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PHILOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS 6 (2021) 243–264

Philological | Encounters

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Philological Conversation



Heterodox Philology: A Conversation with Gauri Viswanathan

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Abstract

Michael Allan and Gauri Viswanathan discuss connections among philology, literary history, and religion, drawing from writers such as Edward Said, B.R. Ambedkar, Zora Neale Hurston, Louis Massignon, and Kumud Pawde. The conversation was initially conducted via Zoom on September 2, 2020, and collaboratively edited for readability.

Keywords

Edward Said – differentiation – theosophy – conversion – democratic criticism

Michael Allan: When *Philological Encounters* was founded, the overall vision was to connect textual, hermeneutic, and philological practices from across literary history, primarily in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. As a comparatist, I have always felt a strong connection to the work of the journal, and I appreciated when Islam Dayeh (the founding editor) approached me years ago about experimenting with potential formats for publication. Over the course of our conversation, we brainstormed having a series of interviews to highlight

scholars who have helped transform literary studies and whose reflections on philology would be of interest to our readers. The idea was to capitalize on the idea of “encounters” through the sort of dialogue that an interview format makes possible. You, Gauri, immediately came to mind for me, and I am deeply grateful that you are the first in what is foreseen to be a series of conversations to be published in the coming years.

Allow me to begin directly with a question that has been at the heart of our journal since its inception. The inaugural volume, taking its cue from debates around Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, considered the future of philology [*Zukunftsphilologie*] and wove together the work of scholars such as Erich Auerbach, Edward Said, Paul de Man, and Sheldon Pollock.¹ As we consider the place of philological inquiry in the humanities, I would love to hear how you understand the term philology. Is there a place for philology now?

Gauri Viswanathan: I would have to contextualize my answer in terms of my own disciplinary training, especially the courses I took with Edward Said at Columbia. As you know, Said was a very prominent voice in the 1970s and 1980s, and the way that he had framed philology is productive even today as we rethink its importance. Even while he constantly referred to classical philology and returned to some of the figures that you mentioned, like Auerbach and Nietzsche, he had a subversive reading of literary representations, which is most prominent in *Orientalism*, but its antecedents were already established in his earlier book *Beginnings*.² His reading of *Orientalism* has its roots in classical philology, which he identified as preparatory for the practice of textual criticism. It is very hard to disengage his idea of representation from the way it has been deployed in literary studies, coming as it does through the philological route.

The 1970s and 1980s are foundational decades in the history of literary studies in terms of the arc that it presented for students writing and professing literature as our field in the twenty-first century. Particularly in those decades in the 70s and 80s, there was an effort to provide a scientific foundation for literary interpretation that went beyond the compulsions of subjective judgment. The humanities have always been in tension with the social sciences and the hard sciences, because the humanities are largely perceived to be lacking in scientific rigor, with the emphasis on interpretation permitting license to unrestrained subjectivity in the reading of literary texts. You see in these two pivotal decades an attempt to reshape literary studies and give it a more

1 Islam Dayeh, “Introducing Philological Encounters,” *Philological Encounters* 1, 1–4 (2016): 1–3, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/24519197-12340024>.

2 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

scientific foundation so that literature can be shown to follow what might be called the laws of nature, or something akin to the laws of science. There is an attempt to place literature within a framework in which it is as rule-governed as the social sciences with which the humanities are often seen to be in contest.

It is in this framework that philology reared its head (some might say reared its ugly head). But I do think that however you place it, the turn to philology was not just about going back to philology in an unthinking or uncritical way, but to look at philology as the root of an attempt to study the laws of language and to delineate those laws. You can think of semiotics and structuralism in the 1970s and the 1980s as attempts to find the rules governing the creation of language and the creation of literature from that language.

I recently re-read Said's *Beginnings*, which to this day I think is truly his masterpiece. It is a work that I find incredibly rich and dazzling; to think that someone so early in his academic career had produced this monumental work! Said's quote from Leo Spitzer arrested me as I thought about our impending conversation: "The philological character of the discipline of literary history is concerned with ideas couched in linguistic and literary form, not with ideas in themselves or with ideas as informing action."³ When Spitzer talks about ideas in themselves, he is referring to philosophy, and when he talks about ideas informing action, he is referring to history or the social sciences. In reading Leo Spitzer, Said resorts to the language of differentiation to explain why philology is different from philosophy, and he continues by saying that differentiation is "the function of a received tradition of a discipline, of an institution—in this case, of philology."⁴ The word differentiation is important in Said's understanding of philology. I emphasize this point because I think that it might be helpful for us to think about philology's role in acts of classification, in setting up language hierarchies and different language groups which are then associated with different national foundations. The crucial word here is differentiation, and this is key to the ways that evolutionary thinkers were talking about the evolution from primal life forms through the differentiation between sexes and between races, ethnicities, and languages. This idea of differentiation becomes a trigger for the shaping of disciplines, leading to the compartmentalization and grouping of different language forms. The question I would ask in response to your original question is this: Does disciplinary formation have something to do with the ways that philology as an instrument of differentiation has become the bedrock of literary study?

3 Edward Said, *Beginnings* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 69—quoting Leo Spitzer, *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 33–34.

4 Said, *Beginnings*, 70.

Michael Allan: Both your work and Said's work connect nineteenth-century philology to evolutionary thought and the hierarchical structuring of cultures, languages, and races through the logic of difference. Given this rather vexed colonial backdrop, is philology—with all of its colonial implications—something that we ought to put in the past tense? Or is a decolonization of philology possible to think of its future? I was struck by your remarks in the new preface to *Masks of Conquest*: "To regain the world through other imaginings that recapture texts from a point outside the institution offers a challenge to English studies that its postcolonial offshoot has considerably reinvigorated."⁵ Could you elaborate on what some of these "other imaginings" are? Are these possible futures?

And if I might follow here with a related second question: I am compelled by how you understand philology as a quest for a science of literary study anchored in an effort to apprehend underlying rules of language. If this scientific quest is one aspect of Said's interest in philology, how would you reconcile this rule-based philology with the emphasis in his work on "surprise"?⁶ What is the place of literary surprise, or disruption, within the rule-based model of philology?

Gauri Viswanathan: They're both great questions and maybe I can begin with the second one, because I think the element of surprise or unexpectedness is crucial in explicating the decolonization of philology, to use your phrase. Said introduces the word hedonism as a vital element of his critical practice, and of course, the word makes a grand appearance in *Beginnings*. Hedonism takes on enormous weight in his critical thought. It becomes a kind of placeholder for subversiveness of critical practice, leading to the undermining of expectations, or the subversion of rules. This is where the question about philology might find an answer. Philology as a science enables its students to track the development of language and discern the rules of language that govern the way we speak and the grammar that we employ. If that is what allows speech in the first place and shapes our intuitive sense of what the rules are, there is another aspect to those rules that is always pushing back against them. Said uses the word hedonism, and I sometimes use the word heterodoxy, to refer to the push back against the canonization of rules or against the orthodoxies that

5 Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), xxii.

6 Here I am thinking of the insights on "hedonism" in Said's work, see: Gauri Viswanathan, "Legacies: Intention and Method," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2014): 5. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/537445>, accessed November 24, 2020.

get established as the principles of the norm.⁷ The question that then must be asked is: Where does that sense of the unexpected come from? What is the source of the energy that pushes back against those rules?

In your first question, you drew my attention to a line from the new preface to *Masks of Conquest* and inquired about the source of what I refer to as “other imaginings.” Where do these other imaginings come from? That speaks directly to the notion of heterodoxy I alluded to earlier, to the hedonism and to the push back against the rules that govern language. The element of surprise is what change is all about. Maybe all of human life is an effort to control the changes that we really have no power to control, but everything we do is an attempt to control those changes, which come to us as a surprise because they are unexpected.

I can offer two illustrations of this argument from the history of literary institutionalization. The first illustration involves Sir Charles Trevelyan, the brother-in-law of Thomas B. Macaulay, who famously instituted an Anglicist language policy in colonial India, which more or less replaced study of indigenous languages with English. In effect, Macaulay valorized Anglicism on the principle that one shelf of English literature was worth more than all the libraries of India and Arabia.⁸ As governor of Madras, Trevelyan was instrumental in implementing many of these Anglicist educational policies. He made an astounding remark in an educational commission report that illuminates my earlier point about attempts to control the changes that we have very little ability to control.⁹ Trevelyan suggested that India offered the potential for being the arena in which a pure form of English can be preserved. In Great Britain, he argued, English is a spoken language, subject to variations of dialect and regional use, and therefore is affected by language change. One has very little control over how that dynamic street (or spoken) language can be completely excised from a knowledge and understanding of English as a fixed and stable language.

If the English language is always changing in the country that is supposed to be the primary English-language speaking country, then how do you try to preserve the language of Chaucer, the language of Shakespeare, the language of Milton? *How do you preserve the language of pure English?* Trevelyan’s hypothesis was that India could be that very place that preserves the purity

7 See, for example, Gauri Viswanathan, “Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy,” *PMLA* 123, no. 2 (2008): 466–76.

8 T.B. Macaulay, “Minute on Education,” see <http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm>, accessed December 4, 2020.

9 Charles Trevelyan, *On the Education of the People of India* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1838).

of the English language, as it would not be subject to the variations of spoken forms. If English is introduced as a language that would be primarily a written language, then Indians would still be speaking in their vernacular languages, while instructed in English as a formal language of study, of writing (especially for official business), and for professions. This way, English would not be contaminated by linguistic change. Trevelyan was thinking philologically in some senses, trying to achieve control over language.

A similar example is to be found in H. Rider Haggard's 1887 novel, *She*.¹⁰ There is a wonderful passage in which we are told that the character Ayesha speaks a pure classical form of Arabic. And, of course, we know Ayesha is two thousand years old and has outlived all other mortals, but she still speaks a kind of classical Arabic. In the present day (i.e., the time of the novel's action), she comes into contact with merchants and explorers, who are speaking an Arabic that sounds very different from the Arabic that she knows. She cannot comprehend the modern Arabic she hears spoken by tradesmen, and her lack of comprehension makes her confused and disoriented. What compels attention is the distinction between the rarefied, frozen language that has not encountered change—and remains more or less fossilized—and language that adapts and changes as its practitioners encounter other languages and people. The fossilization of language is what we perhaps have in mind when we talk about Standard English in the schools. Keeping out the vernacular is a way of keeping out the accents and inflections of other languages. The norms of being an educated person require one to speak a language that is fossilized to an extent.

I think the question that you are asking about philology today is really important, perhaps in a context that no one would have really thought it might be applicable: the democratization of modern education. What is the place of different speech variations in modern education, reflecting the nature of linguistic change, in contrast to a kind of fossilized (or standardized) language that we have now come to understand as the foundation of education?

Michael Allan: I am intrigued by your attention to philology and the fossilization of language, and I like the references you offer to Charles Trevelyan and Rider Haggard. Given that you have drawn together a commission report and a novel, do you see literature doing something different than policy? Is literature an artifact that fossilizes certain modes of speech differently

10 H. Rider Haggard, *She* (London: Longman's, Green, and Company, 1896).

than grammatical treatises? Or does literature disrupt, renew, or forge the conventions of language?

Gauri Viswanathan: Let's take a novel by George Eliot: it might be fair to say that it is written in a language understood to represent a consensus of the norms of the English language. Then let's consider Zora Neale Hurston: we encounter in her novels a language that incorporates so many different dialects, vernacularisms, accents, and inflections. Hurston succeeded in reshaping language into something that is startling in its effects. It is interesting that Zora Neale Hurston wrote with an anthropological eye to what language *is* as opposed to what language is understood to be. And so, I would say that Hurston represents one kind of "other imaginings" you referenced in your earlier question.

Michael Allan: I would love to hear what your own path to literary study was. What initially drew you to your course of study? How do you see your investment in literary education having changed over the years, if at all? Or is what attracted you to literature as a field of study still what fuels you moving forward?

Gauri Viswanathan: Well, you know I majored in English literature at the University of Delhi. At that time, India had long before achieved its independence from British rule, yet there were still doggedly persistent traces of the colonial curriculum in the course of studies in English literature. The curriculum was modeled very much on that of the English universities—speaking about fossils—so that "modern" poets would be the likes of Tennyson and TS Eliot, not dipping much further than that! The curriculum that was part of my education resembled the typical Oxford and Cambridge curriculum of the early-twentieth century. So that disquieting experience certainly triggered my interest in the history of literary education. It seemed so anomalous to be a student in postcolonial, independent India and still see the curriculum—at least, the English literature curriculum—not really evolve much further than in its colonial days. That is what really started me off on looking not at literary texts exclusively, but at the ways in which those texts were placed within the curriculum.

Happily, there have been many changes since the time I was at the University of Delhi. In fact, I would say that some of these changes have gone in just the opposite direction. I did a workshop in Kerala in South India, a few years ago, in which the participants were teachers at various universities across India, as well as graduate students and postdocs. I was fascinated to learn that many of

these teachers, who were based in English departments, were not necessarily teaching English literature, but rather the literatures of numerous Indian languages. This is a big shift in literature departments in India, with PhD research in English departments extending to scholarship in the Indian languages. This is perhaps one sign of India coming to terms with its own postcolonial history.

Michael Allan: Is that to say that Malayalam would be taught in an English department?

Gauri Viswanathan: Not Malayalam as a language, but certainly Malayalam literature.

Michael Allan: You mentioned that the curriculum was set up initially around masterworks of English literature, which led you, as a student, to have an interest in the pragmatics of how a curriculum is structured. Following from there, would you say your investment remains as much in the relationship between the pedagogical side of literary study, on the one hand, and the side of the literary artifact, on the other?

Gauri Viswanathan: Yes, I remain intensely interested in pedagogical questions, but perhaps more from the historical point of view. It has always struck me as a deficit in English departments today that there is continued neglect of courses in the history of education, or even just self-reflection on how our field has become what it is. At Columbia, from time to time, I have taught courses on the history of education, particularly at the introductory graduate level. One such course, on “Disciplinary Formations,” examined some of the principal works in the field authored by scholars such as Franklin E. Court, Chris Baldick, Terry Eagleton, Simon During, John Guillory, Gerald Graff. There is a lengthy history of the literary discipline that is worth studying alongside literary texts. Something I really enjoyed in that course was the opportunity to read the work that my students did, either the seminar papers they wrote or the preparatory research they undertook for their orals or dissertations. In fact, one of my students, Sarah Phillips Casteel, wrote an intriguing seminar paper on the different trajectories of literary studies in the United States and in Canada. She subsequently published a revised version of the paper.¹¹ Examining the role of Scottish migration to Canada, she studied the ways that Scottish immigrants in Canada, fearing to be provincialized in their adopted new country, favored

11 Sarah Phillips Casteel, “The Dream of Empire: The Scottish Roots of English Studies in Canada,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 31, no. 1–2 (2000): 127–152.

an accent on culture (in the Matthew Arnold sense of culture) in literary education. She went on to argue that the Scottish contribution is clearly felt in the particular Arnoldian direction taken in certain programs and departments of Canadian universities. The Canadian history of literary education stands in stark contrast with that of the United States, in which literary studies was very much rooted in rhetoric. Indeed, if you look at the histories of some of the early American universities, literature departments often started off as departments of rhetoric.

I have always found these three-way movements among regions and nations to be one of the most interesting aspects of disciplinary history, challenging the notion that the rise of English can be studied purely from within the borders of one region or nation. The location is never as stable as we think it is. You think of fields developing in the locations in which they are based, but fields actually have other sites of origin. This is what I find very interesting about serious scholarship in literary history, and why I have learned immeasurably from my students' illuminating research. The students went poking around in the archives and discovered things that nobody could have expected. I remain deeply interested in these migrations of movements and of ideas. Even to look at the shaping of a curriculum or department or university, you actually have to go out and trace these patterns of migration in order to then come back to what you think is the home base. And then you find that the home base is hardly the home base at all. And Michael, you know that so well from your own work.¹²

Michael Allan: I have certainly drawn inspiration from your work and the complexity of literary study that you trace. For me, there is always a surprise in the historical pathways that you offer. It is illuminating to see what you excavate from the detours, footnotes, or haphazard relationships that texts and scholars have with one another, something that your commitment to careful historical study makes possible. And I guess this leads me to another question. I have noticed that, in multiple instances, you identify as a literary historian. I wonder if I might encourage you to elaborate on how you understand the task of a literary historian. How is literary history similar to or different from what one would classically call the study of literature? Would you draw a distinction between literary history and literary criticism? I realize that this question might tie back to the response you offered earlier about your relationship to the curriculum at University of Delhi.

12 Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Gauri Viswanathan: I hate to hearken back to the early-twentieth-century scholarship that dominated approaches to literary study, only to be challenged in the 1970s and 1980s, which we can view as revolutionary decades in the way that a lot of the prior narratives about literary study got overturned. I mentioned semiotics and structuralism, but then you also had push back against rule-governed ideas of literary study, in post-structuralism, deconstruction, and New Historicism. What is so interesting about late-twentieth-century English studies, and the proliferation of these different schools during this period, is that it offers a stark contrast to earlier moments. You might think of George Saintsbury, to cite one example of the literary critics whom people were reading for many, many decades; histories of English literature were a regular staple in the literary diets of university students.¹³ Believe it or not, at Delhi University, we actually had to read *A History of English Literature* by Émile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, which was published in 1929 and went through various editions. I don't think anyone has heard of these guys today.¹⁴ But volumes like this were standard history, and you couldn't be a student of literature if you didn't read these histories of English literature. These authors dominated the 'great march of history' approach in which students begin with the first seeds of early Anglo-Saxon literature and then march steadily forward, chapter by chapter, period by period, era by era. This chronological emphasis, with its evolutionary arc, is totally anathema in today's literary studies. But it is quite interesting when you think about how long this approach endured in literary education.

You use the word literary history, and in a technical sense, that is what literary history is about—these grand compendia of history. This is the work that literary scholars of a certain generation did. They wrote grand histories. They didn't necessarily do literary criticism. The model for graduate study today is to take four authors and write a chapter about each author. That has become the monograph of today's publishing world, which was far from the prototype of scholarly work in the early decades of the 20th century, when scholars wrote grand compendia.

One of the pernicious effects of the grand march of history approach had been to claim a false unity of disparate communities, leaving the door open for radical critical shifts that exposed the contrived nature of the very idea

13 George Saintsbury, *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Modern Day* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910).

14 Émile Legouis and Louis François Cazamian, *History of English Literature* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1929).

of national literature. A critic like Raymond Williams steps into that moment in such an interesting way. In some ways, Williams imbibed the purposes of an approach he had inherited as a student of literature. But then he tried to undermine it by finding ways of telling that history in such a way as to include subaltern accounts of hitherto marginalized or forgotten communities. In other words, I think Williams needed to have that master narrative in order to draw in the subaltern histories of the Welsh miners.¹⁵ This was his way of actually bringing in the heterogeneity of Great Britain's population. It is these other stories about Great Britain that get lost in the national narrative. So he needed that grand narrative in order to undermine it through the subaltern histories he incorporated into his literary criticism. And I do think it is interesting to see this work in literary history alongside subaltern studies in Indian historiography, especially the work of Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and other Indian historians who founded Subaltern Studies. The whole point of subaltern studies is to take that mainstream history, to know it and then to undermine it.

I began by talking about the literary. I think it is the rare work that tries to look at both the institutionalization of English studies and the evolution of literary forms together. I find—and I'm sure you have that same experience in your teaching—that some of the most exciting doctoral research being done today rethinks the rise of, for instance, realism and romance in the context of imperialism and globalization. There is an interesting way of taking these broad historical contexts and then examining the evolution of genres within them, like the realist novel or the romance novel. I have a doctoral student who is studying the impact of empire on the regulation of emotion—that is to say, the cultivation of British reserve, coolness, and emotional distancing—by examining the attendant effects of the rise of impersonal narration that feeds into realist fiction. His study opens up ways in which you can write histories that not only are contextual and take a long view of the history of imperialism and globalization amidst global expansion, but also look at the effects of that history on narrative forms in literature. I think this is a very productive way of taking forward literary studies today. This isn't completely rejecting the idea of literary history, but it is a matter of trying to rethink literary history from the viewpoint of how forms evolved in relation to investments in political structures, in historical imperialism, and in capitalism.

If I can just throw in one additional example, since you're asking me personally: I have been teaching a seminar on metropole and colony in the 1930s. I have become very interested in the 1930s as a period that is remarkable for

15 Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960).

being the time which marks both the rise of fascism in Europe and the rise of independence and decolonizing movements in the colonies held by Europe. I read texts together from both parts of the world—from the metropole, as well as from the colonies—in order to study the conjunction between the rise of fascism and decolonization movements. And I think one of the interesting things that I discovered—and so too have my students in their own rich, cogent ways—is how the rhetoric of anti-fascism that you can see in England (as witnessed in the work of Aldous Huxley and Virginia Woolf) was able to stand alongside the call for liberation from imperial control in different parts of the empire. Gandhi is writing at the same time as Woolf. Ambedkar, the Dalit leader, was writing at the same time as CLR James. Their most significant works appeared in the 1930s. So, I have found that focusing on a historical period, in order to look at the concomitant developments in different parts of empire and colonies, has been very fruitful in illuminating the connections that I never expected to see in quite that way.

Michael Allan: What a fascinating class! And above and beyond literary history, an additional axis in your work is a vocabulary that attends to the question of religion: spirituality, theosophy, and heterodoxy. In the social sciences, there is an emphasis on the analysis of religion as a set of practices, but I admire how you draw attention to matters of imagination, enchantment, and aesthetics. How would you describe the place of religion in your reflections on literary study? And to flip the question, how do you see literature, aesthetics, and textuality enriching or complicating the study of religion?

Gauri Viswanathan: Well, I have to say at the outset, religion is the blind spot of literary studies. It is the topic that people don't want to talk about, and I don't think it is just because of some kind of anti-religiosity—I think it is part of the very history of literary studies that the discipline suppresses. A major argument of *Masks of Conquest* is that literature emerged as a field of study in India before it was even formally institutionalized in England, mainly because, in India, there was more or less a prohibition against the teaching of religion in schools. The British were very fearful that Indian subjects would see any attempt at proselytization as an insult, or an offense, against their religious sensibilities. Even though missionaries were clamoring to work in India for a long time, they were banned, in fact, from entry into India until 1813, when some of those restrictions were relaxed. And one reason for that prohibition was that the East India Company, which was then the mercantile company that was trying to gain a monopoly over the British presence in India, felt that missionary proselytization would undercut their attempt to create

deals with merchants. This was a very overt policy of the East India Company: keep religion out of the schools, do not allow any kind of proselytization. But the conundrum was that if you empty education of any moral instruction—which reading of the Bible or scriptural teaching might provide—then where were students to get their moral instruction? This is part of the deliberations in educational commission reports (I mentioned Charles Trevelyan earlier), and in these deliberations, you can clearly see that administrators were looking at English literature as a surrogate for religious teaching. They felt that schools could communicate the principles of ethical thinking and morality through instruction in English literature. The very nature of literary studies is such that it functions as a placeholder for religious teaching. Matthew Arnold made that notion the centerpiece of his thinking about culture: at a time of the declining place of the churches in England, culture and literature were the means by which those values could not only be maintained but also disseminated. Literature's relation to religion has always been part of the history of literary studies. We cannot tell the story of literature without bringing that relationship into view. But to reiterate, for various reasons literature's relation to religion has been the blind spot of literary studies. I've been very interested in pursuing closer examination of that occluded relation from a historical point of view, in order to bring it back into focus.

That historical perspective is essential, I believe, in how we might also think about literature and its relationship to spirituality. I love Victoria Nelson's book, *The Secret Life of Puppets*, because it offers a profound argument about the diminishing place of religion in modern life.¹⁶ She argues that religion and spirituality found a home in, of all places, science fiction. Counter-intuitively, she reads science fiction as the newfound home of modern spirituality. She has a wonderful chapter on the film *The Matrix*, reading the film as a prime illustration of her argument about how science fiction is the vehicle for expressing a vision of spirituality that can no longer be articulated in the public spaces that we inhabit. I'm very drawn to that argument, not least because it has something very exilic about it. This idea of the exile induces melancholy, as if to suggest that religion has been exiled from modern life and is in search of new homes elsewhere.

Another work that I really love is Sumathi Ramaswamy's *The Lost Land of Lemuria*.¹⁷ She looks at a relatively neglected genre, the literature of lost lands. You can go back to Plato writing about Atlantis. The myth of Atlantis is so

16 Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Harvard University Press, 2001).

17 Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

ingrained in the popular consciousness that it overshadows other lost lands that have gripped the imagination, and Ramaswamy focuses on one such other place, Lemuria, to trace how this lost land came to represent an ancient language, religion, and civilization that had been suppressed in the history of conquest of south India. So again, we encounter the idea that religion has been exiled to different parts of one's psyche, different parts of literary and historical traditions. It is not that religion has been erased, but it continues, it flourishes, in these other forms. I'm interested in looking at these other forms to study religion's newfound expressions.

Michael Allan: In *Outside the Fold*, you explore the role of conversion.¹⁸ When it comes to discussions of race, gender, and sexuality, there is an incredible taboo around passing or not being true to oneself. Does conversion avail us different modalities for thinking about the classical conundrum of identity? Religion is not a race or an ethnicity, and it also doesn't quite fit the discourse on identity that seems to be the dominant idiom of our political moment.

Gauri Viswanathan: This is exactly what attracted me to conversion—the idea that conversion destabilizes the accepted barriers around one's identities, so much so that those barriers become what define you in terms of your race, your ethnicity, your gender. The idea that survives is that you are bound by these determinants so as not to be able to transgress them. The inhibiting effects of these barriers acquire the force of implacable nature. In this context I am reminded of the Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, on whom I had written a chapter in my book on conversion. I consider Ambedkar to be one of the greatest figures of the twentieth century. He was a Columbia PhD, and this is what relates him also to the place where I am located, where I reside, where I teach. Ambedkar was the leader of India's Dalits, or, to use the term by which they've been referred to in some of the literature, of the untouchable community. I'm reminded of what he said about Hinduism, which he fought against all his life as a source of the oppression of the untouchable community. He maintained that he had no choice in having been born a Hindu, but he did have a choice in not dying as one. And he decided to convert to Buddhism and led one of the biggest mass conversions in modern history.

Conversion has a mobility that allows for the movement out of the place that is assigned to you as your given identity. Conversion provides a release from some of those constraints. When Ambedkar said he had no choice in

18 Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

being born Hindu, but certainly had a choice in deciding not to die as one, he affirmed that his conversion to Buddhism was driven by aspirational motivations. He didn't just wake up one day and decide, "I'm going to convert to Buddhism." This was a twenty-year long serious and deliberate study that he undertook in world religions: Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Judaism, Jainism, Buddhism. He carefully studied all of these religions. And at the end of those twenty years, he decided he was going to convert to Buddhism because he found in Buddhism an ethics that transcended caste barriers. He found in Buddhism the ethical precepts that he believed would be most meaningful to oppressed communities that were seeking release from the most oppressive, unjust, and inhumane chains and barriers.

One of my arguments in *Outside the Fold* is that conversion can be read as an act of cultural criticism. In converting, one is also producing a body of work that looks back on the religion one is leaving and looks forward to the religion that one is not just accepting in a completely unshaped or unformed way but that one is also actively reshaping. Ambedkar's Buddhism was not necessarily the Buddhism of traditional Buddhism. He reshaped Buddhism according to his own needs. He discarded what he found irrelevant and meaningless to Dalits, and he kept what he thought was most meaningful and served the self-empowerment of Dalits. Conversion is not just an act of moving out of the old into something new, but it is also an act of creation, which is the reason why I see it as a form of cultural criticism. This is what I found so astounding, so remarkable, so inspiring about the life stories of the converts that I studied. Conversion was a very deliberate move for them. They were also infused by what Said would call critical thinking, which is a major component in conversion.

Michael Allan: Could I draw you one step further to ask about Helena Petrona Blavatsky? She is someone who figures in your work not necessarily under the rubric of conversion, but certainly in ways that were transformative to me as I listened to your Beckman lectures at UC Berkeley. I love how you reflected on Ambedkar's conversion just now, and could I invite you to talk a little bit about what you have learned from Blavatsky? How has she informed your thinking about literature, conversion, and religion?

Gauri Viswanathan: This is another one of those questions where you will have to cut me off! I've been living with Blavatsky for quite some time. And I have to say, there are times when I feel almost cursed because I can't leave her. She does have an enormous place in opening up ways of thought that I

hadn't really expected. And I know that it is counterintuitive for me to say that: Blavatsky, I think, is one of the most misunderstood figures in history. I came to Blavatsky actually through Annie Besant. I had a chapter on Annie Besant in my conversion book because I was struck by the many routes she had traversed in arriving at her final conversion to Theosophy. Besant went through so many different passages to arrive at Theosophy: she was a socialist, she was a secularist, she was an atheist, and she went through many different conversions, but her final and lasting conversion was to Theosophy.

I got very deeply interested in Theosophy as an alternative spiritual movement which had enormous influence in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. And it is an ongoing influence. People will be stunned to see how influential Theosophy was, especially in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century. I would highlight that recent interest in Theosophy has spiked because of several groundbreaking museum exhibitions featuring the work of prominent Theosophists. The Guggenheim had one of the best exhibitions in recent years on a Theosophical artist. Last year, just before the museum closed for the pandemic, it had an exhibition on Hilma af Klint, a Swedish painter who was deeply influenced by Theosophy and had read Blavatsky intensely. And now art historians are recognizing Hilma af Klint as one of the pioneers of abstraction and modernism long before Kandinsky, long before Mondrian. Another superb exhibition was on the American artist Agnes Pelton at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The Whitney had barely opened the exhibition on Pelton in early March before it had to close abruptly when New York shut down. The Whitney reopened in September 2020 and gave the people who flocked to the exhibition a chance to savor Pelton's translation of Theosophical principles into aesthetic forms. I should also say that I've been involved in a multi-year project "Enchanting Modernities: Theosophy and the Arts," which documented the very profound influence of Theosophy and Blavatsky on different art forms, including painting, music, and literature.¹⁹ The influence is widespread. Yeats's idea of automatic writing is a case in point: the spirits with whom he claimed to be in communication are also understood as interlocutors in the dialogue of self and anti-self, id and ego. A lot of these poetic conventions came out of the tropes of Theosophical writing.²⁰

19 See: <https://hoaportal.york.ac.uk/hoaportal/enchanted-modernities-index-project.jsp> The book that resulted from the project's art exhibition is *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*, edited by Christopher Scheer, Sarah Victoria Turner, and James Mansell (Somerset: Fulgur Press, 2019).

20 Gauri Viswanathan, "Theosophical Mediations in Yeats' Occult Encounters," in *Yeats and Asia*, ed. Seán Golden (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020).

To go back to who Blavatsky was. She was an occultist to be sure, but she was also a historian of religion. She basically re-examined the histories of religion to look at how the conventions of religious orthodoxy expunged what she then tried to resuscitate as the esoteric currents of mainstream history, which had been either completely expunged from the writing of history or survived as heterodox expressions of Christianity, deemed to be questionable at best or heretical at worst. The skepticism and questioning that have always been a part of the formation of religion is what Blavatsky tried to restore as a way of reading. I can't help noting the irony that her mode of reading reminds me of Edward Said. Of course, I would never put Said and Blavatsky in the same frame of reference, but what Blavatsky did bring to the table was a skepticism toward received dogmas that Said advocated for in his own critical practice, which emphasized critical distance and skepticism as the starting point for thinking about received histories and received traditions. Blavatsky did very much the same with respect to religions, especially Christianity.²¹

Michael Allan: As you were speaking about Blavatsky, I was thinking of a passage in *Orientalism* you highlight regarding Said's comments on Louis Massignon's relation to Islam.²² You suggest Said excavates a sort of heterodox aspect of Massignon's work, and I wonder if you see a similar echo here in this reading you are offering of Blavatsky and Said together.

Gauri Viswanathan: I am so glad you brought this up. This is something that I find quite striking in Said. Let us not forget that Said understood himself to be first and foremost a secular critic. *The World, the Text, the Critic* begins with secular criticism and concludes with a chapter on religious criticism.²³ In that last chapter, Said tears apart Harold Bloom for the kind of misguided religious thinking that doesn't allow for skepticism. But I think, in the Massignon passage, it is really significant that Said understands that Massignon is describing a particular sensibility produced by his reading of mystical Islam. And it is a sensibility of which Said was very intuitively aware, but in a kind of self-conscious way, he doesn't really talk about it so much. The mysticism that he noted in Massignon was one that produced an instantaneous moment of individual transfiguration. Said is drawn to that affect, but once that mystical affect becomes part of a doctrinaire statement, he had to break away from it and

21 See Gauri Viswanathan, "In Search of Madame Blavatsky: Reading the Exoteric, Retrieving the Esoteric," *Representations* 141 (Winter 2018): 67–94.

22 Viswanathan, "Legacies," 7.

23 Edward Said, *The World, The Text, The Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

maintain his critical distance and questioning. But it was that moment, that experience in its instantaneous aspect, that never failed to impress Said. And I think there are several moments in his works where it is possible to see this impact, the Massignon passage certainly being among the most striking.

Michael Allan: To echo what you were saying earlier in our conversation, I love how you connect Said's fascination with those sorts of moments to surprise, to change, to historical transformation. Could I ask you to elaborate a bit more on the relationship between language and religion? Do you see language as a more intuitive identity category than a religious tradition? Is there a connection that you see between learning a language and converting to a religious tradition? Do they relate at all?

Gauri Viswanathan: I thought that is such a wonderful question that, in a sense, goes back to Massignon and the aesthetics of religion: of sound, of sight, of smell. It is a very tactile sensibility. Despite the fact that he was a self-professed secular critic, Said was acutely aware of the legacy of religion in his own life; for starters, his maternal grandfather was a Baptist minister (as he mentions in his memoir). When we would have conversations, I recall the times when he was very attentive to the imagery of the Bible, sometimes citing passages at length. It was the language that moved him, heightened his sensibilities. Language carries a particular religious aspect that we can't really ignore.

In my Indian Writing in English class, I teach a memoir, "The Story of My Sanskrit," written by Kumud Pawde, a Dalit woman.²⁴ In this memoir, the author describes her situation as an untouchable woman who is not supposed to be learning Sanskrit, let alone teaching Sanskrit. And she does eventually learn Sanskrit and she does become a teacher of Sanskrit. But she also talks about the reason why she wanted to learn Sanskrit, a language identified with upper-caste Brahmins and associated with the Hindu texts, all of which are supposed to be far from the purview of the untouchable community. But Pawde captures the moment when she was instantly seized by a desire to learn (and master) Sanskrit as an essentially aesthetic experience. This moment found her standing outside a tent, barred from entering a ritual ceremony then in progress. Though she was not allowed inside, she heard the sounds of the Sanskrit chants coming from the religious ceremony. And she was infused by the very powerful feeling that had its roots in language, not religion. It was the

24 Kumud Pawde, "The Story of My Sanskrit," in Arjun Dangle, *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Limited, 1992).

sound that she was hearing and the sound that created this transformation of her sensibilities. And at that moment she wanted to learn Sanskrit. It was the sound of Sanskrit that infused her desire for learning Sanskrit.

This takes me back to Massignon. There is a connection between Massignon being rendered captive by the sounds of Arabic and Kumud Pawde being transformed by the sounds of Sanskrit. Importantly, the content of religious texts written in these languages is not the immediate cause of these individuals' transformative experiences. What is most interesting in Pawde's memoir is that by learning Sanskrit—by mastering the language and then teaching it—she also then achieves something remarkable: she delinks Sanskrit from the upper caste. Her mastery of Sanskrit affirms that the language is no longer associated exclusively with the upper caste. By mastering Sanskrit, she shows that she—as an untouchable Dalit woman—can become as much an equal partner in speaking Sanskrit, in writing the language, and in teaching it.

It is very remarkable to consider that the association between language and religion is a purely constructed one. There is nothing about religion that requires a particular language to be associated with it. But if you are a member of a forbidden community, by learning that language you also illuminate the constructedness of religious texts. I think this is what is so remarkable about “The Story of My Sanskrit,” as it opens the door for the democratization of religious texts by making these texts accessible. The history of Protestantism bears comparison in the ways that the Bible, once it is detached from Latin, becomes available in the vernacular languages to a broader religious public. Your question is important because it not only draws attention to the links between linguistic and religious sensibilities but also suggests how constructed they are.

Michael Allan: What you are saying calls to mind a passage in Friedrich Kittler's *Optical Media*.²⁵ He has a speculative moment in which he draws attention to the history of religion. As the Catholic church invested in a multi-sensory relationship to religious ritual (which is to say, music, incense, wafers, and architecture), the Protestant traditions were more concerned with practices of printing, translating, and disseminating scripture. He wonders what print history would look like had it taken the multimedia approach of the Catholic church rather than the textualist approach of the Protestants. It is perhaps an exaggerated claim on either side of the story he tells, but it does seem to relate to the passage from “The Story of My Sanskrit” that essentially connects language, sound, and embodiment. And yet, in the same sort of reshaping of

25 Friedrich Kittler, *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

Buddhism that you alluded to with Ambedkar, here in the passage you share, we have a similar sort of twist on belonging and participation.

Gauri Viswanathan: This is such a wonderful thought about how the multi-sensory aspect of religion is what is often written out, or at least controlled, by textual criticism. This might have some analogies with philological inquiry as well. Textual criticism is the endangered animal, as it were, as you try to maintain the textuality of textual criticism as a stable feature—so that it is not too capacious, so that it can be captured by something that isn't too fluid.

I began my conversion book studying Cardinal John Henry Newman, and he is so fascinating because his entrée to Catholicism was through the aesthetics of Catholicism. In a transformative scene in his 1848 novel *Loss and Gain*, the protagonist, who is a thinly veiled autobiographical surrogate, enters a Catholic church and is immediately enveloped by numerous sensory affects: the incense, the music, the chants.²⁶ Catholicism is coming to him not as an idea but as a multi-sensory entity. And textuality has a way of always competing with this multi-sensory mode, which goes back to what we were saying earlier about Zora Neale Hurston. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is, in many ways, a kind of multi-sensory enterprise. Her language is rich with the sounds coming not out of familiar (i.e, standardized) language patterns, but vernacular and regional forms. This is an important point, and it goes back to what we began discussing, which is the role of philological inquiry today and whether in literary studies today, we might be thinking much more about the role of the multi-sensorium as perhaps more democratic in its impact than what textual criticism can do.

Michael Allan: And when you say more democratic, can I ask you to elaborate on what you mean by this term in this instance?

Gauri Viswanathan: What I mean by democratic is that the multi-sensorium recognizes broader spectrums of communities, language communities, ethnic communities, religious communities, whose ways of speaking and writing are not regulated so much as *affirmed* to have equal legitimacy.

Michael Allan: I really appreciate that you're able to come full circle here. And I thank you for sharing with us today.

26 John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain* (London: Burns & Oates, 1848).

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