Alf Hiltebeitel’s writings are luminous and voluminous, and indispensable to anyone interested in the Mahābhārata. I was delighted to make Alf’s acquaintance on my first visit to the USA, at the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in Nashville in 2003, when Jim Fitzgerald organized a panel on the Mahābhārata and was kind enough to invite me to speak on it. Since then I have spent time in Alf’s company at several conferences in several countries. He is a charming fellow, and I feel very lucky to be able to contribute to this volume in his honour.¹

There has been a literary turn in Mahābhārata studies with Alf Hiltebeitel. In terms of the analytic and synthetic divide, Hiltebeitel is a synthetist; he views the text as a whole. He has championed the Poona reconstituted Mahābhārata² as a text worth taking on its own terms; and he has argued against attempting to make chronological stratifications within it.

There are several old assumptions about the Mahābhārata’s diachronic development that the critical edition provides no evidence for. Hiltebeitel encourages us to do without those assumptions. There are then many aspects of the text better to appreciate and newly to understand and integrate, aspects which previously had been sidelined as supposedly late. For example:

• Kṛṣṇa’s divinity and the divine plan to rescue the earth;³
• the many substories with which the Mahābhārata is peppered;⁴

¹ I am grateful to John Brockington and Carole Satyamurti for comments on a draft of this paper, to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding the research, and to Vishwa Adluri for his organizational efforts.
Upākhyānas, Substories, and the Harivaṃśa

The immediate implication of the label upākhyāna—the *upa*-stories—is that these are the lesser stories. But it is all relative. The Mahābhārata text...