; we can answer many of the questions asked about Sanskrit, whether about gender or power or "where the bodies are buried," as Mallette puts it.

ITP generally offers readings that Knutson calls *anuloma*, "with the grain." This is an entirely laudable approach, the sort that, in European philology, found its most accomplished expression in the work of Erich Auerbach. In fact, it is the spirit of Auerbach, though he is mentioned in passing only a couple of times in *ITP*, that seems to animate the book (*Mimesis* after all is also a history of turning points and innovations). But while his style of reading has been universally applauded for its insights, Auerbach himself never offered a theory of how and to whom a literary text *makes sense*. His own historically constituted meanings are offered as if they stood outside of time and carry an aura of finality.[3]

Auerbach and his disciples also exhibit something of the anxiety of critique—the practice of reading *pratiloma*, "against the grain," of learning to be firm, as Mallette puts it, with languages that want to erase what is outside the text. This anxiety, common to Romanists of Auerbach's generation and likely exacerbated by the trauma of World War II, was something about which he was never methodologically explicit, either. It took root in the US academy in the wake of the fin-de-siècle theory wars, finding vocal support over the past two decades in the humanities and the social sciences more broadly.[4] But this critique of critique seems finally to be running out of steam, not so much because of the fickleness of academic fashion or, more grandly, a swing of the Hegelian dialectic, but because of the unprecedented civilizational catastrophe toward which we are hurtling. That climate-change denialists may have adopted the idiom of science and technology studies, or cultural nationalists the idiom of postorientalism, should inspire us not to drop our critical weapons but to sharpen them. In the case of global literary studies, one way to do this might be offered by a critical philology characterized by attending to both word and world, which are not in fact a binary and mutually exclusive phenomena but rather mutually constitutive; a philology that, at the same time, needs to be equipped with a real theory of meaning, which acknowledges pluralism even as it demands attentiveness to the question of truth at every level.

If the value of a work lies in the importance of the questions it raises as much as in the answers it offers, then *ITP* is especially valuable. For it invites us to ask the hardest questions literary studies can ask: How should we read? What does it mean to read (as we always do read) comparatively? Why do we bother to read at all?

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3. Here is not the place to demonstrate the ahistoricism that sometimes marks Auerbach's own historical judgments. Reread "Odysseus' Scar" and ask yourself whether Homer was merely "legend" for fifth-century BC Athens or whether "allegorizing trends" were "foreign" in fourth-century BC Pergamum. See Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 3–23, especially 13 and 18. *ITP*, it should be noted, typically takes the history of reception far more seriously than Auerbach did.

4. For the former see Felski, *The Limits of Critique*; for the latter see Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"

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DOI 10.1215/1089201x-4390027

SANSKRIT SNAPSHOTS

Karla Mallette

For someone coming from outside the field, *Innovations and Turning Points* can be a forbidding volume—in part because of its length, and in part because reading the essays in this book feels a bit like turning the pages of another family's photo album. Individuals, relationships, and the history in which they are entangled come into focus briefly, then blur and recede, leaving behind a sense of vague but urgent affection, like the smoke skeleton of fireworks. I take the invitation to respond to it as a way to open a conversation—between Sanskrit and other languages, between *kavya* and other literary traditions, and between scholarship on Sanskrit and scholarship on other languages. And at moments I pause to admire indecipherable passages, irreducible mysteries that remain for the nonspecialist. The result is another photo album: a series of snapshots taken by a tourist to the language, reflecting on the challenges posed by thinking about Sanskrit *kavya* in a comparative context and what seem to me the most compelling possibilities for the comparatist opened up by the essays in the volume.

The cosmopolitan language—provisionally defined as a literary language that positions itself outside of time and space—insists, at times with hauteur, that it is changeless. It provides a touchstone for thought, and even for something more sublime: it alone is capable of producing the rhythm of ritual, or of telling true stories about the divine. Arabic is the extreme example of cosmopolitan language as *lingua sacra* or religiolect. The Quran refers to itself repeatedly as *an Arabic Quran*: "We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you might understand" (12:2; see also 13:37, 41:3, 41:44, 42:7, 43:3, 44:58). And for Muslims, the meaning of the Quran does not survive translation. The believer may use translation as a means to reach the Arabic but must understand scripture itself in its original tongue. Latin complicates the

I am grateful to Aileen Das, my colleague in the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Michigan, who answered my questions about classical studies.