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Review

The Nay Science: A History of German Indology, by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xvi + 494 pp., $105.00 (hb); $41.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-199-93134-7 (hb), 978-0-199-93136-1 (pb).

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As Adluri and Bagchee point out in their introduction to this sizeable work, there is no shortage of studies that engage the German-Indian encounter in the nineteenth century. Within this well-studied history, *The Nay Science* seeks its own intellectual grounds: '[T]he history traced here is more accurately described as a genealogy of method in Indology. Its focus is not on the great and official monuments (documents, events, authorized histories, or biographies) that mark the history of this discipline, but on the hidden and the obscure: the documents or events that ... Indology has found convenient to forget' (p. 5). In following this line into the 'hidden and the obscure', *The Nay Science* holds almost exclusively to investigating how nineteenth-century German scholars approached just two works, the Mahābhārata and the Bhagavad-gītā (devoting the first 300 pages of the text to this task). Given these limits in subject matter, the book's subtitle, 'A History of German Indology', does appear somewhat misleading. This is partially rectified, however, in the final 150 pages of *The Nay Science*, which considers German Indology's indebtedness to the 'historical-critical method' of textual interpretation, with its origins in Protestant biblical (scriptural) studies. The methodological implications of this, which Adluri and Bagchee view as having had both long-lasting and strongly deleterious effects on the course of Western Indology, raises issues of deep significance for the history of the discipline, though again, it does not itself constitute a full 'history' (as a reader might presume from the book's subtitle).

Chapter One of *The Nay Science* presents a general history of the German Indological engagement with the Bhagavad-gītā and the Mahābhārata. Here, Adluri and Bagchee recount how, after an initial fascination with the Gītā (which hearkens back to the first generation of German Indologists, Herder, von Humboldt, and the two Schlegels), Gītā studies came to a sudden end

in 1827, which Adluri and Bagchee attribute to the German reception of Hegel's critical review of Humboldt's work. It would not be until 1905, and the work of Richard Garbe, that Gītā studies would resume in Germany. German Mahābhārata studies, on the other hand, began with the second generation of Indologists in Germany, starting with Lassen in 1837 (as Adluri and Bagchee note, Lassen was Norwegian by birth, but moved to Germany at the age of 18, and conducted all his academic work there [p. 41]), and continued through the nineteenth century in the work of the two Adolf Holtzmanns (uncle and nephew, generally referred to as 'elder' and 'younger' but referred to in *The Nay Science* as Holtzmann, Sr. and Holtzmann, Jr.) in the 1840s and the 1890s, whose work—particularly that of the younger Holtzmann—as Adluri and Bagchee observe, was quickly forgotten. Adluri and Bagchee see a continuous interpretive line stretching through the works of these three scholars (though not without some exegetical misunderstanding amongst them), exhibited particularly in their view that the text as it stands today resulted from a 'Brahmanic takeover' of an original warrior's tale (pp. 65-67). This 'original' text was replete with elements of an Indo-Germanic past that celebrated the warrior ideal: 'The Brahmans, through no fault of theirs, had become the counterconcept to the Indo-Germanic Āryans' (p. 70). Chapter Two of *The Nay Science* continues to delve into the younger Holtzmann's interpretation of the Mahābhārata (again, celebrating the text's Indo-Germanic 'core' story, while denigrating its Brahmanic reworking), which Adluri and Bagchee engage not merely as an interpretive strain, but as an act of appropriation; for Holtzmann's claim to elicit the 'real' history and meaning of the Mahābhārata effectively abrogates the native tradition that surrounds (and gives meaning to) the text: 'From the European perspective, the Indian commentaries and subcommentaries, their sophisticated technical philosophical vocabulary, their robust system of metacritique and analysis, were worth less than the reflections of the least Western critic' (p. 144). This appropriation becomes further enunciated in the work of the influential Indologist Hermann Oldenberg, who distanced himself from Holtzmann, but who Adluri and Bagchee contend yet continued to articulate Holtzmann's views.

Chapter Three of *The Nay Science* returns to the Bhagavad-gītā. This massive chapter (157 pages) again begins with the work of the younger Holtzmann, who asserted (in 1893, as part of his work on the Mahābhārata) that lurking beneath the Gītā was an 'original' or 'core' text. In Adluri's and Bagchee's view, this assertion opened the floodgates to the attempts by Garbe, Jacobi, Oldenberg, Otto, and Hauer to reconstruct the 'original' Gītā. Yet, as Adluri and Bagchee show, despite these scholars' shared notion of an original text, what that text was, and what it meant varied wildly, from Holtzmann's supposition of an original pantheistic core, to Garbe's ideas about personal salvation in the text (seen also in Otto's work), to Oldenberg's emphasis on the battlefield elements, and its war ethic, to Hauer's assertion that beneath it all is an Indo-Germanic tale of blood-honour. As Adluri and Bagchee deftly

and correctly point out throughout this chapter, each of these permutations had clear ties to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German ideologies, philosophical, political, as well as religious.

Chapter Four of the *The Nay Science* leaves the narrow world of the German understanding of the Mahābhārata and the Bhagavad-gītā to delve into the elevation of the historical-critical method of textual interpretation, from its origins in German Protestant (and largely theological) scholarship to its application in Indology. Here, Adluri and Bagchee capably trace out a course that gains its most ardent spokesmen in the figure of the famed Indologist, Rudolf von Roth, who would famously assert that the modern scholar, with the tools of linguistics and historical analysis in hand, was a more capable interpreter of the Indian textual tradition than any native commentator. Although this approach may have been consonant with the general trends of German textual scholarship, its effects on Indology were nefarious. On the one hand, as Adluri and Bagchee point out, Indologists were now 'forced constantly to denigrate the tradition' (p. 343); on the other, it now became 'impossible for a genuine dialogue to develop between European scholarship and Indian tradition' (p. 345). This discussion is then broadened in Chapter Five of *The Nay Science*, as Adluri and Bagchee scrutinize the German approach to India through an extended critique of nineteenth-century German interpretive methods and modalities. Here, the purportedly scientific nature of German philology (as practised by figures such as Hermann Oldenberg and Rudolf von Roth which, in their hands, became a means to dismiss the Indian interpretive tradition) is contrasted with Hans-Georg Gadamer's view that interpretation should seek not to eliminate tradition but embrace it.

In a brief coda to *The Nay Science*, Adluri and Bagchee consider Mohandas Gandhi's 'self-aware' approach to the Bhagavad-gītā as an alternative to the largely philological interpretation of the German Indologists. For Gandhi, the text was experienced not merely as an ancient Sanskrit document but as part of the lived-in world, his understanding of it gained through 'empirical verification' (p. 440). Though as Adluri and Bagchee note, Gandhi's interpretation 'does not solve all textual problems', it yet presents an 'alternative to the scientism of Indology' (p. 444), and presents a credible challenge to what had long been presumed to be an unassailable methodology in the Western study of India.

The Nay Science is throughout a commendable work. Although the history of German Indology is hardly an unknown or unstudied topic, Adluri and Bagchee bring the enthusiasm of first discovery to their enquiry, and their emphasis on the obscure and rarely studied is of great benefit to the reader. Also of note here is the authors' critical engagement with modern interpretive method, raising questions germane not only to Indology but to the practice of the humanities as it yet stands in the modern academy. The work is not without problems, however. In particular, the significance of the younger Holtzmann's work on the course of Indology is vastly over-estimated (that

scholars may have engaged in some of the same interpretive techniques as Holtzmann, or arrived at similar conclusions, does not make them followers of Holtzmann, an ill-conceived line of reasoning seen in Adluri's and Bagchee's frequent, and, I believe, wrongly directed diatribes against the work of the contemporary Mahābhārata scholar James Fitzgerald). The tendency to over-indulge supposed continuities is seen elsewhere in the text, as in the contention that Hegel's work alone ended German Bhagavad-gītā studies, and so fails to consider the many other accepted factors in this decline (manpower, the availability of texts, the general movement of the Germans away from works already studied by other European scholars). Additionally, there are some peculiar scholarly choices to be noted: quotations from German works are all presented in English translation, though we are not told by whom; there is no discussion of how Adluri and Bagchee divided their labours on the text; the beginning of the book is overwhelmed by lengthy footnotes, not all of which are entirely relevant; and as noted above, the chapters are wildly uneven in length—the longest nearly a book in itself. The final chapter, which takes an elevated view of Gandhi's interpretation of the Bhagavad-gītā, fails to mention the many deeply problematic aspects of his engagement with the text (in particular, its association with his father, and his first reading of it in London in the form of Edwin Arnold's *The Song Celestial*). Though not inconsequential (particularly in a work that criticizes other scholars), these matters do not detract from the substantial contribution *The Nay Science* makes to our understanding of the practice of Western Indology, reminding us, in particular, of the troubling elements that continue to roil just beneath its surface.