

ECSTATIC PHILOLOGY NARRATIVE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA AND THE BHĀGAVATAPURĀṆA

Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee

tasmād vijñānamānandamiti svarūpānvākhyānaparaiva śrutiḥ,
nātmānandasamvedyatvārtha |
— Śāṅkarabhāṣya Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad 3.9.28

INTRODUCTION

This article is concerned with identifying an appropriate method for studying the *itihāsapurāṇa* textual tradition. Whereas the text-historical approach emphasizes chronologies (though these are often speculative, relative, and lacking in manuscript evidence), philosophical approaches provide an interpretation in the form of an argument.¹ What are the systematic principles that guide the *itihāsapurāṇa* tradition? One, the *itihāsapurāṇa* tradition is an interpretive tradition.² What does it interpret? The Veda.³ Two, what is the guiding principle of this interpretation? It is *brahmavāda* or ontology.⁴ Three, the Vedic revelation unambiguously declares *ānanda* to be *Brahman*'s *svarūpa lakṣaṇa* (*vijñānamānandaṃ brahma*; Br.Up. 3.9.28).⁵ Inasmuch as philology or the study of texts ought to pursue understanding texts rather than speculate from a pseudo-scientific perspective, ecstatic philology,⁶ rather than text-historicism,⁷ arguably

¹ For the problems with text-historicism as an approach and as a field, see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *The Nay Science: A History of German Indology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also id., “Paradigm Lost: The Application of the Historical-Critical Method to the Bhagavadgītā,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 20, no. 2 (2016): 199–302 and *Philology and Criticism: A Guide to Mahābhārata Textual Criticism* (London: Anthem, 2018). This article is concerned with offering a fresh approach to the *itihāsapurāṇa* tradition as a corrective to the excesses of historicism, rather than rehearse these criticisms again. As these works demonstrated in painstaking detail, speculations drawn from higher criticism did not stand up to manuscript evidence in the case of even a *single* Indologist. The present article takes the critique of German text-historicism as an accomplished fact, and hence turns to the question of how we should read ancient texts following the diremption of this method.

² *itihāsapurāṇābhyāṃ vedaṃ samupabṛṃhayet |*
bibhety alpaśrutād vedo mām ayaṃ pratariṣyati || (Mbh. 1.1.204)

All references to the Mahābhārata are to its critical edition: V. S. Sukthankar, et al., eds., *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933–1966).

³ The Mahābhārata is conceived of as the Fifth Veda. Vyāsa composes it after dividing the Veda (Mbh. 1.1.52a); it is the support of the Veda (1.1.204); the Mahābhārata is *kārṣṇaveda* (1.1.205). The sages weigh the Mahābhārata against the four Vedas and in every way the epic outweighs them (1.1.209).

⁴ The Mahābhārata is an Upaniṣad (Mbh. 1.1.191), which glorifies Lord Vāsudeva (1.1.193), whom it equates with *Brahman*, as the *śāsvataṃ brahma paramaṃ dhruvaṃ* (1.1.194). Further, *adhyaṭma* is taught here, and the text reflects that highest Self (1.1.196–97).

⁵ Tai.Up. 2.1 identifies *Brahman* with *satyam*, *jñānam*, and *anantam*. Tai.Up. 3.6.1 identifies *Brahman* with *ānanda*. The identification of infinity with bliss is also supported by Chāndogya Upaniṣad 7.23.1 (*bhūmaiva sukhaṃ*).

⁶ Our concept of ecstatic philology has several forerunners, including Plato, Nietzsche, Bataille, and Deleuze. Its critical spirit draws primarily from Nietzsche, particularly the unfinished collection of notes he composed under the title “Wir Philologen.” In these fragments, Nietzsche provides a stunning diagnosis of

provides a better method for reading the *itihāsapurāṇa* and, by extension, also for the humanities. In the remainder of this article, we shall investigate the intersection of the Mahābhārata and the Bhāgavatapurāṇa as interpretations of the Veda.⁸ In order not to lose sight of the aesthetic dimension of these texts, we have chosen to pay close attention to *ānanda* or ecstatic bliss.⁹ Because *ānanda* is *Brahman*'s true nature,¹⁰ we see how

everything he found wrong with his profession up to his time. Most relevant for this inquiry are observations 3.20–22, 27, 28, 37, 38–44, and particularly 61, which follows: “But in general: only through knowledge of the present can one acquire *the inclination for classical antiquity*. Without this knowledge, where could the inclination come from? If we observe how few philologists there are—apart from those who earn a living at it—we can judge how matters really stand with this inclination toward antiquity. It *barely* exists, since there are no disinterested philologists. This, then, is the task set us: to overcome the general educational influence of philology! *Means*: reduction of the philological profession; doubtful whether the young should be acquainted with it. Criticism of the philologist. The value of the ancient world: it sinks with you. How terribly you must have fallen, since it has such small value now!” Friedrich Nietzsche, “Notes for ‘We Philologists’,” trans. William Arrowsmith, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, n.s., 1, no. 2 (1973/1974): 297. Stated simply, ecstatic philology is an attempt to raise anew the question of the value of ancient texts, beyond the material they provide for the professional philologist and the industrious text-historian.

⁷ For the source of the expression see Paul Hacker, “Zur Methode der geschichtlichen Erforschung der anonymen Sanskritliteratur des Hinduismus. Vortrag gehalten auf dem XV. Deutschen Orientalistentag Göttingen 1961,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 111, no. 2 (1961): 483–92. Hacker defines *Textgeschichte* as “the method of comparing multiple transmissions” (*die Methode des Vergleichs der Mehrfachüberlieferungen*; *ibid.*, 489). He develops the method explicitly via a reference to Willibald Kirfel’s *Purāna Pañcalakṣaṇa: Versuch einer Textgeschichte* (Bonn: Kurt Schroeder, 1927), Rüping thereafter acknowledges his debt to the “text-historical method [*textgeschichtliche Methode*]” of Willibald Kirfel and Paul Hacker, noting in particular that “Hacker expanded the text-historical [*textgeschichtliche*] method in principle to the anonymous literature as a whole. What was to be sought out was not merely the origin of a text or material, but rather, its development within anonymous literature must also be traced and evaluated in an intellectual-historical and literature-historical perspective.” Klaus Rüping, *Amṛtamanthana und Kūrma-Avatāra: ein Beitrag zur puranischen Mythen- und Religionsgeschichte* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1970), 1–2. For further sources see Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, “Methods and Contexts: Rethinking Religion in South Asia,” paper published on Academia.edu, <https://www.academia.edu/43307584>, particularly nn. 9, 19, and 21.

⁸ The theme of this article is thus, properly speaking, not *aesthetic*—an explanation of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa based on *rasa* theory. Rather, it explores the literary-philosophical dimension of philology, undertaken as an alternative to the text-historical approach.

⁹ For an introduction, translation, contexts, and interpretation of the *rāsālīlā*, see Graham Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love: India’s Classic Sacred Love Story: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). For an introduction to the *bhakti* philosophy of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, see Edwin F. Bryant, *Bhakti Yoga: Tales and Teachings from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (New York: North Point Press, 2017), which contains translations of key sections of the Purāṇa and related texts such as Nārada Bhakti Sūtras. See also the translation of sections of the tenth book of the Purāṇa in Edwin F. Bryant, *Krishna: Beautiful Legend of God (Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa Book X)* (London: Penguin, 2003). We cite Bryant’s translation wherever available. For the remaining portions, this article uses the Tapasyananda edition—Swami Tapasyananda, trans., *Srimad Bhagavata: The Holy Book of God*, vols. 1–4 (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math). All translations of the Mahābhārata, unless otherwise noted, are from J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Mahābhārata*, vols. 1–3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973–78). Translations of the Bhagavadgītā are from J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata: A Bilingual Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁰ By “true nature,” we mean the invariable and inseparable nature of *Brahman*, its *svarūpa lakṣaṇa* in contrast to *svabhāva* which signifies the separable nature of a thing, which nonetheless inheres as a basic quality in it.

these texts connect literary ecstasy with its very source, *Brahman*. With these comments on method and the history of the field,¹¹ we turn to an analysis of the ontology of bliss. We shall then turn to the texts themselves to understand how the narrative program of the *itihāsapurāṇa* grounds aesthetic delight in the ontology of *Brahman*.

THE ONTOLOGY OF BLISS

Both the Brahmasūtras and the Bhāgavatapurāṇa begin with a statement of the central theme of the text: *Brahman*. The Brahmasūtras begin with: *athāto brahmajijñāsā || janmādyasya yataḥ ||*, that is, “Hence, thereafter, a deliberation on *Brahman* (is to be undertaken). That (*Brahman*) from which (are derived) the birth etc. of this (universe)” (Br.Sū. 1.1.1–2). The Bhāgavatapurāṇa also begins with *janmādyasya yataḥ*. While the former text is a logical one (*yukti*), the latter is an aesthetic, ecstatic text describing itself thus: “The Bhāgavata is the fruit of the wish fulfilling tree of Vedic literature (*nigama kalpataroḥ*), it is like the nectar (*amṛta*) flowing from the mouth of Śuka.” Addressing its readers, the text says: “Aho! O connoisseurs of aesthetic experience (*rasa*)! O experts in poetic moods (*bhāva*) [the first step of *bhakti*], while in this world, drink continuously the spiritual flavors (*rasa*) of the Bhāgavata to your full satisfaction” (Bhp. 1.1.3; Bryant trans.). The Bhāgavatapurāṇa is thus an ecstatic text.

Despite the declaration that both texts are about *Brahman*, the source of creation, et cetera of the universe, the texts appear to have little in common. Is not the meticulous, inexorable logic of the Brahmasūtras opposed to the passionate poetry of the Purāṇa? What does sobriety have to do with ecstasy? To understand this, we must follow the cue of the “author” of these texts.¹² Tradition attributes the Brahmasūtras and the

¹¹ This article is not concerned with the history of Purāṇa studies. For a useful summary of how scholars have attempted to conceptualize the genre, see Travis L. Smith, “Textuality on the Brahmanical ‘Frontier’: The Genre of the Sanskrit Purāṇas,” *Philological Encounters* 1, nos. 1–4 (2016): 347–69.

¹² The question of the authorship of the Mahābhārata can be raised historically—and unintelligently—as the question “could one person really have written all of it?” German Indologists such as Georg von Simson had many choice things to say about the naïveté of Indians without realizing that the mistake they attributed to them—thinking that one *historical* figure could have written the epic and the eighteen Mahāpurāṇas—was truly only their own (for the full citation see the reference list at the end). The concept of subjectivity that appeared self-evident to the Indologists would simply not have been available to Indians much before the nineteenth century. Alternatively, we can raise this question intellectually as the question of what “Vyāsa” signifies for the tradition. Although the former approach may seem self-evident to us, who live under the shadow of nineteenth-century historicism, it is by no means clear that this is the only—or even a useful—approach to literature. As M. H. Abrams notes, “to pose and answer aesthetic questions in terms of the relation of art to the artist, rather than to external nature, or to the audience, or to the internal requirements of the work itself, was the characteristic tendency of modern criticism up to a few decades ago, and it continues to be the propensity of a great many—perhaps the majority of critics today. [But] this point of view is very young measured against the twenty-five-hundred-year history of the Western theory of art, for its emergence as a comprehensive approach to art, shared by a large number of critics, dates back not much more than century and a half.” M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 3. Particularly in the case of the epic, raising a “Vyāsa question” on analogy with the Homeric question in classical studies is fraught with difficulties, because unlike Homer, Vyāsa cannot be bracketed out as a mere authorial cipher; he appears as a character throughout the epic. Whereas in the case of Homer, we can substitute the phrase “historical redactional agency” for the “author’s name, Homer,” such a substitution is not possible in the case of the Mahābhārata. German Indologists bravely if naively ventured to do the impossible, and the results were unsound. Beginning with the presumption that they knew what literature is and what an author is, and just

Bhāgavatapurāṇa to Rṣi Vyāsa, who appears in the Mahābhārata as its author. We can be naïve historical realists and raise the commonsense question about a historical figure capable of authoring such a text. The solutions to the “Vyāsa question” produced demonstrably false results.¹³ What is history if not dead facts embedded in narratives which are not self-conscious of their own constructed character? Fortunately, we can also approach textual traditions thoughtfully, and try to see what this eponymous tradition of Vyāsa is indicating. Let us trace this tradition to its inception in the Mahābhārata.

In the outermost frame of the text, before commencing the recitation of the epic, the narrator tells his audience: *itihāsapurāṇābhyāṃ vedam samupabṛṃhayet | bibhety alpaśrutād vedo mām ayaṃ pratarīṣyati ||* (Mbh. 1.1.204). The textual tradition, whether logical or ecstatic, is primarily *interpretive*. Thus, the Mahābhārata presents itself as the fifth Veda and attributes its composition to Vyāsa who is also the editor of the Veda, the primary revelation.¹⁴ The Brahmasūtras are also attributed to Bādārāyaṇa, an epithet of Vyāsa’s. Again, once we set aside text-historicism, we see that the Brahmasūtras are a carefully ordered system of aphorisms constructed and grouped as a logical-interpretive matrix of the Veda. And the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, as we saw, is the nectar of the fruit of the tree of Vedic literature, self-consciously fashioned as an ecstatic interpretation of Upaniṣadic *Brahman*. Not only is the Bhāgavatapurāṇa explicit that Kṛṣṇa is the supreme *Brahman* revealed in the Veda; it is also quite aware of the various systems of philosophy, harmonizing them with Upaniṣadic *Brahman*. The ecstatic text is not unphilosophical, propounding blind sectarian faith. Nor is the sobriety of the Brahmasūtras unaware of ecstasy. In fact, following its initial five topics establishing the ontology and textual grounds for inquiry into *Brahman*, the philosophical text begins again with an inquiry into bliss: *ānandamayādihikaraṇam*.

THE MISERY OF TEXT-HISTORICISM

As a prelude to ecstatic philology, let us consider a “text-historical” objection to the identification of *Brahman* with *ānanda*. Here is how Paul Hacker formulates this

how problematic these characterizations can be, they ventured out to find the various agencies (necessarily in the plural) that could “explain” the work. This is why we need to take up the question of the author and the work again. Ugraśravas and Vaiśampāyana refer to their narrations as Vyāsa’s “entire thought” (*matam kṛtsnam*; Mbh. 1.1.23c, 1.55.2c, and 1.56.12c). The bard tells us that Vyāsa produced a brief summary after its great elaboration (1.1.49a), that it is available in parts, and different scholars learn it from different sections, and that some are specialized in preserving the text and others in explaining it (59–51). These comments all appear straightforward, but upon closer examination, they reveal a hesitancy to draw firm boundaries between the author, the work, and the reader. However, this does not mean that there is no creative genius, or that composition is a literary absurdity (*Unding*), or that the reader can approach it in any random way. There is a thought guiding this literature, a thought that is simultaneously receptive (to the Vedic revelation) and inceptive, or better, *emergent*.

¹³ Even compared with the Homeric question concerning the authorship of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which German scholars took as their model, Indologists significantly lag their peers in Classical Studies. For a review of the state of the field, see Martin West, “The Homeric Question Today,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 155, no. 4 (2011): 383–93. See also Frank M. Turner, “The Homeric Question,” in *A New Companion to Homer*, ed. Ian Morris and Barry Powell (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 123–45.

¹⁴ For a good summary of Vyāsa’s interactions with the Vedic revelation see Bruce M. Sullivan, *Seer of the Fifth Veda: Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa in the Mahābhārata* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999).

objection, making Śaṅkara the spokesperson for his “individualistic” conception of “person”:

Vedānta schools generally described the nature of the self by the triad *sat, cit, ānanda*. These words signify Being, Spirit, and Bliss. The self is not characterized or qualified by being, spirit, and bliss; rather, each of these terms stands for the whole of the self’s essence or substance or nature. Śaṅkara, however, hesitated to describe the self as being and bliss without restriction. This is one of the peculiarities that distinguish him from other teachers of his school. According to Śaṅkara, the self is essentially Spirit. His conception of spiritual self comes very close to the notion of person as evolved by some modern Western philosophers, especially Max Scheler. There are also some striking resemblances to St. Thomas’ idea of *lumen naturale*.¹⁵

There may be good reasons to deny the blissful nature of the Self (though none occur to us), arising from Hacker’s Christianity.¹⁶ However, when he attempts to import an understanding of “person” borrowed significantly from Max Scheler’s ethical personalism into Advaita using specious “text-historical” arguments to divide Śaṅkara from his followers he goes astray. The arguments Hacker raises against Śaṅkara are many, covering practically every aspect of this school, but in keeping with our theme we shall focus on only one: his position on *ānanda*. Hacker claims in several texts that, as compared with the subsequent tradition, Śaṅkara is reluctant to identify *Brahman* with

¹⁵ Paul Hacker, “Śaṅkara’s Conception of Man,” in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 179.

¹⁶ That this is the real crux of Hacker’s opposition to “later” Advaita can be seen from the following statement: “As a result, personal relationships, wherever they impose themselves on the investigation, are eliminated. To make the relationship of self to Supreme Self collapse into an absolute identity is the first and last goal of all cognitive efforts of this system. Thus, the awakening call had to be relegated to an impersonal and illusory realm. The question of ‘being with one another’ of persons imposed itself where the act of love was examined in connection with bliss, but love was reduced to self-love and the relation collapsed. Personal relationships are described expressly in Vedānta texts as not being truly real. The ‘you’ as a philosophical expression of the person opposite to the ‘I’ is identified expressly with ‘it.’” Paul Hacker, “The Idea of the Person in the Thinking of Vedānta Philosophers,” in *Philology and Confrontation*, 168. Malkovsky too in his reconstruction of Richard De Smet’s views appreciates this as the real stumbling block for the Advaita-Christian encounter: “Given this new limited application, it was clear that attributing personhood to the divine was tantamount to making God anthropomorphic. The result has been inhibiting for the Advaita-Christian encounter. ‘Today it is practically impossible to convince the Hindus that the personal God of Christianity is really the Absolute and as a rule the non-dualists among them consider that the Christians have inherited only an anthropomorphic conception of the Deity.’ This tendency has been helped along, as we have seen, by the Advaitic tradition’s identification of *īśvara*, the personal Lord, with the lower *saguṇa brahman*, who is frequently an anthropomorphized version of deity. De Smet, then, sees the necessity of expounding a more traditional Western conception of personhood, showing its suitability to both the human and the divine, not so as to establish a greater ontological status for *īśvara*, as Hacker had done on exegetical grounds, but rather to show how the Advaitic *nirguṇa brahman* and the *deus simplex* of Christian scholastic thought can both be regarded as eminently personal.” Bradley Malkovsky, “The Personhood of Śaṅkara’s *Para Brahman*,” *The Journal of Religion* 77, no. 4 (1997): 560. But while we can appreciate his commitment to the “interreligious encounter,” importing Christian concepts into Vedānta under the cover of “*Wissenschaft*” hardly makes sense.

ānanda.¹⁷ As this claim goes to the core of Advaitic soteriology,¹⁸ it is not a trivial point. Let us look at Hacker’s principal argument first. In “Distinctive Features of the Doctrine and Terminology of Śaṅkara,” he writes:

The only positive characteristic that Ś. assigns to Brahman is its being spirit or consciousness The *ānanda*-nature of Brahman traditionally taught in Vedānta is not challenged by Ś., but it is, remarkably, discussed only in places where a text Ś. is interpreting mentions it. Ś. describes Īśvara in precisely the same way.... But nowhere does Ś. say that Īśvara is *ānanda*.¹⁹

Mayeda borrows these criteria uncritically from Hacker, and Karl Potter enters them dutifully in his encyclopedia.²⁰ Andrijačić accepts them as canonical in a rearguard action to save text-historical philology without engaging with a single criticism of the method, the school, or of Hacker.²¹ But no aspect of Hacker’s argument holds up to a critical

¹⁷ Thus, in “Śaṅkara the Yogin and Śaṅkara the Advaitin: Some Observations,” Hacker claims: “Śaṅkara’s reservations with regard to the traditional characterization of the self (or Brahman) as primordial being have been sketched here in passing, because only with that in view can we fully comprehend his even more reserved attitude toward the equally traditional characterization of the self (and of Brahman) as *ānanda*” (ibid., 112), whereas in “The Idea of the Person in the Thinking of Vedānta Philosophers,” he states: “I would like to refer to the doctrine of the Self as beatitude, bliss, or happiness (*ānanda*). The very sober Śaṅkara did not appreciate this doctrine; he avoided it wherever he could. But, nevertheless, the tradition insisted that the Self was not only being (*sat*) and spirit (*cit*), but also bliss: *sac-cid-ānanda*. The doctrine of *ānanda* is, in turn, evidently an ontologization of a mystical experience detached from its frame of reference; it includes an insight into the nature of the person” (ibid., 165).

¹⁸ A point Hacker is well aware of. See Paul Hacker, “Śaṅkara the Yogin and Śaṅkara the Advaitin,” in *Philology and Confrontation*, 112–13: “At BBh 4,4,6, in a discussion of the nature of liberation, Śaṅkara touched on the subject of *ānanda* again, independently of the Upaniṣad text interpreted here. He is critical of the view that liberation is the manifestation of a distinct new consciousness (*vijñāna*) and of a distinct new *ānanda*. He argues thus: *vijñāna* and *ānanda* are essential properties (*dharma*) of the same substrate (*āśraya*); they can never, therefore, stand to each other in the relation of subject and object. In view of the TBh we can add that it would be senseless and misleading to speak here of a cessation, a coincidence, or a nondistinction of subject and object of bliss.”

¹⁹ Paul Hacker, “Distinctive Features of the Doctrine and Terminology of Śaṅkara: Avidyā, Nāmarūpa, Māyā, Īśvara,” trans. John Taber, in *Philology and Confrontation*, 86.

²⁰ See Karl Potter, ed., *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies: Advaita Vedānta up to Śaṅkara and his Pupils* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 115.

²¹ Ivan Andrijačić, “The Reliability of Hacker’s Criteria for Determining Śaṅkara’s Authorship,” *Journal of Dharma Studies* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42240-022-00123-8>. Andrijačić notes the weakness of Hacker’s method: “Hacker distinguished Śaṅkara’s terminological peculiarities using only the Brahmasūtra-Bhāṣya (= BSBh), not taking into consideration other works that might be considered genuine.” But his proposed solution, to consider “as a working hypothesis, BĀUBh and TaittUBh ... the work of Śaṅkara, the author of BSBh,” hardly addresses its underlying circularity. Uncritical application of an unsound argument does not make it more plausible; the entire argument here, if there is any, blindly accepts Hacker’s criteria—not one source critical of the text-historical method is cited—and applies them to affirm their validity, according to Andrijačić, “a powerful tool by which to distinguish Śaṅkara from later authors.” Indeed, the Brahmasūtrabhāṣya once again serves as the paradigmatic text, against which even this expanded canon of “genuine” works of Śaṅkara is measured. The “conclusions” Andrijačić arrives at are trivial: “Here, Śaṅkara interprets *ānanda* as a statement of *brahman*’s own form (*svarūpānvākhyāna*) and not the bliss of the Self that can be cognised. This is one of the rare occasions in which Śaṅkara defines *brahman* as *ānanda*, but this is in accordance with Hacker’s notion (1950, p. 277) that Śaṅkara might designate *brahman* as *ānanda* when such a characterization appears in commented

examination. Śāṅkara is a careful exegete (*mīmāṃsaka*) of the Vedic revelation. He does not need to independently affirm *Brahman*'s nature as *ānanda*; indeed, this fact can only be known from the revelation itself. Moreover, as *śruti* is the ultimate *pramāṇa* for him, his focus is mainly on distinguishing *laukikānanda*, mundane happiness, from *brahmānanda*, the bliss the knower of *Brahman* experiences, and both in turn from *ānanda* as a characteristic of *Brahman* (see, for instance, Tai.Up. 2.5.1–4 2, and Bṛ.Up. 3.9.26). Hacker's argument is like faulting an author for not noting that the sun rises in the east.²²

The further argument, "Ś.'s reticence about the identification of Brahman or Īśvara with *ānanda*, held by all other Advaitins, is thus quite similar to his rejection of the materialization of *avidyā*,"²³ is a *non sequitur*. Śāṅkara is not reticent about *ānanda* as *Brahman*'s *svarūpalakṣaṇa*: he affirms it every time the primary text mentions it (for example, at Bṛ.Up. 4.3.32 or the entire section on bliss in Tai.Up.). Hacker only succeeds in generating this impression because he circularly excludes these passages, the very instances relevant for discussion, from consideration. The circumstance that other commentators elaborate a concept more than Śāṅkara does is likewise not evidence of his "reluctance or refusal to accept *ānanda* as a positive property of Brahman."²⁴ Hacker overlooks the complexities of the dialogical and hermeneutical situation and the difference in aim between them.²⁵ A text-commentarial tradition such as Vedānta aims to explicate the underlying text(s) through a series of commentaries and super-commentaries. The latter stand in a different relation to the Vedic revelation than does Śāṅkara. They must simultaneously take his views into consideration and explicate them,

text." The problem of circularity is not obviated. The sentence "in the sentence in the commentary on TaittU 3.6.1, where *ānanda* is explicitly equated with *brahman* (*ānando brahmeti vyajānāt*), Śāṅkara follows the idea of highest *ānanda*, albeit rather mechanically and without detailed reflection" leaves us wondering: what exactly constitutes a non-mechanical and detailed reflection? The kind found in Jezic's work? Andrijačić does not cite Myers's definitive article: Michael W. Myers, "Śāṅkarācārya and Ānanda," *Philosophy East and West* 48, no. 4 (1998): 553–67. He cites, but misrepresents Pande; the latter's view is not that "devotional hymns and other smaller works cannot be judged by the criteria proposed by Hacker, mostly because of the difference in genre," but that Hacker's method is circular. On method, the only scholar cited is Hacker himself. Criticism of the text-historical method, above all the illustration that this method did not work in a single instance in the case of the Bhagavadgītā (see Adluri and Bagchee, "Paradigm Lost"), is not cited. No mention is made of Hacker's apologetic interest (see Adluri and Bagchee, "Methods and Contexts," cited earlier); the fact that Andrijačić's article appeared after the revelation of Hacker's Nazism, but does not cite the historical context of his work shows just how little concerned text-historians are with scholarly objectivity.

²² As Pande notes, against Hacker's and Mayeda's view that "*Brahman* is not be understood in terms of *Ānanda* at all," "must be placed the fact that the Vedāntic tradition before Śāṅkara as also after him including his followers clearly regards *Brahman* as *ānanda* and also regards *mukṭi* as positive fulfillment and bliss. His commentary on the *Tai* clearly shows that for him *ānanda* indicates the nature of *Brahman* as much as *satya* and *jñāna*." G. C. Pande, *Life and Thought of Śāṅkarācārya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 201.

²³ Hacker, "Distinctive Features of the Doctrine and Terminology of Śāṅkara," 86.

²⁴ Potter summarizing Hacker's criterion in Potter, ed., *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*, 115.

²⁵ Thus, Hacker's criterion that Śāṅkara speaks of Īśvara more frequently than his successors ignores the fact that Śāṅkara is engaged in debates with other schools such as Sāṃkhya and the Buddhist ontologists, who do not accept Īśvara. Once he finishes the Brahmasūtra commentary, it would be redundant even for this philosopher to rehash the Īśvara issue.

while commenting on the Upaniṣads. It would be absurd to expect them to have an equal number of references.

The claim that “he [Śaṅkara] does not attack the teaching of his fellow Advaitins if it happens not to correspond to his own, but he replaces it with other ideas and ignores it until exegetic considerations force him temporarily to confirm the prevalent view,”²⁶ rests on an equivocation between two senses of the verb “to ignore,” that is, either “to refuse to acknowledge (a person or thing); to disregard intentionally” or “(without implication of deliberate or conscious action:) to fail to acknowledge or consider (something); to overlook.”²⁷ The circumstance that Śaṅkara does not discuss *Brahman*’s nature as *ānanda* as extensively as his successors can at best justify the inference that he ignores it in the latter sense (though, textually speaking, this too is false). But when Hacker claims that he “ignores it until exegetic considerations force him temporarily to confirm the prevalent view,” he illicitly moves from the latter to the former sense. He thereby not only attributes a motivation to Śaṅkara that he *cannot* know (unless we enter the realm of psychologism); he also commits a *petitio principii*. The entire argument is *ex silentio* and relies on negative evidence: “Śaṅkara does not comment on *Brahman* as *ānanda* where there is no reason to do so; hence, his view of *Brahman* as *ānanda* is less positive than his successors.” This is like claiming that because Christ has less to say about his divine sonship than his disciples (Christ nowhere calls himself the “Son of God” in the entirety of the New Testament, always referring to himself as “son of man”), he rejected the attribution.

The issue here is thus not whether Śaṅkara adequately acknowledges *Brahman*’s nature on bliss; indeed he does, and Hacker’s criteria are demonstrably false.²⁸ The issue is rather *why*, given all the problems with text-historicism—its untenable arguments, its arbitrary criteria, its subjective conclusions, its failure to contribute to meaningful reading, its reduction of literature to *realia*, and not least its apologetic intent, about

²⁶ Hacker, “Distinctive Features of the Doctrine and Terminology of Śaṅkara,” 86.

²⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v., “to ignore.”

²⁸ There is ample proof that Śaṅkara discusses *Brahman*’s nature as *ānanda*, even when the underlying text does not require him to do so. For instance, in Br.Sū. 1.1.2, the first substantive aphorism in the Brahmasūtras that significantly discusses the nature of *Brahman*, he concludes his discussion with an open-ended objection: “Which, again, is that Upaniṣadic text that is sought to be referred to by the aphorism?” He responds by citing the text he has been discussing all along, the Taittirīya Upaniṣad. The definition of *Brahman*, the nature of the universe, and the means of relative and absolute knowledge have already been discussed, yet Śaṅkara once again introduces the passage “from Bliss certainly all these beings originate; they live by Bliss after being born; and towards Bliss they proceed, and into Bliss they get merged (Tai.III.iv).” He notes that “other texts too of the same class [can] be quoted, which speak of a cause that is by nature eternal, pure, and free, and intrinsically omniscient” (Br.Sū. 1.1.2), yet he preferentially cites the Bhṛguvallī section of this Upaniṣad. Contra Hacker’s claim, Śaṅkara also glosses *ānanda* as *Brahman*’s nature when it is *not* explicitly mentioned in the text. For example, in his commentary on Gauḍapāda’s *kārikā* on Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad 2.32, when discussing his predecessor’s acosmic view, he writes, “The *Smṛti* of Vyāsa also supports this view in these words: ‘This duality of the universe, perceived by the wise like a hole seen in darkness in the ground, is unstable like the bubbles that appear in rain-water, always undergoing destruction, ever devoid of bliss, and ceasing to exist, after dissolution.’” The passage clearly locates bliss with *Brahman*, rather than within the universe. The reason Śaṅkara need not gratuitously dilate on *Brahman* as bliss is that, of all the axioms of the Upaniṣads, following bliss requires the least explanation. As everyone knows, *sukhārtha sarva bhūtānām matāḥ sarvā pravṛttayah* (the activities of all beings are meant for the attainment of happiness).

which Hacker’s students were in no doubt²⁹—some scholars continue to revere this method. Hacker falls prey to the very error Śankara points out as the source of confusion: *śrutihānanyaśrutakalpanāprasaṅgāt* (rejecting what is well established by the text and accepting some other thing not intended by them; Br.Sū. 1.1.4). Even if we overlook Hacker’s bad philology as serving some other purpose (he explicitly states that his philology is in the service of Christianity),³⁰ what motivates continued genuflection before the pseudoscience of the text-historical method in our discipline today?

IN SEARCH OF ECSTASY

The *gopīs*’ erotic-mystical dance with Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa is well known as a representation of the highest ecstasy a soul can experience. But what is the connection between literature and ecstasy? Plato says:

You know, none of the epic poets, if they’re good, are masters of their subject (οὐκ ἐκ τέχνης); they are inspired, possessed, (ἔνθεοι, κατεχόμενοι) and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. The same goes for lyric poets if they’re good: just as the Corybantes are not in their right minds (οὐκ ἔμφορονες) when they dance, lyric poets, too, are not in their right minds when they make those beautiful lyrics, but as soon as they sail into harmony and rhythm they are possessed (κατεχόμενοι) by Bacchic frenzy. Just as Bacchus worshippers when they are possessed draw honey and milk from rivers, but not when they are in their right minds—the soul of a lyric poet does this too, as they say themselves. (*Ion* 533e–34a)³¹

Not only poetry, but also philosophy is dedicated to this god of ecstasy. “There are indeed, as those concerned with the mysteries [that is, the initiated] say, many who carry the *thyrsus* [the religious symbol] but the [true] Bacchantes are few. These latter are, in my opinion, no other than those who have practiced philosophy in the right way” (*Phaedo* 69d). Even in language, a divine madness plays a role: “in both name and achievement, madness from a god (μανία) is finer than self-control of human origin, according to the testimony of the ancient language givers... [It] takes a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and

²⁹ “Through all the textual documentation and historical analysis and triumphant display of philological and chronological evidence, we also hear the voice of an advocate of the European tradition and, more specifically, of a Christian theologian. The historical analysis itself, in all its ‘objectivity,’ rejects but also conceals a very pronounced sense of religious and cultural identity and an uncompromising commitment to certain Christian and European premises and values.” Wilhelm Halbfass, “An Uncommon Orientalist: Paul Hacker’s Passage to India,” in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Tradition and Modern Vedānta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 9–10.

³⁰ “My real profession is the science [*Wissenschaft*] of India, especially of Indian philosophies and religions. Unlike all my other colleagues, however, during my thirteen-month stay in India I established an association with the Mission, mainly the Catholic but also the Protestant. I wanted to place my science in the service of the Church.” Paul Hacker, *Greuel der Verwüstung an heiliger Stätte: Paul Hacker zur Lage der Kirche nach dem Zweiten Vatikanum*, ed. Rudolf Kaschewsky (Heimbach/Eifel: Patrimonium Verlag, 2012), 140, n. 1.

³¹ All references to Plato are from the Cooper edition: *Plato: Complete Works*, edited, with Introduction and Notes, by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997).

teaches them to future generations” (*Phaedr.* 244e–245a). Ecstasy, in the Platonic idiom, is *mania*, a divine madness higher than sophistic sobriety or human skill. The vocabulary of initiation, possession, madness, frenzy, and inspiration underscore Plato’s “erotic” view of philosophical literature.³² No wonder then, that he finds writing—rather than live discourse—problematic. His dialogues, though written, maintain the quality of a live conversation, a narration. Although writing remains the medium by which great literature is preserved, it could also turn literature into dead material, *realia*. Compared with Socrates’s inspired, erotic philosophical speech about the ascent of the soul to behold pure being, Plato provides a counterexample. Socrates says: “Actually, you’ll find that it’s just like the epigram people say is inscribed on the tomb of Midas... It goes like this:

A maid of bronze am I, on Midas’s tomb I lie
As long as water flows, and trees grow tall
Shielding the grave where many come to cry
That Midas rests here I say to one and all.”

To recapitulate our argument, the *rāsalīlā* in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa raises the question of the ecstatic potential of literature. To theoretically thematize this potential, we introduced Plato’s assessment of *mania* in its relation to the act of participating in literature as well as experiencing a rapturous overcoming of the embodied everyday self. The point here is not whether *bhakti* is the same as divine *mania*—that question is historical and misses the point. Rather, in the very conceptualization of terms such as “philosophy” and “philology” by Plato, we find a warning: that literature contains a communication of something alive, enlivening, enlightening, and sacred. It should not forsake such communication, the very basis of pedagogy, for the sake of dead things: epitaphs and epigraphs of persons and things.

This Platonic preamble allows us to approach literature with a different attitude and set of questions than the text-historical method. In this article, we follow the question of ecstasy presented in the *rāsalīlā* to distant textual origins by following a thread of textual clues. In doing so we hope to share a glimpse of how the *itihāsapurāṇa* tradition preserves, narrates, interprets, and transmits its poetic and philosophical content. The texts themselves form a procession of narrative celebration. We shall begin by introducing the Bhāgavatapurāṇa as an ecstatic text, and then return to the question of ecstatic philology again in the following section.

NARRATIVE ECSTASY IN THE BHĀGAVATAPURĀṆA

The Bhāgavatapurāṇa self-consciously transmits an experience of literary ecstasy. The stories of Hari are nectarine (*hari-kathāmṛtam*; Bhp. 10.1.13). They destroy the sins of Kaliyuga (10.1.14) and purify the narrator, interlocutor, and the listeners (10.1.16). His deeds in various incarnations are delightful to the ear (*karṇa-ramyāṇi*; 10.7.1); they remove the cravings of the mind and cultivate purity, devotion, and friendliness (10.7.2). Even the liberated trees Nalakūvara and Maṇigrīva ask that their speech be ever engaged in narrating the attributes of the Lord (10.10.38), while Nanda and his *gopas* delight in

³² See Vishwa Adluri, “Initiation into the Mysteries: Experience of the Irrational in Plato,” *Mouseion* 3, no. 6 (2006): 407–23.

narratives of Kṛṣṇa and become joyful (*mudā*), overcome the limitations of embodied existence (*bhava-vedanām*), and experience bliss (*ramamāñās ca*) (10.11.58). This is as literally as one can conceptualize ecstasy. The creator Brahmā asserts that the unconquerable Lord is conquered by those devoted to the Lord through reciting his stories (10.14.3): these stories cultivate understanding and devotion (10.14.5). When Kṛṣṇa leapt into the lake to subdue the poisonous serpent Kāliya, the *gopīs* restrained his distressed mother from following him; fixed in grief and lifeless like corpses (*mṛtaka*), they consoled themselves with stories of the beloved of Vraja (*vrajapriya kathāḥ kathayantya*; 10.16.21). Those women who had never seen Kṛṣṇa were already captivated by listening to his tales (10.23.18, 23).

At the conclusion of the mystical-ecstatic *rāsa* dance, Śuka recommends that an intelligent person, listening with faith to the narratives of Viṣṇu’s play, conquer lust and other diseases of the heart and attain supreme devotion (Bhp. 10.33.39), which the text explicitly says is the highest philosophy (1.5.8–9). The *gopīs* who danced with Kṛṣṇa surprisingly describe their experience as an ecstatic enactment of the Lord’s delightful narrative (*manojña-kathāḥ*; 10.47.43). Later, when Kṛṣṇa leaves for Mathura, Uddhava consoles the love-stricken *gopīs* by singing the stories of Kṛṣṇalīlā (10.47.54). In an aside to the listener-reader, Uddhava remarks that for one who has developed an appreciation for these narratives, even birth as the creator god is less engaging (10.47.58). He worships the dust of the feet of the *gopīs* who had danced in this literary-ecstatic dance, repeating that these songs and stories purify the three worlds (10.47.63).

The Bhāgavatapurāṇa is thus fully aware of and masterfully deploys the ecstatic-erotic power of literature for its salvific philosophical potential.³³ We could easily extend the list of passages which demonstrate this Purāṇa’s self-consciousness as an ecstatic salvific text. In the tenth *skandha* alone, we have 52.20, 65.14, 80.2–3, 85.59, 87.21, 90.49. But these lists are sophistic exercises and remind us what philology ought not to be: reading reduced to scavenging for *realia*. Plato mocks this tendency as mere cleverness and rough ingenuity: the true task of philology is to read narratives for self-knowledge (*Phaedr.* 229c–30a). The Bhāgavatapurāṇa explicitly warns against a crude historicizing approach. Śuka says, “O great King! I have narrated to you the stories of many who lived to make their names famous in their lifetime and then to pass away and become a memory or a mere name soon after. These narratives are only the literary device I have used with a view to instill into you the importance of renunciation and realization. They have no ultimate significance in themselves (or are not to be taken as literal facts)” (Bhp. 12.3.14). The Sūta, closing out the outer frame, also concurs: narratives that deal with temporal facts alone (*asat kathāḥ*) are ultimately false (*mṛṣāḥ*) and dead (*asatīḥ*), but those that deal with the truth are auspicious and purifying (*maṅgalaṃ... puṇyam*), blissful (*ramyam*), ever charming (*ruciraṃ navam navam*), and an eternal intellectual feast (*śaśvan manaso mahotsavam*). What truth is this? The truth of that from which this universe obtains its birth, et cetera, as stated in both Brahma-sūtra 1.1.2 and Bhāgavatapurāṇa 1.1.1.

ECSTATIC PHILOLOGY

³³ This point is explicitly made in the hymn to Kṛṣṇa delivered by Kāliya’s wives (see especially Bhp. 10.16.38–49).

To proceed now from the impasse of scientific historicism—a nay science—and seek a meaningful experience of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, we need an ecstatic philology.³⁴ We can sketch it briefly: The term *philologia* is first conceptualized by Plato in the *Phaedo*, where he links “misology” and “misanthropy” to the interruption of the argument for the immortality of the soul. This means philology, as Plato understands it, has the soul, which transcends materiality, as its object. This transcendence is erotic, noetic, and salvific. From the perspective of crude philology, which is concerned solely with *realia*, this appears as a form of madness. Socrates says that the way ancients handled language is superior, “since it uses reasoning to bring intelligence (*nous*) and learning (*historia*) into human thought”; it is far better than the modern approach which is ἀπειρόκαλος (ignorant of the beautiful, tasteless, vulgar) (*Phaedr.* 245c).³⁵

The Greek word ἔκστασις means standing outside (*ek-*) oneself, to be displaced from one’s everyday self. The operative force here is ἔρως, roughly translated as love or desire. Plato describes the ascent of the soul as powered by *eros*; its destination is the “beautiful itself,” which is true being. Plotinus employs the term *ecstasy* when he describes his own philosophical experience. He does this explicitly in Plato’s terminology: whereas the universe represents an emanation (πρόοδος) from the One, ecstasy is a return (ἐπιστροφή) to the One. Plotinus gives the example of a painting; a beautiful image transports one from bodily seeing to the truth, which is the very source of

³⁴ See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* §57, titled *To the Realists*: “You sober people who feel armed against passion and phantastical conceptions and would like to make your emptiness a matter of pride and an ornament—you call yourself realists and insinuate that the world really is the way it appears to you: before you alone reality stands unveiled, and you yourselves are perhaps the best part of it.... That mountain over there! That cloud over there! What is ‘real’ about that? Subtract just once the phantasm and the whole human *contribution* from it, you sober ones! Yes, if you could do *that!* If you could forget your background, your past, your nursery school—all of your humanity and animality! There is no ‘reality’ for us—and not for you either, you sober ones—we are not nearly as strange to one another as you think, and perhaps our good will to transcend drunkenness is just as respectable as your belief that you are altogether *incapable* of drunkenness.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 69.

³⁵ A sentiment Foucault echoes. See Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 2: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 383: “The descent (*Herkunft*) of the historian is unequivocal: he is of humble birth. A characteristic of history is to be without choice: it encourages thorough understanding and excludes qualitative judgments—a sensitivity to all things without distinction, a comprehensive view excluding differences. Nothing must escape it and, more importantly, nothing must be excluded. Historians argue that this proves their tact and discretion. After all, what right have they to impose their tastes and preferences when they seek to determine what actually occurred in the past? Their mistake is to exhibit a total lack of taste, the kind of crudeness that becomes smug in the presence of the loftiest elements and finds satisfaction in reducing them to size. The historian is insensitive to the most disgusting things; or rather, he especially enjoys those things that should be repugnant to him. His apparent serenity follows from his concerted avoidance of the exceptional and his reduction of all things to the lowest common denominator. Nothing is allowed to stand above him; and underlying his desire for total knowledge is his search for the secrets that belittle everything: ‘base curiosity.’ What is the source of history? It comes from the plebs. To whom is it addressed? To the plebs. And its discourse strongly resembles the demagogue’s refrain: ‘No one is greater than you and anyone who presumes to get the better of you—you who are good—is evil.’ The historian, who functions as his double, can be heard to echo: ‘No past is greater than your present, and, through my meticulous erudition, I will rid you of your infatuations and transform the grandeur of history into pettiness, evil, and misfortune.’”

eros (see *Enneads* V.3.17 and II.9.16.). Plotinus’s example is apt: when reading a book, too, we do not remain at the level of the words, but are transported by the experience the author seeks to convey.

Ecstatic philology thus pays heed to the dynamics of the soul: one reads a book or listens to a tale to be moved by it rather than to reduce it to mere information. What the *rāsalīlā* enacts is this ecstatic philology, one which interprets Vedic sentences such as “know bliss to be verily *Brahman*,” et cetera. This literary-philosophical dimension of Kṛṣṇa’s identity with *Brahman*, an interpretation of *Brahman*, and the ultimate experience of it—in short, the ecstatic dimension—are never lost in the commentarial tradition. Even late poets recognize it, as can be seen from two interpretations of Bhāgavatapurāṇa 10.33.3. In his *Nārāyaṇīyam*, Melpathur Narayana Bhattatiri sees in the *gopīs* the embodiment of the Upaniṣads:

I see before me a (bluish) radiance which is as captivating as a thick array of blue lily flowers. I am bathed in nectar. Then I see in the core of that radiance the form of a divine boy particularly beautiful because of budding youth, who is surrounded by Nārada and other sages on whose limbs the hairs stand on end because of the supreme bliss they are experiencing and by the Upaniṣads in the form of a group of resplendent beautiful damsels. (*Nārāyaṇīyam* 100.1; Sastri trans.)

But the intensely moving poetry is also important, as the blind poet Bilvamangala, mystically experiencing the same *rāsalīlā*, writes in Śrī Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛtam:

Between a *gopī* and a *gopī*, Mādhava, and between Mādhava and Mādhava a *gopī*, and in the middle of this circle, the son of Devakī, playing His flute and singing. (Śrī Kṛṣṇakarṇāmṛtam 2.35)³⁶

In ecstatic philology, poetry is an interpretation of reality, and interpretation is a recreation of the relationship between poetry and the soul.

Ecstasy and textuality are explicitly linked in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. Śuka, himself liberated, admits that sages who are established in the absolute without attributes rejoice in singing the excellences of Hari (Bhp. 2.1.7). The Mahābhārata also knows this joyfulness. Kṛṣṇa says in the Bhagavadgītā: “With their thoughts on me, their very lives devoted to me, enlightening one another and always recounting my stories, they are full of contentment and delight” (*tuṣyanti ca ramanti ca* | Bhg. 10.9). Kṛṣṇa repeats this sentiment in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, adding that such conversations are a means to *bhakti* (Bhp. 11.26.28). The *gopīs* experience ecstasy not only when they dance with Kṛṣṇa, but also when they sing *kṛṣṇa-līlā* (10.35.26). On his visit to Vraja, Uddhava rejoices in recollecting the deeds of Kṛṣṇa with the *gopīs* (10. 47.56). Even before they had laid eyes on him, the Brāhmaṇa women who fed Kṛṣṇa had heard of his glories (10.23.23). Rukminī decides to marry Kṛṣṇa upon hearing of his beauty, prowess, and glories sung at

³⁶ aṅganāmaṅganāmantare mādhave mādhaveṣu mādhaveṣu cāntareṇāṅganā |
itthamākalpite maṅdale madhyagaḥ sañjagau veṇunā devakīnandanah ||

her father's home (10.52.23). All these are instances of the erotic potential of inspired narrative.

The Bhāgavatapurāṇa is transparent about the joy of narration and works with the narrative of *Brahman* to induce bliss in the listener. In the final *skandha*, as Śuka beings to wrap up his narration to Parīkṣit, he reveals the nature of what he has just recounted. As we have seen, Śuka discounts the mere historical veracity of the tales in favor of their salvific import (Bhp. 12.3.14). He then advises:

Those who aspire to have pure and undiluted devotion to Kṛṣṇa should constantly hear about the sin-destroying acts and excellences of Kṛṣṇa sung or chanted or discoursed upon by great devotees. Let them hear that alone, ever and anon. (Bhp. 12.3.14–15)

After Śuka finishes narrating, Sūta resumes the narrative. He recounts how Parīkṣit died from the bite of the great snake Takṣaka and how his son Janamejaya performed the snake sacrifice to avenge his father's death, a sacrifice where Vyāsa's Mahābhārata was narrated. Since Vyāsa is the editor of the Veda and the author of the *itihāsapurāṇa*, Sūta pulls together the textual tradition beginning with the unarticulated primordial sound (*nāda*) (Bhp. 12.6.37), the manifestation of *om* (12.6.39), which in turn reveals its source, the all-pervading Paramātman (12.6.41). Systematically, the letters of the alphabet and the teachings of the Veda are transmitted through teachers (12.6.45). Vyāsa compiled the Vedas into four texts according to meter. Then come about recensions such as the Taittirīya, et cetera. Last to appear are the Purāṇas, in which Vyāsa's student Vaiśampāyana and Sūta himself play important roles in transmission.

The narrative then takes up the ultimate challenge of cosmic dissolution (*pralaya*)³⁷ and forgetting by narrating the Mārkaṇḍeya episode. Then, in spite of the entropic power of time (the decline of the *yugas*), the narrative of the textual tradition continues by recapitulating in a summary form the twelve *skandhas* of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. In this manner, the textual tradition transcends both an original text and an author whose authority is based on his own subjective consciousness and creativity. Rather, an originary force, coeval with both the emanation of the universe and the textual tradition, provides ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic moorage to the *itihāsapurāṇa*. Plotinus reveals the ontological moorage of the *itihāsapurāṇa*: *śṛṣṭi* is emanation from the source, the One, whereas *bhakti* is the erotic ecstatic return.

When Sūta wraps up his narrative, he draws attention to the erotic power of Kṛṣṇa's narratives, which inspire us beyond ephemeral materiality.

The literary productions in which there is no place for the worshipful Lord, the master of all the senses, but deal with only worldly men and matters, are devoid

³⁷ *Pralaya* also has eschatological significance: *mokṣa* is presented through it both here and in the epic. Before reciting the thousand names of Viṣṇu, Bhīṣma says:
yataḥ sarvāṇi bhūtāni bhavanty ādiyugāgame |
yasmimś ca pralayaṃ yānti punar eva yugakṣaye ||
tasya lokapradhānasya jagannāthasya bhūpate |
viṣṇor nāmasahasraṃ me śṛṇu pāpabhayāpaham || (Mbh. 13.135.11–12)

of truth and are ephemeral. On the contrary, such works as reveal the glory of God manifesting through all life and Nature—they promote what is true, what is good, and what is holy.

It is that literature which sparkles with the excellences of the Divine that remains ever novel in its power to delight and charm the mind. It alone can sustain the mind always as in a festive mood, and dry up the ocean of *saṃsāra* in which man is plunged.

However attractive might be the literary beauties of a writing, poem or song, if it is devoid of all references to, and expositions of, Śrī Hari's world-sanctifying excellences, it is like a mud puddle which attracts only crows and never the swans. Holy men eschew them; for, they care only for where the Lord is and for what reveals His presence.

It is such compositions as are embellished by the names of the Lord, the Infinite Being, which reveal His holy fame and destroy men's sins, that saintly personages hear, expound, and recite, even if there be mistakes in every line of such texts.

(Bhp. 12.12.48–51)

Ecstatic philology does not separate ontology, theology, and anthropology (in the literal sense of the term). Every Indian philosophical system has a salvific goal. That goal is presented as *bhakti*, or *the literal rapture obtained from a literary rapture: the kṛṣṇa-līlā*. This is possible because the text under discussion pays heed to that which is “emergent” (*janmādi*), the capacity of the source to well up in the present and transport us, rather than an original, which has been sublated or is of mere antiquarian interest. We shall later explore the ontological “origin” of ecstatic joy in the being that transcends beings: *Brahman* whose very nature, *svarūpa lakṣaṇa*, is bliss, *ānanda*. Ecstatic philology and *philologische Wissenschaft* pursue different goals. The former moves our soul and is thus akin to the power of poetry; the latter is devoted to what is dead.

THE ECSTATIC TRADITION

As the very term “tradition” carries negative connotations in the “enlightened,” “critical,” and “reformed” European episteme, we must relearn how to think of texts and traditions before we can approach the textual tradition transmitted under the aegis of Vyāsa. Following a method recommended by Nietzsche himself, we shall work our way backwards from post-modernity to Plato. We begin with Bataille, an ecstatic follower of Nietzsche's: “What art and literature express does not have the birdbrained appearance of learned laws... The truth pursued by science is true only provided that it be without meaning, and nothing has meaning unless it is fiction.”³⁸ This is something the Vyāsa tradition understands only too well. Whereas in Hegel there is utter ignorance that he is merely constructing a narrative of which he sees himself as the climax,³⁹ the

³⁸ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoeckl (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 225.

³⁹ See Nietzsche's *Second Untimely Meditation*: “History understood in this Hegelian fashion has been mockingly called God's sojourn on earth, though the god referred to has been created only by history. This god, however, became transparent and comprehensible to himself within the Hegelian craniums and has already ascended all the dialectically possible steps of his evolution up to this self-revelation: so that for

itihāsapurāṇa understands not only its own narrativity, but also the narrativity of every account of being human, indeed, of the entire cosmos presented in sense perception. Thus, *itihāsapurāṇa* is higher than history: it is flooded with the light of self-consciousness and it is moreover a rapturous tradition inviting participation. Here is Bataille again:

Myth remains at the disposal of one who cannot be satisfied by art, science, or politics. Even though love by itself constitutes a world, it leaves intact everything that surrounds it. The experience of love even augments lucidity and suffering; it develops the malaise and the exhausting impression of emptiness that results from contact with decomposed society. Myth alone returns, to the one who is broken in every ordeal, the image of a plenitude extended to a community where men gather. Myth alone enters the bodies of those it binds, and it expects from them the same receptiveness. It is a frenzy of every dance; it takes existence “to its boiling point”: it communicates to it the tragic emotion that makes its sacred intimacy accessible. For myth is not only the divine figure of destiny and the figure where this world moves; it cannot be separated from the community to which it belongs and which ritually assumes its dominion. It would be fiction if the *accord* that a *people* manifests in the agitation of festivals did not make it a vital human reality. Myth is perhaps fable, but this fable is placed in opposition to fiction if one looks at the people who dance it, who act it, and for whom it is the living *truth*. A community that does not carry out the ritual possession its myths possess only a truth in decline... A myth thus cannot be assimilated into the scattered fragments of a dissociated group. It is in solidarity with *total* existence, of which it is the tangible expression.⁴⁰

This much on the opposition of “myth” and “history.” These two terms were set up as a dichotomous pair in the Enlightenment. Myth was no longer a narrative, but a counterconcept to critical reason, embodying in it tradition, and every other form of irrationality. Enlightenment thinkers such as Pierre Bayle and Bernard de Fontenelle practically laid the foundation for a counter from German Romantics such as Schelling, the Schlegel brothers, and Schiller: these Germans quickly repurposed the “irrationality of myth” in new ways, unwittingly leading to irrational new myths such as German Nationalism. A sane voice can be found in Hans Blumenberg, who usefully understands the significance of myth in its narrativity, its unrecognized kinship to critical reason, and its usefulness in reshaping the narratives of our times.⁴¹ Thus the question “does the Indian literary tradition have an enlightened view of history, or does it succumb to the Enlightenment view of myth?” has little to do with the subject at hand, to which we now return.

Hegel the climax and terminus of the world-process coincided with his on existence in Berlin. Indeed, he ought to have said that everything that came after him was properly to be considered merely as a musical coda to the world-historical rondo or, even more properly, as superfluous.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 104.

⁴⁰ Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 232.

⁴¹ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

When Śuka, the primary narrator of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa begins narrating the salvific mystical dance of the *gopīs* with Kṛṣṇa, the *rāsalīlā*, King Parīkṣit interrupts:

The King said:

O holy one! They [the *gopīs*] knew Kṛṣṇa only as a lover, not as *Brahman*. Their outlook was therefore body-based, being born of the *guṇa* of *rajas* (*guṇadhiyām*). How can such a frame of mind bring about the erasing of ignorance and the effacement of embodied existence?

Śrī Śuka said:

I have answered this question of yours earlier (in the seventh *skandha*) when the attainment of liberation by Śiśupāla, the king of the Cedis (*uktaṃ purastād etat te caidyah siddhiṃ*), through the practice of confrontation with Kṛṣṇa was described. If an enemy of Kṛṣṇa can be thus blessed, why not his lovers?

The Supreme Being who is changeless, immeasurable, unseen, transcending matter but regulating its course, adopts an individuality only to bestow salvation on *jīvas* (*nṛṇām niḥśreyasārthāya*).

All those who always fix their mind on Śrī Hari through any sentiment—sex-love, anger, fear, affection, sense of unity, or devotion (*bhakti*)—they all attain to His nature. (Bhp. 10.29.12–15)

Śuka refers the meaning of the present narrative, *rāsalīlā*, to another narrative, the liberation of Śiśupāla. When we go to the the seventh *skandha*, we find a further reference:

King Parīkṣit said:

O learned one! The Lord is the same to all; he is the dear one and the friend of all. Then why did He act like a partial person? Why did he kill the Asuras in order to favor Indra?

Śrī Śuka said:

O King! You have put a very relevant question about the Lord's wonderful sport (*hareś caritam adbhutam*); for, in it is involved the greatness of His devotees too. After making obeisance to Sage Vyāsa, I shall narrate to you these deeds of the Lord which bring out the greatness of devotees like Prahlāda, extolled by Nārada and other sages, and having the power of enhancing devotion in its listeners...

In connection with this, there is a traditional narrative, which was given out by Śrī Nārada at the Rājasūya sacrifice of Yudhiṣṭhira when the latter questioned him for the clarification of a doubt. (Bhp. 7.1.1, 4–5, and 12)

Śuka's salutation to Vyāsa and the reference to Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājasūya sacrifice take us to the Mahābhārata. Let us follow this thread of references further.

When Yudhiṣṭhira, at the great Rājasūya sacrifice, saw with astonishment how the totally undeserving Śiśupāla, the king of the Cedis, gained union with Kṛṣṇa, he questioned the divine Ṛṣi Nārada seated there as follows, in the hearing of the assembled sages.

Yudhiṣṭhira said:

It is a wonder to me to see how this Śiśupāla, an archenemy of the divine Kṛṣṇa, attained union [*sāyujyaṅ*] with Him, the Supreme Being, Vāsudeva—a fulfilment which is difficult to obtain even for men of whole-hearted devotion. (Bhp. 7.1.13–14)

Śuka is referring to the Sabhāparvan of the Mahābhārata, specifically the Śiśupālavadhāparvan, which is the twenty-sixth *upaparvan* in the epic. Here is the relevant passage:

He [Śiśupāla] was still speaking when the blessed Madhusūdana, the scourge of his enemies, irately cut off his head with his discus. The strong-armed king fell like a tree that is struck by a thunderbolt. Thereupon the kings watched a sublime radiance rise forth from the body of the king of the Cedis, which, great king, was like the sun rising up from the sky; and that radiance greeted lotus-eyed Kṛṣṇa, honored by the world, and entered him, O king. (Mbh. 2.42.21–22)

Before we pursue the intertextual connection to the Mahābhārata, we must ascertain that we have not ignored an intratextual connection: Śiśupāla’s death in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. This is described in narrative order, as part of Kṛṣṇa’s activities in the tenth *skandha*, chapter 74. Here, as in the epic, only two verses describe the death and liberation of Śiśupāla:

Then the worshipful Lord, restraining his partisans, angrily faced the attacking enemy and cut off his head with his razor-sharp discus.
While all the world looked on, a center of brilliance coming out of the dead body of Śiśupāla, was found to reach Kṛṣṇa and get absorbed in him, like a meteor falling on the earth. (Bhp. 10.74.43–44)

We are trying to follow the textual references pertaining to Śiśupāla’s liberation to understand how this episode allows us to appreciate the *rāsālīlā*. We arrived at the intersection of the Mahābhārata and Bhāgavatapurāṇa. But the dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and Nārada, which is offered as an explanation in the seventh *skandha* is missing in both the epic and the tenth *skandha*’s version of this episode. We have, it seems, arrived at a blind alley, and we must resign ourselves to speculating that these texts may have had many authors, how historical processes and accidents must have shaped them, and why we hence cannot expect any design in the texts as we have them. At first sight, we must abandon the meaning of the text by turning to the materiality of the text, distinguishing the former task as “traditional” and the latter as “scientific.” Even this consolation is hardly possible: the so-called scientific approach to the Mahābhārata proved to be filled with error and prejudice. We therefore have to return to the texts themselves for interpretive clues.

The Bhāgavatapurāṇa begins with three verses of benediction, praising: (i) the “supreme truth,” which is the cause of the creation, sustenance, and dissolution of the universe and the source of revelation; (ii) the Bhāgavata text; and (iii) its readers. These three verses also disclose the four features of any *śāstra*: (i) *adhikāri* (the qualified student); here, the devotees; (ii) *viśaya* (subject matter), that is, the supreme truth and the

relationship of the soul to *saguṇa Brahman* through *bhakti*; (iii) *prayojana* (result), which is *ātyantika-duḥkha-nivṛtti* (complete cessation of sorrow) and *paramānanda-prāpti* (attainment of supreme happiness), in the form of complete surrender to Bhagavān; and (iv) *sambandha* (relationship) between *adhikāra*, *viśaya*, and *prayojana*.

The outer frame of the narrative is introduced in the fourth verse: it is the Naimiṣa Forest, where Śaunaka and his companion *ṛṣis* are engaged in a sacrifice lasting a thousand years. The entire Bhāgavatapurāṇa unfolds in the conversation between these sages and the Sūta Ugraśravas, the son of Romaharṣaṇa. In the last chapter of the first *skandha*, the Sūta introduces the narrator Śuka, the son of Vyāsa, who narrates the Bhāgavatapurāṇa proper to King Parīkṣit. This king is Arjuna's grandson and the sole survivor of the Kurus after the great battle, but he has been cursed to die of snakebite in a week. This is the second frame. In the twelfth *skandha*, chapter 5.13, Śuka completes his narrative and closes out the inner frame. The Sūta narrates the remaining eight chapters of this final *skandha* and closes out the outer frame.

The literary architecture of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa thus engulfs the Mahābhārata in stunning ways. The narrative site occupied by the text is the same as the epic's (Naimiṣa) and the narrators and their respective audiences are also the same. Both texts explicitly attribute authorship to Vyāsa and both texts describe the same *Brahman*, Nārāyaṇa. The Bhāgavatapurāṇa knows the Mahābhārata intimately and shares not only an "author" and characters with it but also the design of its embedded narratives. The outer frame of both texts is the same, whereas the inner frame is modified in interesting ways: instead of Vyāsa's student Vaiśampāyana, Vyāsa's son Śuka narrates the inner frame. The audience and the setting of this inner frame contain interesting inversions. Whereas the Bhāgavatapurāṇa is narrated to Parīkṣit when he is about to succumb to snakebite, the Mahābhārata's inner frame is narrated to the dead king's son, King Janamejaya, at the sacrifice of the snakes. Thus, although the Bhāgavatapurāṇa is conscious of itself as a successor to the Mahābhārata, it presents itself as if it were narrated much earlier than the first narration of the epic. We underscore these points to demonstrate the playful genius at work in these compositions; the frame narratives, for example, are no mere additions by "later redactors." By the time of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa's composition, whenever that may have been, the Mahābhārata had already established itself as a paradigm of ecstatic literature. The conclusions of the so-called text-historical method which seeks to explain the history of a text by disregarding its literary design are thus even less credible in the case of this Purāṇa than they are in the case of the Mahābhārata.⁴²

⁴² The problems we identify are not new. Bailey in his introduction to the Gaṇeśapurāṇa writes: "One reaction to this eclecticism [of the Purāṇas] has been a bewilderment, sometimes found in the writings of some exponents of the German *textgeschichtliche* school where a slightly negative evaluation of the quality of the genre seems to be asserted. This reaction is based upon an implicit view that a confused (*verworren*) narrative is one defining feature of any given Purāṇa," adding in a footnote that "it is incidental that this perception has never been tested on a Purāṇa acknowledged as a complete syntagmatic unit, but only in individual parts of Purāṇas. Given that the theoretical views which gave rise to such a perception also limited the definition of a Purāṇa to a compilation of individual *Textstücke*, it is difficult to see how the validity of the perception could be tested on anything other than the minimal paradigmatic unit of the Purāṇic narrative. In other words, the theory on which the perception depends is almost self-fulfilling as it refuses to countenance the Purāṇa as a complete literary unit." Addressing the "de-composition" of the Purāṇas undertaken by text-historical scholars, Bailey astutely identifies the contradiction inherent in this method: even if we were to achieve "the listing and dating ... of every possible paradigmatic element that

The entire first *skandha*, narrated by Ugraśravas, deals with various literary dimensions of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa: how does this text situate itself vis-à-vis the textual tradition of the Veda and the Mahābhārata? To understand this, we need to make two textual jumps. First, what is the architecture of the Mahābhārata narrative? Second, is there previous—Vedic—inspiration for the Mahābhārata’s design? The Mahābhārata is consciously drawing its literary structure from *yajña*: even the war is described as a *raṇa-yajña*. The predominant *yajña* structuring the epic is the Rājasūya. And the Rājasūya is described in detail in certain Vedic texts such as the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa. We begin with the Mahābhārata’s version of the Rājasūya. We shall then return to the seventh *skandha*, which in its entirety is presented as having been narrated previously at Yudhiṣṭhira’s Rājasūya.

ECSTASY OF THE TALE

After the Pāṇḍava princes establish their kingdom in Indraprastha, Yudhiṣṭhira has a *sabhā* built for him by the Asura Maya. Receiving Nārada cordially in his court, Yudhiṣṭhira asks whether the sage has seen a more splendid hall anywhere (Mbh. 2.6.5–10). Nārada describes, in order, the halls of Indra—the highest world where only one king, Hariścandra, resides among the divine seers; then the halls of Yama, Varuṇa, Kubera, and Brahmā. Asked by Yudhiṣṭhira, Nārada reveals that Hariścandra obtained this high heaven because he had performed the Rājasūya sacrifice. For the sake of his father Pāṇḍu, Yudhiṣṭhira immediately resolves to undertake the sacrifice (Mbh. 2.1.5–11). It is at this sacrifice that Śiśupāla’s death occurs. Before we take up our analysis of this event, note that this Rājasūya is the critical point which precedes the events leading to the war. Yudhiṣṭhira loses the kingdom and after a period of exile, returns to another sacrifice: the *raṇa-yajña* of the Kurukṣetra, which is described as a Rājasūya. Yudhiṣṭhira is successful this time, but his lineage is wiped out. The sole survivor Parīkṣit is revived by Kṛṣṇa, but this king too dies as a result of Takṣaka’s snakebite.

As the epic opens, Arjuna’s great-grandson Janamejaya undertakes the *sarpasattra* to avenge his father Parīkṣit’s death. This is a no less gory sacrifice in which snakes are immolated, but it is also the setting for the first telling of the Mahābhārata outside the private teaching Vyāsa had given his student Vaiśampāyana. The narrative moves from one bloody sacrifice to another, until it terminates in the peaceful Naimiṣa Forest. The epic is structured according to the logic of these sacrifices, which form key settings for the story to unfold or to be retold. The entire Mahābhārata is further structured by arranging these sacrificial events in a cycle: the epic begins at the end, and

can be isolated in the Purāṇic tradition... it would still not overcome the fundamental methodological problem involved in the reluctance to define the individual Purāṇa as the basic unit of research.” Greg Bailey, “Introduction,” in *Gaṇeśapurāṇa. Part I: Upāsanākhaṇḍa. Introduction, Translation, Notes and Index by Greg Bailey* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1995), 6–7. Unfortunately, given the institutional dominance of German Indology, he does not go so far as to reject text-historicism outright as an ideology and as religious apologetic. See our article, “The Passion of Paul Hacker: Indology, Orientalism, and Evangelism,” in *Transcultural Encounters between Germany and India: Kindred Spirits in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Joanne Miyang Cho, Eric Kurlander, and Douglas McGetchin (New York: Routledge, 2013), 215–29. For more evidence of Hacker’s evangelical aims, see Adluri and Bagchee, “Methods and Contexts,” cited previously.

thus at the end it begins again. These narrative features are not accidental. The universe goes in circles, repeatedly, and our fate in it is *saṃsāra*. But what is the logic that drives this cycle of creation? The Gītā provides the answer:

Prajāpati, after creating creatures and sacrifice together, said in the beginning: “Ye shall multiply by it, it shall be the cow that yields your desires. Give ye the Gods being with it, and the Gods shall give ye being. And thus giving each other being ye shall attain to the highest good. Themselves enhanced in their being with sacrifice, the Gods shall give ye the pleasures ye desire: he who enjoys their gifts without return to them is but a thief.” (Bhg. 3.10–12)

Creatures exist by food, food grows from rain, rain springs from sacrifice, sacrifice arises from action. This ritual action, you must know, originates from the *brahman* of the Veda, and this *brahman* itself issues from the syllable *OM*. Therefore the ubiquitous *brahman* is forever based upon sacrifice. He who does not keep rolling the wheel that has been set in motion, indulging his senses in a lifespan of evil, lives for nothing. (Bhg. 3.14–16)

But the narrative of the epic itself is told in the intervals of the sacrifice. If our embodied existence in a universe governed by physical and ethical laws is akin to sacrifice, then the intervals in a sacrifice become “openings” in the determinism that the sacrificial model reveals. The narrative intervals in a sacrifice provide opportunities for experiencing ecstasy and, in the case of the texts under consideration, *liberation*. Śaunaka is pleased to listen to the Bard’s narratives: “You tell your stories with verve, son, with gentle sounds and charming words. You speak like your father, boy, we are very much pleased. Your father was always attentive to our wishes—now pray tell this tale as your father used to tell it!” (Mbh. 1.14.2–3) The repetition is purely for experiencing joy. Kṛṣṇa teaches Arjuna this joyful hermeneutics in the Gītā:

The wise, who are filled with fervor, love me in the knowledge that I am the source of everything and that everything comes forth from me. With their thoughts on me, their very lives devoted to me, enlightening one another and always recounting my stories, they are full of contentment and delight. To those who, always yoked, love me joyfully I grant the singleness of mind by which they attain to me. Residing in their own very being I compassionately dispel the darkness of their ignorance with the shining lamp of knowledge. (Bhg. 10.8–9; trans. modified)

The Mahābhārata interprets this relation between the telling and listening of the narrative as one of joyfulness: The bard says, “Aye, I shall tell you that sublime grand tale, *The Mahābhārata*, as Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana contrived it in the very beginning. Enjoy it, lofty-minded brahmin, as I tell it. I too have great joy in reciting it here” (*manoharṣo mamāpīha pravartate*; Mbh. 1.53.35).

Let us return to Yudhiṣṭhira’s Rājasūya, remembering that the Śiśupāla narrative occurs in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa’s seventh *skandha*. This entire *skandha*, as we saw, is presented as a dialogue between Nārada and Yudhiṣṭhira at the Rājasūya. To interpret the

Rājasūya in the Mahābhārata, we need to turn to the Vedic sources of this sacrifice in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa. According to this text, the king must ritually hear the story of Śunaḥśepa at the Rājasūya sacrifice. The story is as follows: Hariścandra Vaidhasa Aikṣvaka has a hundred wives but no sons. He consults with Nārada and worships Varuṇa for a son. He promises to offer his son as a sacrifice to the god. But his son Rohita, now a young man, refuses to be sacrificed and instead purchases Śunaḥśepa from his father for a hundred cows. He also pays a further hundred Ajigarta to bind and sacrifice his own son. By chanting hymns to various deities, however, Śunaḥśepa releases himself from the sacrificial post. For each *mantra* that he chants, one of his hundred fetters is loosened. He is ultimately adopted by Viśvāmitra.

The Aitareya does not tell us why *this* story should be told in the Rājasūya, but it suffices to note that no one tells it to Yudhiṣṭhira at his Rājasūya. Instead, the epic replaces the Śunaḥśepa story with another one: the tale of Śiśupāla. While adapting the Rājasūya from the Aitareya, the Mahābhārata changes the victim; and in doing so *interprets* what salvation means. Bhīṣma elaborately describes the childhood of the Cedi prince. When he was born, he was misshapen and brayed like an ass. His mother and father decided to cast him out. A disembodied voice told his father: “King, he is born your son, illustrious and powerful, therefore be not afraid of him, but guard your child anxiously” (Mbh. 2.40.5). The voice further predicted that the person who restored the proper appearance of the child would also cause his death. Later, when the queen placed her son in Kṛṣṇa’s lap, his appearance was restored. The anxious mother, Kṛṣṇa’s aunt, knew that Janārdana would kill her son. To assuage her, Kṛṣṇa promised: “I shall forsooth forgive a hundred derelictions of your son, paternal aunt, even though they may be capital offenses. Do not sorrow” (Mbh. 2.40.22). But when the emboldened Śiśupāla overreached his transgressions (a hundred) in the Rājasūya, Kṛṣṇa cut his head off with a discus. Curiously—and this is an amazing turn of events—Śiśupāla is liberated: “Thereupon the kings watched a sublime radiance rise forth from the body of the king of Cedis, which, great king, was like the sun rising up from the sky; and that radiance greeted the lotus-eyed Kṛṣṇa, honored by the world, and entered him, O king” (Mbh. 2.42.22–23). Śiśupāla inaugurates the famous motif of *vairi-bhakti*, of which the Bhāgavatapurāṇa speaks sufficiently. What concerns us here is the way a Vedic *yajña* is presented, and how that presentation is an interpretation. Head and shoulders above all the expert squabble, the feat accomplished by the two Kṛṣṇas—*ṛṣi* and God—forms the *bhakti* praxis and *itihāsapurāṇa* narrative that won out in Hinduism.

The Mahābhārata substitutes the Śunaḥśepa narrative with the Śiśupāla narrative, but enough resonances endure. One character is born deformed and brayed like an ass; the other is named after a dog’s tail, which is known for not being straight. Both are betrayed by their parents. Both end up in the place of the *yajñapaśu* or the sacrificial animal. Both inhabit the domain of the Rājasūya. Motifs like sitting on the lap of the Viśvāmitra to be saved from the sacrifice and sitting in Dāmodara’s lap to attain *mokṣa* are important parallels as are the hundred fetters which become undone and the hundred transgressions which fail to bind. Śunaḥśepa is released in the last moment by *ṛk* mantras and is adopted into a new family line with hoary ancestry. But the Mahābhārata ends the parallels there. Śiśupāla is saved in an entirely different way. He no doubt ends up being killed as if he were a *yajñapaśu*—magnifying and humanizing the sacrificial victim—but he attains something infinite, a state that can never be achieved through any *yajña*. By

replacing the Śunaḥśepa narrative with the Śiśupāla narrative, Vyāsa replaces desire for heaven with the fulfilment of all desire: absorption into *Brahman*, Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva. The Mahābhārata is thus both innovative and conservative, or more precisely, it is interpretive. Even the motif of substitution is already contained in the Śunaḥśepa narrative: Śunaḥśepa himself is a substitute for Rohita. What guided this interpretation? The epic understands its textual project clearly: the Mahābhārata is an Upaniṣad (Mbh. 1.1.191) which glorifies Lord Vāsudeva (1.1.193) whom it reveals as *Brahman: śāśvatam brahma paramam dhruvam* (1.1.194). Further, *adhyātma* is taught here, thus the text reflects that highest self (1.1.196–7). What is the purpose of interpretation? Veda should be elucidated based on *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* (1.1.204). What is the result of interpretation? The revelation of Kṛṣṇa as *Brahman* whose nature is bliss. The Mahābhārata’s interpretative activity connects the creative and ecstatic potential of literature with its very source, which is existence and bliss. The *itihāsapurāṇa* is an ecstatic textual tradition that demands a suitable philology: an ecstatic philology.

THE BEING OF ECSTASY

In reading the intersection between Mahābhārata and the Bhāgavatapurāṇa, we are following what we termed “ecstatic philology” or the erotic element with which this tradition narrates itself to itself, as if in an joyful procession. But what or who leads this procession? What is the source of this ecstasy so faithfully transmitted in these literary creations? Again, we turn to Plato’s genius to guide us.

In the *Symposium*, Diotima reveals to Socrates the erotic connection between creativity and its source: beauty. After warning him that he may find it difficult to be initiated into the “final and highest mystery” (τέλεια καὶ ἐποπτικά, *Symp.* 210a; literally, the final vision of initiation), she nevertheless teaches him: the lover is led through appreciating the beauty of the body, of laws and customs, and finally to the beauty of knowledge. Here the lover turns from instances of beauty to the great ocean of beauty, and gazing upon it, becomes gloriously creative and brings forth beautiful ideas in “the plenteous crop of philosophy... When a man has been thus far tutored in the lore of love, passing from view to view of beautiful things, in the right and regular ascent, suddenly he will have revealed to him, as he draws to the close of his dealings in love, a wondrous vision, beautiful in its nature; and this, Socrates, is the final object of all those previous toils. First of all, it is ever-existent and neither comes to be nor perishes, neither waxes nor wanes...” (*Symp.* 210a–211a; Bury trans.). The source of all creativity and beauty is that which is ever existent, or simply, being. Plato describes it as the true, the good, and the beautiful.

When we turn to the *itihāsapurāṇa* tradition of narratives and the festivals and rituals based on this tradition, we can also see the deep connection between ontology and ecstasy, or rather, the relationship between *Brahman* and *bhakti*. *Bhakti* is ecstatic not because it is irrational or because it is a creed or because it is social dynamics as Durkheim has it. *Bhakti* is not ecstatic because it is transgressive. *Bhakti* is ecstatic because it is the experience of the unconditioned source: it is ecstatic precisely because it is a liminal experience, dehiscing from, though without negating, the order of subjectivity and social constructions.

The textual tradition always understood itself as oriented by the revelation of *Brahman* as not only existence and consciousness, but also bliss. Śāṅkara writes:

For it is in reference to the supreme Self alone that the word “bliss” is repeated many times. After introducing the Blissful One, and speaking of Him as Bliss in the texts, “He is Bliss to be sure” (*raso vai sah*; Tai. II.vii.1),⁴³ it is stated, “For one becomes happy by coming in contact with Bliss. Who indeed would inhale or exhale if this Bliss were not there in the supreme space (within the heart)? For this One indeed delights people” (Tai. II.vii); “This is an evaluation of Bliss” (Tai. II.vii.1); “He attains this self full of Bliss” (Tai. II.viii.5); “The enlightened man is not afraid of anything after realizing the Bliss of Brahman” (Tai. II.ix.1); and “He knew Bliss as Brahman” (*ānando brahmeti vyajānāt*; Tai. III.vi). In another Upaniṣad also, the word Bliss is seen to be used for *Brahman* Itself in the sentence, “Knowledge, Bliss, Brahman” (*vijñānamānandaṃ brahma*; Br. III.ix.28.7).⁴⁴

The argument that Śāṅkara is referring to *nirguṇa Brahman*, and not *saguṇa Brahman*,⁴⁵ whereas the Purāṇa speaks of Kṛṣṇa as “the Lord” (*kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān svayam*; Bhp.

⁴³ Here, *rasa* means bliss and is a synonym for *Brahman*, but significantly in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa *rasa* is also an aesthetic, gustatory term as in English “he has good taste.” In Sanskrit, aesthetics elaborates a *rasa* system of “flavors” and their corresponding emotions or *bhāvas*. *Rasa* aesthetics articulates an external mimetic component which interacts with internal emotional states in a participatory way. This participation is also mimetic, but *truer* than average historical existence. Thus it is ecstatic.

⁴⁴ Śāṅkara, commentary on Br.Sū 1.1.12 in Swāmi Gambhīrānanda, trans. *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya of Śāṅkarācārya* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), 65.

⁴⁵ Doniger suggests that “the *nirguṇa* image of deity—the god without qualities—in Hinduism is a graft onto Puranic and temple bhakti that never really took,” “the *nirguṇa* line” being “taken up by grassroots Hindus with a strictly limited degree of success.” She argues that “the logical outcome of merging with a *nirguṇa* deity—moksha—would be the disappearance of bhakti, with no god to be the object of devotion; [as] the ultimate *nirguṇa* deity is *brahman*, the impersonal divine substance of which all living things are elements.... *Nirguṇa* bhakti is [thus] a concoction that monistic Hindu philosophers imposed upon a *saguṇa* bhakti tradition that managed, somehow, to absorb it.” Wendy Doniger, “*Saguṇa* and *Nirguṇa* Images of the Deity,” in *On Hindus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 151–52. Contra Doniger, however, we can observe that the goal of every *askesis* and every soteriological praxis is to experience the divine absolute. This can have several gradations, but whether it be the *unio mystica* or various forms of theistic worship, all of these can have sense only if they are referred to an infinite, unconditioned Being. Thus, whatever the confessional commitments of the practitioners, their praxis can only be meaningfully classified as a religious one if it is directed, in the ultimate analysis, not to this or that being or object of worship but to Being itself. Vice versa, in forms of *askesis* directed at *nirguṇa Brahman*, the liberation sought may not be thought of as an extinction; what is more *mokṣa*-like than a single, unbroken contemplation and what is more akin to a single, unbroken contemplation than the experience of divine love, or *bhakti*? Is the “disappearance of bhakti” to be understood as its cessation or its perfection, where, in a love so intense, neither the distinction between lover and thing loved nor the distinction between the beginning and end of this love remains? If *bhakti* is conceived of transactionally and empirically, as requiring an external object and as being about no more than an ostentatious display, then Doniger’s interpretation is surely correct. A true *bhakta* would seek always an objectified and external God. But merely because the *bhakta* rejoices in worshipping, being with, and attending to his God, are we justified in assuming that he has rejected “merging” into God? Or is the constancy, fluency, and autonomy of his ritual performance precisely an indication for the fact that he has removed himself from our mundane world (from which perspective alone, our descriptions of his actions occur)? The distinction between a “personal” and an “impersonal” deity is drawn too strongly when we aver that “the ultimate *nirguṇa* deity is *brahman*, the impersonal divine substance of which all living things are elements.” For every

1.3.28), is irrelevant to the current discussion, because both the Brahmasūtras and the Bhāgavatapurāṇa begin their inquiry into *Brahman* with the phrase *janmādyasya* or “the source of creation, et cetera” of this universe. Śaṅkara prefaces his interpretation of the *ānandamayādhikaraṇam* (verses 12–19) by raising an objection: “It has been established with the help of logic that the Upaniṣadic texts... aim at proving that the omniscient and omnipotent God is the cause of the origin, continuance, and dissolution of the universe. And by asserting that the same kind of knowledge is gathered from all the Upaniṣads, it has been explained that all the Upaniṣads speak of a conscious entity as the cause. What then is the idea of proceeding with the remaining portion of the book?” He responds to the objection he has raised by claiming that *Brahman* is known in two aspects—with the delimitations of name and form (*nāmarūpavikārabhedopādhiviśiṣṭam*) and without them (*sarvopādhivivarjitam*)—leading to different means of liberation: mediated (*kramamukti*) and immediate (*sadyomukti*). From a logical, ontological, and theological point of view then, the Brahmasūtras do not hesitate to make room for the Bhāgavatapurāṇa’s vision and the Purāṇa reciprocally concurs with the Upaniṣadic revelation of *Brahman*: Kṛṣṇa is Bliss personified (*kevalānubhavānandasvarūpaḥ*; 10.3.13).

NĀRADA’S ECSTATIC JOURNEY

This article investigated the intersection of the epic and the Purāṇa to rethink the relationship between the liberation of Śiśupāla and the ecstasy of *rāsālīlā*. The Bhāgavatapurāṇa, as we saw, knows the Mahābhārata only too well to have committed the apparent gaffe of citing a non-existent episode. Its reference to the Yudhiṣṭhira-Nārada dialogue in the epic, alleged to have taken place at the Rājasūya, is a carefully constructed “empty reference,”⁴⁶ which discloses the innovation of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. Instead of mechanically copying episodes from the epic, in what could be termed “adaptive reuse” of epic matter,⁴⁷ the Bhāgavatapurāṇa not only offers a learned interpretation of ultimate reality and the means of attaining it, but also discloses the salvific potential of narrativity.

worshipper, provided he is willing to grant universality and non-exclusivism to the concept of deity, simultaneously worships both the personal and the impersonal, or, rather, both *Brahman* with form and without form. It does not make sense to speak of *Brahman* as impersonal, as though we could imagine *Brahman* with a personality, just as when we say someone worships a personal god, we do not mean that God has a “personality.” When realized saints themselves show that the distinction is meaningless or, at least, merely heuristic, it takes a certain kind of hubris to reinstate it as absolute, deriving from “the merging of several different Indian traditions,” and to accuse the *sants* of committing an epistemological mistake. Indeed, as Biardeau notes, *bhakti* is not a phenomenon of “lower-caste origins, which slowly pushed its way into upper-caste circles”; it is “the work of Brahmins”; its “structures ... unintelligible so long as they are cut off from Vedic Revelation.” Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization*, trans. Richard Nice (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 89–90.

⁴⁶ For the source see Andreas Bigger, *Balarāma im Mahābhārata: seine Darstellung im Rahmen des Textes und seiner Entwicklung* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998). For a comprehensive refutation of Bigger’s idea that we can establish the existence of “parallel versions” of the Mahābhārata using so-called empty references, that is, a reference that exists in the constituted text of the Mahābhārata critical edition “without this reference being satisfied in the normative redaction [that is, the constituted text] itself” (111) see Adluri and Bagchee, *Philology and Criticism*, particularly “The Argument from Empty Reference” and “The Argument from Loss.”

⁴⁷ We borrow the term from Elisa Freschi and Philipp A. Maas, eds., *Adaptive Reuse: Aspects of Creativity in South Asian History* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017).

We already met Nārada in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa where he presented Hariścandra with a dilemma about the good life: either the life of holy men unattached to *pravṛtti* or the life of a sacrificer engaged in *pravṛtti* for the sake of wealth and sons. We likewise saw how Nārada plays a vital role in the Mahābhārata's Rājasūya episode, where Yudhiṣṭhira's choice to perform this rite also implied a painful sacrifice: the *raṇa-yajña* of the Kurukṣetra. Nārada mentions Hariścandra in response to the king's desire to hear about the various *sabhās* and *lokas*. Later, at the sacrifice, Yudhiṣṭhira beholds Śiśupāla's liberation but *continues* with the rite. After completing the concluding *avabhṛta* bath (Mbh. 2.42.35), he thanks Kṛṣṇa and bids him farewell: "It is by your grace, Govinda, that I have attained to the rite. By your grace that the entire royal baronage came under my sway and attended on me, bringing rich tribute. Without you, hero, we shall find no joy at all. Yet you must go to your city Dvāravatī" (2.42.47–48). Vāsudeva understands Yudhiṣṭhira's choice only too well and, as the *yajña-phala-dāta*, the boon-bestowing Lord grants him the result of the *yajña*. Nārada, who had told Yudhiṣṭhira about the Rājasūya, is present to witness the entire *yajña*. His account is as follows:

Nārada called to mind the lotus-eyed Hari. The lord Nārāyaṇa, slayer of the enemies of the Gods, conqueror of enemy cities, had himself been born in the baronage to keep his promise—he, the creator, who of yore had himself commanded the Gods: "Ye shall regain your old world after killing one another...." He, enemy-crushing Hari, the strength of whose arms Indra and all the gods revere, had indeed become man. "O woe, the self-created God himself will once more carry off this powerful baronage that has grown so great," such was the thought upon which Nārada reflected, wise in the Laws, for he knew that Hari Nārāyaṇa was the lord who is to be praised with sacrifices. (Mbh. 2.33.10–15)

Nārada, who understands the *devarahasya* of *bhārāvatarāṇa*, had previously offered Yudhiṣṭhira a choice, just as he had outlined two paths (of renunciation or sacrificial transaction) to Hariścandra. Yudhiṣṭhira, like Hariścandra, eagerly chose the fruit of sacrifice rather than salvation. Therefore, the Bhāgavatapurāṇa dilates on the meaning of Śiśupāla's liberation by furnishing a dialogue between Nārada and Yudhiṣṭhira, thereby filling in an "empty reference" of its own making. Thus, a literary retelling by the Purāṇa makes explicit the salvation provided by Kṛṣṇa and the complementary critique of sacrifice.

In the intervening Vedic corpus, between Nārada's appearance in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa and his role in the Mahābhārata, we meet Nārada in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (seventh *prapāṭhaka*) learning from Sanatkumāra. Confessing to the youthful sage that he knows all the sciences, the four Vedas and the fifth (that is, *itihāsapurāṇa*), grammar, et cetera, he says: "O venerable sir, such as I am, I merely know the subjects textually (*mantravit eva asmi*). But I am not a knower of the Self. It has been heard by me, from venerable people like you, that a knower of the Self goes beyond sorrow. Such as I am, I am full of sorrow (*so 'haṃ ... śocāmi*), please take me beyond sorrow" (Ch.Up. 7.1.3; Gambhīrānanda trans.). Nārada confesses that he has undergone a broad academic education, but he knows these subjects only "textually." His admission raises a philological-pedagogical question concerning the meaning of texts and the principles

guiding their interpretation. As though anticipating the problems with our historicism and our allegedly critical philology, it reveals the limitations of mere textual study. Nārada’s confession is a critique of polymathy and sophistry over the salvific potential of philosophy.⁴⁸ True knowledge, the Upaniṣad claims and the Purāṇa enthusiastically affirms, leads to bliss. This conversation recalls another dialogue that occurs at the very beginning of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. In this conversation between Nārada and Vyāsa, the author of the epic reflects on the nature and purpose of his literary activity. After composing the epic, Vyāsa reflects on his own sorrow:

Observing all the vows and in absolute sincerity, I have devoted myself to Vedic study, service of the teachers and the adoration of the sacred fires.

In the guise of the Mahabharata, I have also made available to people debarred from Vedic study the truth contained in the Vedas, viz., the knowledge of the fourfold meaning of life—Dharma (Virtue), Artha (Wealth), Kāma (Desire) and Moksha (Liberation).

Still, alas! I, who am considered great and perfect among those endowed with the lustre of spiritual refinement, fail to feel that enrichment and joy of the spirit.

(Bhp. 1.4.28–30)

Nārada arrives and admonishes Vyāsa. The reason Vyāsa fails to experience delight, according to the sage, is that he has not “for the most part,” “described the pure glory of *Bhagavān*” (Bhp. 1.5.8). He has not “described the greatness of Vāsudeva to the same extent that [he has] gloried the four [mundane] goals of life—*dharma*, righteous conduct; *artha*, material well-being; *kāma*, satisfaction of desires; and *mokṣa*, liberation” (1.5.9). Nārada continues, “Unfortunately, desiring to speak of other unrelated things, your focus became distracted away [from Kṛṣṇa]. But your mind, distracted by names and forms (*nāma-rūpa*) can never gain tranquility by any other means whatsoever [than the composition of the Bhāgavata]” (1.5.15–16). After instructing Vyāsa to recall “by means of *samādhi* vision, the activities of Kṛṣṇa, [the one] who frees from all bondage” (1.5.13; Bryant trans.), Nārada continues on his way. The Purāṇa continues with a remark by the Sūta to his listeners in the outermost frame:

⁴⁸ The Upaniṣad’s critique of polymathy has parallels in both Heraclitus (Fr. B40 and 129, D-K) and in Plato (*Laws* 811a–b and 819a). Granger provides a useful summary of the former’s views in Herbert Granger, “Heraclitus’ Quarrel with Polymathy and Historiê,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974–2014) 134, no. 2 (2004): 235–61, noting particularly the dangers of polymathy, which include “credulity and a reliance upon the opinions of others,” “burdening him [the seeker of truth] with a mass of superfluous information that goes well beyond what is needed for understanding,” and “a false sense of achieving a privileged epistemic position that only a handful of human beings would ever be able to attain.” As Granger points out, “For Heraclitus, however, there is no privileged position, and the truth is equally open to all. ‘Although the *logos* is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding’ (B2); men are merely ‘deceived in the recognition of what is obvious’ (B56); they ‘do not think things in the way they encounter them’ (B17). . . . The truth should be within mankind’s compass, especially since ‘Man’s character is his fate’ (B119), and ‘Common to all is thinking’ (B113). There is nothing essential in the nature of humanity that blocks humans from reaching the truth. The elitist Heraclitus is an egalitarian when it comes to the estimation of the underlying capacity humans possess for the attainment of the truth. Each man is his own witness, and he requires no further authority than himself: ‘It belongs to all men to know themselves and to reason soundly’ (B116)” (258–59).

Blessed is this divine sage Nārada! For singing to the accompaniment of his vina about the excellences of the Lord, he himself is ever inebriated with divine love, and he enlivens with joy the hearts of beings distressed by the woes of the world (*gāyan mādyann idaṃ tantryā ramayaty āturam jagat*). (Bhp. 1.6.38–39)

What is the source of the sage’s delight? In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Nārada was sorrowful because he was not a knower of the Self (*evāsmi nātmavit*). Here the roles are reversed: it is Vyāsa who is unfulfilled (*asaṃpanna*; Bhp. 1.4.30) and regretful (*khidyataḥ*; 1.4.32) and Nārada who instructs him in the means of achieving joyfulness. The dialogue between Nārada and Sanatkumāra concludes thus: “Sanatkumāra said: ‘That which indeed is Infinite, that is joy. There is no joy in the finite. The infinite alone is joy. But the Infinite indeed has to be sought after.’ Nārada said: ‘O venerable sir, I seek after the Infinite’” (*yo vai bhūmā tatsukhaṃ nālpe sukhamasti bhūmaiva sukhaṃ bhūmā tveva vijijñāsitavya iti bhūmānaṃ bhagavo vijijñāsa iti*; Ch.Up. 7.23.1; Gambhīrānanda trans.). Nārada certainly succeeded in his quest for the infinite, as reported by the Mahābhārata in the Nārāyaṇīya (Mbh. 12.321–39). Nārada visits the retreat of Nara and Nārāyaṇa. There, he is surprised to find them engaged in worship. Nārada asks Nārāyaṇa about the deity to whom he sacrifices: “You are glorified in the Vedas along with the ancillary texts and the purāṇas. You are considered the Unborn, the Sempiternal, the Sustainer, the Insurmountable Immortality. In You is established the entire universe, past, future and so on. . . . [You are the] Father and Mother of the entire universe, and also the Eternal Guru. We know not to which deity or ancestor you sacrifice today” (Mbh. 12.321.24–26; my trans.). Nārāyaṇa tells Nārada about his original form known as the Puruṣa, which is manifested to his devotees on Śvetadvīpa. Reaching Śvetadvīpa, Nārada worships Nārāyaṇa with a hymn of 169 divine names. When Nārāyaṇa reveals Himself, Nārada declares:

Nārada said:

Certainly, today I have instantaneously obtained the fruit of my austerities, vows and regulations, since I beheld the Bhagavān.

It is a superlative boon to me that I saw you; you the sempiternal one, the Bhagavān, the omniscient one, the lion, the Great Lord (*mahāprabhu*) of all forms. (Mbh. 12.326.15–16; my trans.)

Nārada thus brings together the Vedic revelation (Brāhmaṇa), Upaniṣadic *Brahman*, and philosophical contemplation or *darśana* (of *saguṇa Brahman*) in the *itihāsapurāṇa*. By bringing back the report of how Nārāyaṇa is worshipped by his devotees on Śvetadvīpa (Mbh. 12.331.41–43) he inaugurates both the textual tradition (of Pāñcarātra Āgamas) and the *bhakti* tradition in Hinduism. Nārada joyfully traverses the canon, demonstrating its literary continuity. He is present at all key moments of these narratives, shepherding them for aesthetic pleasure, edification, *bhakti*, and the ultimate bliss. Instructed by Sanatkumāra and having seen Nārāyaṇa’s supernal form on Śvetadvīpa, he works with Kṛṣṇa and Vyāsa to reveal the ultimate import of Vedic revelation by making good the lacunae in the tradition: what Yudhiṣṭhira *should* have asked but did not; what Vyāsa *should* have expounded but did not. In a way, he is guiding the *reader* just as much as the

character or the author to draw the logical conclusion from his preliminary sorrowfulness. This is the very trope with which the Brahmasūtras also began again: the inquiry into bliss, *ānandamayādhikaraṇam*.

The text-historical method breaks up texts into layers, phrases, and even words rearranged on a timeline.⁴⁹ It feigns that as “anonymous literature”⁵⁰ “we cannot interpret them [the Purāṇas] as achievements of individual authors, belonging to precisely determinable periods.”⁵¹ But regardless of whether there was one author or many, here we see the texts creatively explicating the insight into *Brahman*’s nature as bliss and carrying this enterprise to its logical conclusion in Purāṇic Hinduism. Our analysis showed that the *itihāsapurāṇa* is a highly self-conscious interpretive tradition which undertakes a literary-aesthetic interpretation of the revelation of *Brahman* in the Veda. Contrary to the theory of “adaptive reuse” of texts, driven by extrinsic and mechanical considerations,⁵² the *itihāsapurāṇa* undertakes ecstatic philology, one that interprets

⁴⁹ See Hacker, “Zur Methode der geschichtlichen Erforschung,” cited earlier. As for what this method achieves, here is Hacker’s answer: “From such changes (I mean: inversions of the text, expansions, interpolations and even individual word variants) we can at times practically read off intellectual-historical processes. And since for the most part we lack direct historical evidence, *Textgeschichte* or, speaking more generally, the *method of comparing multiple transmissions* is often the sole scientific means of knowledge of the historical processes” (ibid., 489). As explained in *Philology and Criticism* (94, n. 35), the term *Textgeschichte* should not be translated with “textual history.” It is not what we would ordinarily understand by a history of the text, that is, the history of its authorship, place of composition, reception, manuscript tradition, et cetera. Rather, what Hacker means is a history *internal* to the text (which for him does not *exist* as such), a history of its alleged constituent elements that must be first detected in the text using so-called *textgeschichtliche* inferences. In practice, this has meant creating complicated charts of “relationships of dependence” (*Abhängigkeitsverhältnisse*) between texts or mythemes as illustrated by Hacker in his *Prahlāda* book (see below). Further examples may be found in Peter Schreiner, “Die Hymnen des Viṣṇupurāṇa. Materialien zur Textanalyse des Viṣṇupurāṇa” (Habilitationsschrift, University of Tübingen, 1980) and Annemarie Mertens, *Der Dakṣamythus in der episch-purāṇischen Literatur: Beobachtungen zur religionsgeschichtlichen Entwicklung des Gottes Rudra-Siva im Hinduismus* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998). The hypothetical—and pointless—nature of these exercises has never troubled its practitioners.

⁵⁰ Hacker proposes this expression “as a collective term for the Mahābhārata, the Purāṇas and the dharma texts of Hinduism in particular,” their distinguishing feature being that they are “ascribed to a mythic author.” He also calls them “composite literature or ... compiled or redacted literature.” Hacker, “Zur Methode der geschichtlichen Erforschung,” 483–84. We think “literary community” is a better description for how the texts interact with each other.

⁵¹ Paul Hacker, *Prahlāda: Werden und Wandlungen einer Idealgestalt* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1959), 12.

⁵² The editors formulate the concept in several ways, including: “The attribute ‘adaptive’ presupposes that the reusing person pursues a specific purpose by adapting something already existent to his or her specific needs. The reused object has to be identified as being reused, because otherwise the adaptation is not an instance of reuse, but of recycling”; “In contrast to simple re-use, adaptive reuse is not merely the repetition of a previous use; it implies more than an item just being used again. In adaptive reuse, the reuser expects his or her audience to recognize the reused elements in order to achieve a well-defined purpose, as for example adding prestige, credibility, etc. to the newly created item”; “simple and adaptive re(-)use do not mutually exclude each other. In general, different degrees of adaptation characterize individual cases of re(-)use. On the side of simple re-use, economic reasons are more relevant, whereas on the side of adaptive reuse, changes of purpose (‘resemantization’), and authorial expectations concerning the audience’s recognition of the reuse are more dominant”; and “In the case of textual reuse, adaptive reuse highlights the fact that the textual material has been reused. Its reuse emphasizes the text and its connotations.” Elisa

Vedic sentences such as “know bliss to be verily *Brahman*,” et cetera. Interprets how? By revealing the ecstatic potential of narrative, while simultaneously demonstrating that *Brahman* itself is the source of all narrative and bliss. The claim that “older Purāṇic texts are content with narrating the mythology that has been handed down. . . . Theological content is only sporadically expressed in these myths”⁵³ is thus textually unsustainable. By tracing the stations of Nārada’s journey, we showed that the *itihāsapurāṇa* undertakes a re-reading of the Vedic revelation in which ontology and myth are inseparable and together unfold a logic *internal* to the tradition. The ontology of bliss is first revealed in the Veda. In the Mahābhārata, it is developed into a critique of the sacrificial order and taken to its ultimate conclusion in the rapturous experience of *rāsalīlā* in the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. Thus, in lockstep with the descent of *Brahman* into the textual universe of the *itihāsapurāṇa*, philosophical logic guides the formation of the canon. A better way, then, to conduct even so-called text-historical investigations is to grasp the issues at stake in the texts and allow ourselves be guided by the narrative interactions between them. By paying attention to these intertextual and intratextual references, our reading of the texts becomes more meaningful. These connections are not available to text-historicism, hence vindicating our earlier claim that ecstatic philology, rather than text-historicism, provides a better method for the humanities. Finally, we may recall the two kinds of literary activity outlined in Plato’s *Phaedrus*: the engraving on the tomb of Midas and the narrative of the soul’s erotic ascent to participate in the feast of the gods. How did we become such a necromantic, historicizing people who prefer the bondage of literal interpretations to literary ecstasy?

CONCLUSION

This article made a contribution to the study of the *itihāsapurāṇa*. It proposed ecstatic philology as a response to what is dead in and dead *about* critical philology.⁵⁴ There are many ways of defining this new philology: it is the antithesis to the autopsies of text-historicism; it is concerned with recovering and participating in the Dionysian dimension of texts; it is the *gaia scienza*; it reconstructs the community of texts and the communities to which these texts belong and on which in turn they bestow meaning. But these definitions seek once again to turn ecstatic philology into a method that can be indifferently applied, whereas the first principle of ecstatic philology is that it is *enacted*. Hence our approach in this article, which showed that the texts themselves form a community: they belong to and interpret the nexus of meaning of that community, while simultaneously bestowing meaning on that community. If one is attuned to these narrative interactions, one can enter into and joyfully participate in the experience these texts cultivate. The relationship between the Mahābhārata and the Bhāgavatapurāṇa in

Freschi and Philipp A. Maas, “Introduction: Conceptual Reflections on Adaptive Reuse,” in *Adaptive Reuse: Aspects of Creativity in South Asian History* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017), 13–14 and 17.

⁵³ Hacker, *Prahlāda*, 102.

⁵⁴ See Vishwa Adluri, review of *World Philology*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang, *American Historical Review* 121, no. 3 (2016): 908–10, especially 910: “*World Philology* is perhaps best read as a well-meaning, albeit naïve, plea for a renewal of philology. But one wonders whether this attempt is not too late and the ship has already sailed or, in this case, sunk. Philology, to speak with Hegel, is ‘a shape of life grown old.’ By gathering under the banner of a ‘critical philology,’ it ‘cannot be rejuvenated but only understood’ (Hegel, *Preface to the Philosophy of Right*).”

terms of *kṛṣṇa-līlā* proved to be a complex one, inexplicable by purely historical-critical method. Hence we turned to hermeneutic interpretation, paying close heed to a *sensus communis* that undergirds the texts, their communities, and the ultimate concern that guides them. We followed the topic of ecstasy because it is a cipher for the doctrine of being that guides these texts. Without paying heed to that ontological source of joy, we are left with no way to appreciate texts: we see only a “monstrous chaos”⁵⁵ or “literary absurdity”⁵⁶ and even, in Doniger’s case, “an Irish bull.”⁵⁷

A good amount of racism also went into Western readings of Indian texts, as reflected by Stietenron’s comment:

The analytic thinking of Western interpreters who were schooled in historical-philological methods stands in contrast to the traditional Indian commentators, who not only harmonized and freely downplayed all breaks in the text [that is, the *Gītā*], but, above all, sought to read their own philosophical-theological concepts out of individual textual passages, in order to secure Kṛṣṇa’s divine authority for them—a spectrum that has been further expanded since the beginning of India’s independence movement by the politically motivated interpretations of modernity.⁵⁸

This racism continues in dichotomies such as “traditional versus critical approaches,”⁵⁹ “scholar versus practitioner,”⁶⁰ “academic versus the believer,”⁶¹ “etic versus emic

⁵⁵ Oldenberg’s term in Hermann Oldenberg, *Das Mahābhārata: sein Inhalt, seine Entstehung, seine Form* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922), 1.

⁵⁶ Winternitz commenting in Moriz Winternitz, *Geschichte der indischen Literatur*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Amelang, 1909), 272.

⁵⁷ Doniger, “*Saguna and Nirguna Images of the Deity*,” 152.

⁵⁸ Heinrich von Stietenron, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Angelika Malinar, *Rājavidyā: Das königliche Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1996), 6–7.

⁵⁹ See Jürgen Hanneder, “Pretence and Prejudice,” *Indological Taurinensia* 37 (2011): 123–37, particularly 132: “With queer arguments Adluri tries to be on the side of those who think that the texts as given or transmitted in the Indian tradition have to be made sense of, against those who are more interested in the prehistory of texts, their strata, etc., with his own interests mostly limited to the *Mahābhārata*.”

⁶⁰ Hanneder cites both the contrast between “traditional Indian and Western academic scholarship” and the fact that “the pandit’s proficiency in a subject is often coupled ... with a certain way of life ... it may be difficult to divorce the academic aspect from the Pandit identity”; the “holism” of the pandit is contrasted with “Western” Indology’s “specifically historically oriented, critical approach.” Jürgen Hanneder, review of *The Pandit. Traditional Scholarship in India*, ed. by Michael Axels, *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 155, no. 2 (2001): 671–72.

⁶¹ In Jürgen Hanneder, *Marburger Indologie im Umbruch: zur Geschichte des Faches 1845–1945* (Munich: P. Kirheim Verlag, 2010), 81–87 we are told that “a scientific [*wissenschaftliches*] interest in Indian culture” no longer “suits our time”; “for many, it would surely be enough to hear about India’s culture in travel-books and to doze between palm-leaf libraries and flying yogis.” The “religious-confessional [*religiös-weltanschaulich gebundene*]” perspective of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi University is contrasted with “the old Indology, an erstwhile rational human science [*Geisteswissenschaft*], that garnered honor for itself for the understanding and clarification of India’s cultural and intellectual history.” This is a dramatic oversimplification of the fact that “old Indology” was no less “religious-confessional,” excluding Jews, Hindus, and to a great extent Catholics also. See Adluri and Bagchee, *The Nay Science*, particularly chapter 4 and see also Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, “Jews and Hindus in Indology,” paper published on Academia.edu, <https://www.academia.edu/30937643>. Hanneder forgets that “historicism emerged from

thinking,”⁶² and “‘scholars of Indian origin’ versus ‘Western scholarship’.”⁶³ But what purpose do these dichotomies serve? Their sole purpose is to delegitimize the communities to which these texts belong, and for whom they *continue to be meaningful*. This critical feint of writing off readers who appreciate the literary, soteriological, philosophical, and cultural dimensions of Indian texts as somehow unscientific and parochial has many coded qualifiers: “Brahmanism,” “nationalism,” “Indian ‘approach’,” “uncritical,” “unhistorical,” and “unscientific,” to name a few.⁶⁴ If scholars today lament the death of Indology and the humanities, it is because they have forgotten the first requirement for studying something. Deleuze writes:

If you don’t admire something, if you don’t love it, you have no reason to write a word about it. Spinoza or Nietzsche are philosophers whose critical and destructive powers are without equal, but this power always springs from affirmation, from joy, from a cult of affirmation and joy, from the exigency of life against those who would mutilate and mortify it. For me, that is philosophy itself...⁶⁵

In dismissing ecstatic philology, it would be easy to return to the stereotype of non-European cultures as “traditional,” “confessional,” “unreformed,” and “unenlightened.”⁶⁶ But our analysis showed that the textual tradition is quite self-critical. Furthermore, what

long-standing dilemmas internal to theology and biblical exegesis,” and that much of historical-critical scholarship until very recently was anti-Judaic in tendency. See the discussion in James L. Kugel, “Biblical Studies and Jewish Studies,” *AJS Newsletter* 36 (1986): 22–24 and see also Jon D. Levenson, “The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament and Historical Criticism,” in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 1–32. The quote is from Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. de Wette, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 14.

⁶² A good summary of the etic versus emic debate may be found in Daniele Cuneo, “Thinking Literature: Emic and Etic Approaches,” *Rivista degli studi orientali*, n.s., 84, no. 1/4 (2011): 123–28. The author ultimately rejects the distinction.

⁶³ The quote is from Mislav Ježić, “Historical Layers of Bhagavadgītā—the Transmission of the Text, Its Expansion and Reinterpretations. What Do Bhagavadgītā and the Cathedral of Saint Dominus Have in Common?” *Filozofska Istraživanja* 41, no. 2 (2021): 272.

⁶⁴ See Eli Franco, review of *The Nay Science. A History of German Indology*, by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2016): 695–98 and see also our response: Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee, “Authors’ response to Book Review of *The Nay Science. A History of German Indology*,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2019): 813–16.

⁶⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2004), 144.

⁶⁶ In *Marburger Indologie im Umbruch* Hanneder claims that a “functional Indology” is needed for the “defence of the achievements of the Enlightenment against religiously determined views” Bronkhorst, in Johannes Bronkhorst, “Indology, What Is It Good for?” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 161, no. 1 (2011): 115–22, claims that “disciplines like Indology can only exist against a background of Enlightenment values. However, not only do disciplines like Indology need Enlightenment values, Enlightenment values also need disciplines like Indology” (ibid., 116). According to him, scholars are not “mere good-will ambassadors of another tradition”; they have “a far more important role to play, viz., to defend the Enlightenment values that we consider vital for the society we live in” (ibid., 119). But in Kant’s words, the Enlightenment is identified with *sapere aude!* whereas the Indologists stand for the “self-incurred tutelage” of the greater portion of mankind.

we have articulated here is not everyday piety attributable to Indians. It is an attempt to salvage reading literature from the death-throes of critical philology. Ecstasy is not the same as the pleasure of reading a text, such as the nineteenth-century European novel.⁶⁷ Ecstasy is paying heed to the Dionysian element in texts which invites a person to existentially and emotively participate in the act of reading. The *itihāsapurāṇa* tradition is self-conscious of this ecstasy and reveals it as such.⁶⁸ One need not be a believer to participate in this experience: the sole requirement for it is the very one Deleuze articulates, *the capacity for love*.⁶⁹ Deleuze thus finds the institutionalized historicism of the humanities inhumane. His antidote is to learn to “read with love.” The Mahābhārata itself undertakes such a philology: a reading of the previous four Vedas, and thus a “fifth Veda.” Its literary project is a joyful affirmation against the nihilists—the *nāstikyas*. Its narrative pedagogical tract works with the *eros* of the reader, the initiate is delighted all the way. In carrying forward the Mahābhārata’s project, the Bhāgavatapurāṇa takes aesthetic delight to its zenith by presenting Kṛṣṇa as bliss—exactly as the Taittirīya Upaniṣad says: *raso vai saḥ*.

⁶⁷ See Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 205–22.

⁶⁸ Peter Bisschop, in a trivial, and rather mean-spirited, criticism of two recent books on the Purāṇas by Raj Balkaran, castigates the author for setting up an “artificial divide ... between text-critical scholars ‘slicing and dicing [...] for historicist or philological aims’ on the one hand, and those who read individual Purāṇas as an integrated whole, for whom Balkaran’s primary example is Greg Bailey, on the other.” Peter C. Bisschop, “What is Ailing Purāṇic Studies?” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 64 (2021): 174. We were surprised to find ourselves drawn into the debate (“In certain respects, this unproductive binary recalls the arguments of divisive publications by Vishwa Adluri and Joydeep Bagchee on the Mahābhārata which likewise set up a divide between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ scholars, as though the Deva-Asura war needs to be transplanted to the battleground of academia”), especially since the reference is to our work *Philology and Criticism*, which is nothing if not a defense of philology, particularly the kind—“philological research based on manuscripts”—to which Bisschop appeals. *Philology and Criticism* critiques the bad philology of scholars such as Reinhold Grünendahl, whose work Bisschop approvingly cites in other work. Bisschop has clearly not read the book. The question is not whether one should use philology or not; clearly, one should. The question is what aims that philology serves, whether a negative aim such as the “higher anti-Semitism” (Schechter’s expression) of the German scholars’ higher criticism or a positive aim such as bringing texts to the reader and bringing their ideas alive. Here the Skandapurāṇa project has produced rather dismal results. We fully appreciate that “the very question of how antiquity is to be comprehended in relation to modernity is basic to the historicism which distinguishes the nineteenth century’s sense of the self. The so-called turn to history as a mode of religious, cultural, political self-expression is very much a sign of the nineteenth-century times, and the discipline of classics is fundamental in the production of such knowledge. Studying the past was a privileged way in which the modern citizen was formed, and philology played a foundational role in this process.” Catherine Conybeare and Simon Goldhill, “Philology’s Shadow,” in *Classical Philology and Theology: Entanglement, Disavowal, and the Godlike Scholar*, ed. Catherine Conybeare and Simon Goldhill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2. Method is where modern man feels most sovereign. Underscoring the deficiencies of a tradition, particularly one that is not one’s own, becomes a way of affirming oneself: as critical, Western, European, secular, that is, the entire gamut of identities predicated on the Reformation. But we should also be conscious of what is lost when we take up such an antithetical relationship to antiquity, the ability of any kind of past to speak to us. This is really what “ails” Purāṇic studies today: they have nothing to say to anyone anymore and, as a result, the closure of departments is inevitable. See Peter C. Bisschop, “150 Years of Sanskrit Studies in the Netherlands: the Kārnapurāṇa,” paper published on Academia.edu, <https://www.academia.edu/16936828/>.

⁶⁹ Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, 139–40.

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