

2008

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Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume 28, Number 3, 2008, pp. 533-557 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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How Newness Enters the World: The Methodology of Sheldon Pollock

Rebecca Gould

Der ächte Historiker muss die Kraft haben, das Allbekannte zum Niegehörten umzuprägen und das Allgemeine so einfach und tief zu verkünden, dass man die Einfachheit über der Tiefe und die Tiefe über der Einfachheit übersieht.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben” (1874)

When setting out to deal with a work obsessed with beginnings, it is paradoxically natural to turn to an end. I therefore quote from the conclusion to one of Sheldon Pollock’s masterpieces, the twelfth Gonda lecture, titled “The Ends of Man at the End of Premodernity.” He is engaged in accounting for how it was possible within the Sanskrit world to create not only a culture but a civilization that did not rely on the related values of innovation and change.

The absence of modernity [in India] before colonialism would . . . be something less to regret than to celebrate, a sign of real civilization equipoise, where success is not (as in modernity) the capacity to expand but the capacity to endure. There is no law of chronic deficiency in human affairs mandating that societies, like cities . . . must always be under construction and never complete, that understandings of literary art, the structure of the moral order, or the organization of power can never achieve something like adequacy and even perfection for the social world concerned, but must be constantly rejected for something newer and better.

This proposition about the value placed by modernity on change is fascinating not only for its intellectual content but for its formal placement within the text. For Pollock proceeds to contradict himself: “Celebrating ‘civilization perfection’ is nothing more than a blind abdication of self-criticism. Together these produce, among other things, a misrecognition of the profound social conflict that lay at the heart of the non-modern nonwestern political and cultural orders, transforming what was in fact an exhausted ideological apparatus into a cultural achievement. In terms of intellectual history we are more justified in concluding that the dead hand of tradition arrested an Indian modernity.”¹

Thus we have two contradictory possibilities, presented in tension together. Pollock suggests that one insists on being chosen over the other, but it seems to me that passages such as this one capture well the structure of the mind that produced this reflection. More than any

I am grateful to Hadas Yaron for comments on an early draft of this essay, to the editors of *CSSAAME* for their patience with a text that ended up being longer than intended, and to the copy editors for going beyond the call of duty in their meticulousness. Due to my comparative focus, I have had to be schematic in my summaries of the state of scholarship on South Asia and the Caucasus. More detailed engagements with issues raised only briefly here will appear elsewhere.

1. Sheldon Pollock, *The Ends of Man at the End of Premodernity*, Twelfth Annual Gonda Lecture (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005), 87.

Comparative Studies of
South Asia, Africa and
the Middle East
Vol. 28, No. 3, 2008
doi:10.1215/1089201X-2008-030
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oeuvre known to me, Pollock's engages multiple worlds. Time and again, we find his scholarship yielding authority to premodern Indic materials. The end result of this scholarly methodology is a corpus that opens the reader to worlds hitherto unknown and in some cases otherwise unknowable. I would like to argue here that this methodology accounts in great measure for Pollock's greatness both as a philologist and as a theorist of premodernity. The quality of the perceptions offered in this oeuvre concerning eras, cultures, disciplines, texts, regions, histories, and experiences that know no regional or temporal constraint could only have emerged from a mind more adept at challenging and transcending the conventions of the world we inhabit than anyone else at work in the academy today.

And now Pollock has given us a much denser volume than the Gonda lecture. No essay can presume to encompass adequately the richness and significance of this work. I therefore offer here an interpretation of Pollock's methodology, intended for the non-Sanskritist, situating his magnum opus, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, within the context of his other work.² More broadly, I consider the scope and significance of Pollock's oeuvre from the perspective of comparative literary history. Though I allude to the many fields and disciplines to which Pollock's work makes a contribution, and attempt to suggest the nature of his accomplishments from some of those perspectives, from a comparative perspective (which is but one of many ways of reading) his most significant achievements lie in the vision he brings to the study of the past and the way in which he relates his material to the study of the present. There is in Pollock's oeuvre a set of philosophical concerns that are largely implicit within his

scholarship insofar as they derive from (rather than being foisted upon) his material. These concerns are all the more powerful for their unobtrusiveness and their capacity to shed light on questions of temporality, the concept of literature, and the problem of access to worlds that lie at empirical removes from the present.

I attempt here to reconstruct some of the empirical and intellectual background for this body of work, which comprises both the most important philological scholarship being produced in this country at present and some of the most visionary critical thought concerning how we as scholars ought to envision the futures of our various disciplines. It is hoped that the distance I have from issues of paramount concern to Sanskritists opens his oeuvre to broader, nonspecialist interpretations. I have no doubt of its relevance for anyone interested in literature, history, and the study of the modern and premodern world. More specifically, Pollock's work, carefully considered, can and should transform contemporary understandings of the relationship between culture and power, the status of literature, and the shifting meaning of categories such as state, ethnicity, and polity throughout history. This essay is written for someone like me, a non-Sanskritist, who stands to gain as much as I have from Pollock's oeuvre but who might not have discovered it without this attempt at mediation.³

The Language of the Gods in the World of Men is an account of *kavya*, the Sanskrit term for literature in a courtly context, in its relation to polity, *raj*.⁴ The study of premodern South Asia engages the Latinate world and the rise of the European vernaculars as a comparative foil. The third part of the book offers a critique of contemporary social theory from the perspec-

2. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Pre-modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Subsequent references to *The Language of the Gods* are given by page numbers in parentheses. In this article, all parenthetical references are to this book.

3. One highly significant aspect of Pollock's work not treated here is his editorial endeavors, the most significant of which is the monumental *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). The contributions of this volume are considered in a review symposium in the *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 42 (2005).

4. The term *kavya* is notoriously resistant to explanation to non-Indologists. Richard F. Gombrich offers one gloss: "Kavya corresponds precisely to no English term; but the one word English translation is poetry. . . . not all verse is kavya nor is all kavya in verse" (Gombrich, introduction to Bilhana, "Fifty Stanzas of a Love Thief," in *Love Lyrics*, trans. Greg Bailey, ed. Richard F. Gombrich, Clay Sanskrit Library [New York: New York University Press, 2005], 279.) Sanskrit literary theorists conceive of *kavya* in terms of a particular relation between word and meaning in the literary text (Sheldon Pollock, "Sanskrit Literary Culture: From the Inside Out," in *Literary Cultures in History*, 47).

tive of premodern South Asia. Following the tripartite structure of the book itself, I open with a general consideration of the nature and scope of Pollock's achievement before moving to a reflection on the possibilities that his work opens for thinking about culture and power in a comparative context (with specific reference to the Caucasus and the Islamic world generally, where my research has focused). I conclude by looking at the ways Pollock teaches us to deal with what is perhaps the deepest, and certainly the most pervasive, issue facing all academic disciplines today: Eurocentrism, not solely in the economic sense intended by Samir Amin, but as an epistemological barrier. Eurocentrism is the conditioning possibility for contemporary knowledge, and Pollock's work more than any other helps us to make sense of this predicament as well as how to move beyond.

The Language of the Gods

Pollock's fundamental concern is with the question of newness in all of its manifestations: within time, history, society, and literature. How does newness enter the world? he asks repeatedly. The question generates others: How is literature born from the nonliterary and textuality from the oral? How does modernity emerge from the past? How does vernacular consciousness arise in contexts where it did not exist before? How is the desacralizing process he deems central to the shift within ancient Indian history from the Sanskritic culture of the Vedas into the Sanskrit of *kavya* (implicitly, Pollock seems to argue, a secular institution) marked historically? How do worlds come into being without antecedents? How can we describe and discern what has never been said before? How, in short, is newness born?⁵

In Pollock's account, Sanskrit literature separated itself from daily life as it defined for

itself a universal sphere, both transregional and outside of time. The distinction made in Sanskrit texts between worldliness (*laukika*) and the this-worldly (*alaukika*) is one of the central taxonomies informing Pollock's own investigation. Though *kavya* denied its worldliness during the early epoch of flourishing (the third century BCE to the first century CE), Pollock's operative presumption is that literature is always related to power, that in fact it creates and even constitutes forms of political life, as well as being inflected by these forms. "Poetic images," he notes elsewhere, "are, in a non-trivial sense, historical facts."⁶ His historical phenomenology of the premodern South Asian aesthetic enables us to perceive the intrinsically political content of literature for the South Asian world, and for others as well.

But Pollock's belief in the permeable relation between the real and represented pertains to far more than the intersection of politics and culture. The argument that art "shows us that representation can sometimes be the only way the real and the true come to be known"⁷ is the dominant keynote of his oeuvre. As an ontology of representation the insight is a valuable one, but even more important is the complex consistency with which the theory unfolds in his work; at a certain point, the insight ceases to be theoretical. Much like poetry, it becomes not just a statement about reality but a tool in its construction.

Drawing inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of social power and domination, Pollock's interest lies in the forms of concealment and embodiment that the interaction between text and context takes, in literature as well as history. This relation between text and context describes Pollock's understanding of the relationship of literature to the world generally and stands in contrast to more familiar ap-

5. The metaphor of newness in Pollock's work has been critiqued by Brian A. Hatcher in "Sanskrit and the Morning After: The Metaphorics and Theory of Intellectual Change," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 43 (2007): 333–61. The article does not address the possibility that, arguably, all scholarship is a search for newness. Do we not distinguish the meaningful from the nonmeaningful according to the extent to which it is new in relation to prior forms of knowledge? Looking for newness is no impediment to scholarship, though the concept should be engaged with full reflexivity. While we might doubt

that anyone has done anything "new" by locating newness in Indian intellectual history, I find it more useful to read Pollock's emphasis on newness as an implicit theory of knowledge, with methodological implications.

6. Sheldon Pollock, "The Death of Sanskrit," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43 (2001): 409.

7. Sheldon Pollock, "The Playwright Bhava-Bhuti," in *Rama's Last Act (Uttarāmacarita) of Bhavabhūti*, trans. Pollock, Clay Sanskrit Library (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 40.

proaches of treating texts as reflections moving in one direction, from the real to the unreal. The latter view gives us binaries between texts and the world that have resulted in the implicit degradation of literature as a mode of engaging with reality. In the readings we encounter in Pollock's work, texts both reflect and create worlds, and the indeterminacy of that encounter is appreciated with a depth that alters the way in which both are perceived.

The first part of *The Language of the Gods* traces a historical narrative of desacralization: from the use of Sanskrit in the Vedas, with Prakrit used by the Mauryas in the centuries leading up to the common era, to the explosion of documentary texts in Sanskrit under the Sakas. Three centuries passed before the transition from public writing to literary Sanskrit took place, accompanied by "a new politics of culture and culture of politics connected with this language choice and discursive move" (73). The desacralization accompanying the arrival of the Sakas is yet another form of newness entering the world, one of the first on record in world history: "A new cultural-political formation, a Sanskrit cosmopolitan formation, was on the point of being invented" (73). Pollock's argument culminates in the controversial (if well-substantiated) claim that "what began when Sanskrit escaped the domain of the sacred was literature" (74). The desacralization of Sanskrit the Sakas brought about is expressed in the *laukika/alaukika* binary that marks much of Indian intellectual history; it is Pollock's argument that without such a split, *kavya*, in its Sanskrit-specific sense, cannot exist.

Another crucial taxonomy that structures the book's empirical investigation and its theoretical contribution is *marga/desi*, the former denoting "way" and the latter "place." The dialectic between these two terms determined the respective fates of the cosmopolitan and vernacular (discussed below) within Indian cultures. If *marga* was characteristic of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, then the rise of the vernacular was associated with *desi*. *Marga* "functioned first as a multiple and expansive category for identifying 'regional' styles of a single unified cultural substance, *kavya*, across cosmopolitan space" (408). Within the Kannada world of south India, it soon began to denote something close to *desi*

(region) as the vernacular millennium wore on, and regional languages and identities acquired greater salience with the public lifeworlds of those inhabiting the Sanskrit cosmopolis.

Desi itself is divided into two kinds of vernacular register: "For some parts of India we can speak of *two* vernacular revolutions: one that was cosmopolitan in its register and divorced from religion, and another that might be best termed regional, both for its anti-Sanskritic, *desi* idiom and for its close linkages with religious communities that developed distinctively regionalized characters" (432). With either kind of vernacular register, the general argument for world history is that in the second millennium, in contrast to the first, "everybody was going local" (422). The second part of *The Language of the Gods* is devoted to exploring the reasons behind and nature of this vernacular transformation in literature and epigraphy.

Such, roughly sketched, are the contours of Pollock's historical argument, an achievement stunning enough in its own right from the perspective of South Asia studies and Sanskrit philology. As the implications of that contribution will be made more explicit by commentators more qualified than I to write on such topics, my focus here is on its comparative dimension, for it is my belief that the real power of this oeuvre lies less in the narrative it offers—the story has been told before, albeit less brilliantly and in much more fragmented ways—than in the lessons it draws from that history, and also for what it teaches us about the terms and relations according to which these lessons ought to be inferred. This relation is, it seems to me, entirely new to the history of orientalism, as well as to its stepchild, Indology.

Pollock argues on the basis of various forms of textuality, from primers in the art of poetry to epigraphic inscriptions, that the relation between power and culture that obtained in the premodern world of the Sanskrit cosmopolis stands in stark contrast to the textual encoding of this relation in the premodern Latin cosmopolis. His primary evidence, particularly on the South Asian side, is epigraphic inscriptions, which he relates to the different forms of power known to these respective worlds. The presentation of one Sanskritic literary genre in particular, *praśasti*, is significant in its own right;

even the nonspecialist reader will be struck by the beauty of the texts that Pollock translates, as well as by his startling readings of their content.⁸ Sometimes translated as “eulogy,” *praśasti* can be described as public texts that encode a specific and complementary relation to political power. Pollock notes that “unsympathetic modern readers, who have judged inscriptional poets to be simple ‘versifiers’ devoid of poetic inspiration,” argue that “no one considered public poetry to be poetry at all—no one, perhaps, except the writers themselves” (137).⁹

His masterly analysis of a fifth-century inscription from Karnataka ably reveals the limitations of former scholarship that dismissed *praśasti* texts as mere documentary records. “If as a genre *praśasti* can be said to be about anything,” Pollock concludes, “it is as much about exploring the capacities of the Sanskrit language for the production of praise as the content of praise itself” (137). From here, we are initiated into a social world that privileges the aesthetic priorities of literature. This world—and here is the shocking part—is entirely new, in spite of the fact that it is situated in medieval South Asia. The most important lesson to be drawn from the *praśasti* readings is that literature was the location as well as the form of a political articulation of power. After reading about a world wherein literature can write politics, the student of literature and theory is led to ask, what implications does this have for the meaning of the political in the world we inhabit now?

Pollock’s unprecedented discovery is not just that texts encode a political relationship to the world, but that literary languages themselves are instruments of power; Latin and Sanskrit helped to shape rather than merely reflect the realities that the scholar of premodernity reconstructs. It therefore stands to reason that literature teaches us about power no less than a

study of power helps us to understand literature; politics and culture are not only inseparable but also mutually self-constituting. As he argues in his study of the Sanskrit literary aesthetic, “The conditions for understanding [Sanskrit and Prakrit] literature are the permanence, predictability, and the common-sense of the social world.”¹⁰ It is the writing and reading of *kavya* that makes the social world more permanent, predictable, and commonsensical. The study of literature intersects with politics because literature is political; in articulating the social world, literature creates the common sense that upholds the political order and contributes in large measure to its continued existence, as well as dictating the terms by which that order functions.

Causality is a questionable category of analysis in any philosophically aware literary history, and it would be inaccurate to imagine that there could ever be a single reason for the dominance of the Western world in modernity. It is nonetheless necessary to juxtapose the historical fact of European hegemony with the world that Pollock describes with unparalleled detail and sophistication. In the Latin cosmopolis, by Pollock’s account, language mastered space, while in the latter case, the “language of the gods” (the Sanskritic term for Sanskrit) saw itself as transcending the coordinates of space and time. This difference is also reflected in the static and seemingly unchanging nature of Sanskrit texts; the language itself (at least according to its practitioners and theoreticians) does not change over time; an ideology of transcendence with regard to time is also evident in the difficulty of dating Sanskrit texts or in determining anything about texts beyond the evidence they provide. In contrast to Latin literature, there is no attempt within the tradition to historicize the literary object. In the Sanskrit cosmopolis,

8. Dipesh Chakrabarty also suggested that Pollock’s readings of *praśasti* make up this book’s most stunning contribution to the theorization of the political at “Language, Culture, Power: New Directions in South Asian Studies,” a conference held in Pollock’s honor, Columbia University, February 2008.

9. A fuller account of the *praśasti* is also available in Sheldon Pollock, “Public Poetry in Sanskrit,” in “Sanskrit Literature,” ed. A. N. D. Haksar, special issue of *Indian Horizons* 44 (1995): 84–106; and Pollock, “The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, A.D. 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology,” in *Ideology and Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit language*, ed. J. E. M. Houben (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 197–247.

10. Sheldon Pollock, “The Social Aesthetic and Sanskrit Literary Theory,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29 (2001): 208.

categories such as place (*desi*) and history are irrelevant.

This difference might account as well for the emergence of the Romance languages as vehicles of vernacular expression in the Latin cosmopolis in contrast to the relationship between Sanskrit and the vernaculars. During the reign of the Sanskrit cosmopolis (until, that is, the early centuries of the second millennium) and well into the “vernacular millennium,” the power differential between local and cosmopolitan languages was quite unlike that which obtained in Europe. This difference is expressed most concretely in the relationship to territory that obtained in these respective worlds. According to Pollock, the Roman *imperium*, unlike the Sanskrit cosmopolis, “knew exactly where the outside was—knew its own spatial form” (275). One graphic demonstration of power knowing and delimiting its spatial form is that of Hadrian’s Wall in northern Britain, “a twelve-foot-high, ten-foot-thick, seventy-five-mile-long barrier to separate the Romans from the barbarians” (275).

As if to underscore the continuity of this relationship to territory with the modern relation to space, Pollock cites a Latin account that remarks on the wall’s “single and irreproducible center” (275). An inscription on the Emperor Augustus’s mausoleum indicates a similar relationship between space and power. A few excerpts of this inscription indicate the general tone: “When foreign peoples could safely be pardoned I preferred to preserve rather than to exterminate them. . . . The Pannonian peoples, whom the army of the Roman people never approached before I [Augustus] was the leading citizen, were conquered.” This evidence leads to insights concerning the particular kind of polity encoded in this relationship between text and power: “The Roman imperial order was not about expanding the center to the periphery . . . but about incorporating the periphery into the single Roman center” (276).

By contrast, “the very concept of ‘subjecting the world to the power’ of one people is nowhere at any time attested in the Sanskrit cosmopolis.” The specific consequences of this relationship to space also imply a different relation to power, evident in a citation from Cornelius Nepos’s *Life of Hannibal*: “No one doubts that the Roman people [*populus*] are superior in virtue to all people [*gentes*] . . . that they take precedence over all peoples [nations] in courage.” This particular xenology, in which the group in power justifies its hegemony on grounds of inherent (and sometimes genetic) superiority, was according to Pollock, “never . . . enunciated in reference to any political collectivity in premodern South Asia” (277).

Pollock’s argument for premodern South Asia as over and against other realities does not skirt the philosophical and ethical difficulties of such power, based as it was on hierarchies demanding deeper scrutiny. Much of Pollock’s work has been devoted to examining the naturalization of stark power differentials by the *śāstric* texts of much Sanskrit Brahmanical tradition.¹¹ The aestheticization of power in Sanskrit literature, and the implications for a Sanskrit poetics of political life, is a persistent theme of this oeuvre. Pollock reframes power, however, by altering the grounds on which the more conceptually significant inquiries, such as those of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, are most often made. The reader of his oeuvre encounters an argument not merely for the historical significance of the past but for the conceptual necessity of premodern lifeworlds. We need to know these worlds, he argues, not because of their factual existence, as the historians who were the object of Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique might say, but because without such knowledge we can have no understanding, and therefore no active role to play, in the creation of our future.

An observation from an essay published a decade prior to this book could have served as

11. See in particular Pollock’s “From Discourse of Ritual to Discourse of Power in Sanskrit Culture,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 4 (1990): 316–45; and his “The Idea of Śāstra in Traditional India” and “Playing by the Rules: Śāstra and Sanskrit Literature,” in *The Tradition Shastrics in the Indian Arts*, ed. A. L. Dallapiccola and S. Zingel-Avé Lallemant, Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1989), 17–26 and 301–12.

our epigraph. Though it is concerned with the Sanskrit cosmopolis, it also sheds light on Pollock's own writing: "Sanskrit articulated politics not as material power . . . but politics as aesthetic power. . . . the Sanskrit 'cosmopolis' I shall describe consists precisely in this common aesthetics of political culture, a kind of poetry of politics."¹² A more recent essay on philology repeats these insights to serve a different end. Pollock suggests that Edward Said's greatest contribution was in teaching us to read "politics philologically."¹³ This brilliant characterization of Said's contribution is equally apt as a description of Pollock's own contribution to the humanities. Finally, consider an observation from an earlier controversial article, "Deep Orientalism," on the tasks facing scholarship on premodern India. In thinking through the problematic of power before the Raj, Pollock suggests, we must think more carefully about social stratification in premodernity and not forget the universality of this particular philosophical conundrum: "Rather than any singular 'idea of inequality' it is truer to speak of plural 'ideas of inequalities,' for there are many forms of difference—gender, ethnos, race—constructed in many diverse ways as inequalities."¹⁴

In the same context, he cites a startling passage from Sanskrit literature that ably sums up one of the more pervasive discursive relations to power in Indian intellectual history: "Whatever act *aryas* who know the Vedas claim to be *dharma*, is *dharma*, whatever they reject is said to be *adharma* [non-dharma]." In this same essay, Pollock quotes a Sanskrit writer, Lakṣmīdhara, who captures well the "xenophobic energy" contained within the *arya/mleccha* (barbarian) distinction. His words concern the Turks, who were invading the Northwest frontier under Mahmud of Ghazna (d. 1030). Their incursions posed a threat to the Brahmanical world order that was at once cultural and political: "One should never perform a *śraddha* in the land of the *mlecchas*," Lakṣmīdhara writes; "one should never go to the land of the *mlecchas*. If

one drinks water from the wells of the Others, one becomes like them."

While such statements should be understood in part as a response to a threat, commonplace enough to any student of barbarian invasions in any part of the world, more than that is going on in the structuring of such exclusionary practices in Sanskrit intellectual history. The evidence for the a priori foundation for social stratification here is overwhelming and impossible to deny. And yet here as well, no attempt is made to repackage a worldview so alien to modern ideologies of human equality. What is remarkable about "Deep Orientalism" holds for Pollock's work in its entirety: this relentlessly critical and often polemical approach takes no stance other than that demanded by the subject under investigation. Not unlike those of the recently deceased Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass, Pollock's readings are shaped by his material to such an extent that he transforms in contexts where others merely comment. Pollock achieves this by facing aporias and incommensurabilities rather than shielding his own ethics from the assault of other realities.

My focus on the conceptual implications of Pollock's oeuvre should not obscure his empirical depth. His primary project lies in textually reconstructing and interpreting a world largely lost to us today, and in using those texts to teach us about the contours and possibilities of our present existence. Pollock's enterprise has resulted in many specialist articles unknown outside Indology. Two articles in particular, "The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory in Indian Intellectual History" and "Mīmāṃsā and the Problem of History in Traditional India," are especially worthy of consideration outside the context of Sanskrit philology.¹⁵ The first article suggests that the modernist truism that practice follows theory is both time and place specific, and, on the basis of Indian texts, demonstrates different ways of understanding the relationship between ideas and the practices emerging from them. The latter article

12. Pollock, "Sanskrit Cosmopolis," 198–99.

13. Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology: The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," *Critical Inquiry*, forthcoming.

14. Sheldon Pollock, "Deep Orientalism: Notes on Sanskrit and Power beyond the Raj," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 105. The subsequent quotations are from p. 107.

15. Sheldon Pollock, "The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory in Indian Intellectual History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* [hereafter *JAOS*] 105 (1985): 499–519; Pollock, "Mīmāṃsā and the Problem of History in Traditional India," *JAOS* 109 (1989): 603–11.

considers the forms of historical consciousness available to the premodern Indian imagination and looks at the how the Sanskrit tradition itself worked to emphasize certain historical sensibilities at the expense of others. Both articles are arguments about tradition as such and not just in the Indic context. Both are framed in such a way as to invite comparative thinking and are relentlessly open to the possibilities of difference and sameness between the Sanskrit world and our own.

Greatness does not always preclude formulaic thinking, but in Pollock's case it seems to. He shifts effortlessly from the known to the unknown and back again, from areas of canonical learning to areas of complete obscurity, known to him and perhaps a few other specialists alone. Pollock's range of perception renders him uniquely qualified to address questions central to all of us (ethnicity, identity, literature, space, religion, politics) with a cognitive intensity unmatched by contemporary scholars and unprecedented among his orientalist predecessors. I have no easy way of determining where this brilliance comes from, but I suspect that a large part of the power of his vision resides in his material and his relationship to it: Pollock's primary sources are premodern, and this means that his work, of supreme relevance to any consideration of modernity, speaks in a different register. His oeuvre is an example of what happens when a great scholar also happens to be a great thinker.

Cosmopolises Compared

In 1131, the Andalusian writer al-Garnati traveled from Spain to Derbent, at the time the most cosmopolitan city of Dagestan. He was carrying with him a manuscript copy of *Kitab al-Mukhni* by the Baghdad theologian al-Makhamili, with the intention of introducing these revered texts to his fellow Shafites. (Al-Garnati, al-Makhamili, and the Dagestanis were all followers of the

Shafi *madhab*, or school of law.) Al-Garnati was not prepared for the linguistic diversity he encountered in Derbent. He took out his *Kitab al-Mukhni* and began to interpret it for the emir of Dagestan, only to discover that not only was the emir able to understand the text in the Arabic original but that he had no trouble translating it spontaneously into the multitude of languages spoken by everyone present: "May Allah have mercy!" al-Garnati wrote in amazement; "[The emir] spoke in different languages, including Lakzan, Tabalan, Filan, Zakalan, Khadakh, Gumikh, Sarir, Alan, As, Zirikhkaran, Turkish, Arabic, and Persian. . . . the emir explained the contents of al-Makhamili's book to all of them in their own language."¹⁶

Had such a scene taken place in a modern context, each language would have been mapped onto a particular community of speakers (and this is indeed how such encounters have been misinterpreted by modern historiography). But categories linking language and people fall short of premodern Caucasian realities. More conscientious historical reconstructions create a picture of proliferating heteroglossia. For much of the medieval Caucasus, linguistic labels did not even need to be coined because multilingualism was an element of everyday life. In many cases in the premodern Caucasus languages existed without ever receiving names. In the premodern world it was unnecessary to delineate and demarcate language boundaries as we do today; cultural and ethnic identities were not predetermined by the categories we like to think of as indigenous.

Pollock's model of culture and power in the Sanskrit cosmopolis insists upon cross-cultural comparisons suggested above. Such an approach would help to refine the theory itself and teach us what is meant in discussing premodern power.¹⁷ I engage with only one comparison, between the Caucasia Indicus (the term used in Greco-Roman sources for the region bordered

16. Moshe Gammer and David Wasserstein, eds., *Daghestan and the World of Islam*, *Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Humaniora* 330 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2006), 25.

17. Pollock's "Power and Culture Beyond Ideology and Identity," in *Margins of Writing, Origins of Culture*, ed. Seth L. Sanders, Oriental Institute Seminars no. 2 (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2006), 277–87, considers the implications of the cosmopolis model of premodern power for non-Indic ancient polities and furthers the critique of power in its modern meaning.

by the Hindu Kush) and the Caucasus proper. Subsequent to the campaigns of Alexander the Great, these regions were seen by the world of Greco-Roman antiquity to occupy opposite ends of the known world; hence their analogous names. Both were known for their mountains and astonishing linguistic diversity. But before we apply indiscriminately terms and categories developed to explain the South Asian world, let us inquire into their applicability.

Primary among the terms of importance to Pollock's project are the cosmopolitan and the vernacular. The most salient aspect of the cosmopolitan/vernacular distinction within north India is that languages that became vernaculars in many cases developed from Sanskrit in interaction with the local environment and still retain obvious grammatical and lexical correlations to their originary language. This has not always been the case for all premodern polities affected by cosmopolitan formations. Nor was it the case for southern India, with Dravidian Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu. But as Pollock argues, even Dravidian languages have a heavy Sanskrit lexicon, to the extent that the history of Kannada and Telugu literatures can hardly be written without an awareness of Sanskrit literary history. Likewise, we could argue the reverse, pointing to features of Sanskrit and the Sanskrit-derived vernaculars that partake of linguistic peculiarities, such as retroflexes, found in Dravidian languages.

So, while in India all the languages and literary traditions under Pollock's purview developed in close relationship with one another, this is not true for all parts of the world. The Latin cosmopolis is a well-chosen comparative pair, given that the relationship between the Romance languages and Latin closely parallels the relation between cosmopolitan Sanskrit and South Asian vernaculars. This comparison allows for precise parallels: "Very much like Kannada and other Sanskrit-distant Dravidian languages of south India, Latin-distant Germanic languages such as Old English developed vernacular literary cultures on the cosmopolitan model as early as the beginning of the ninth century. By contrast, like Sanskrit-near Indo-Aryan languages of north India, Latin-near romance languages such as Florentine required as much

as five centuries to do so" (391). These historical facts lead Pollock to wonder, "Did north Indian languages develop a mode of coexistence with Sanskrit that obscured their vernacular potential in a way impossible for the languages of south India and Southeast Asia? Parallels with the literary-cultural transformation of western Europe suggest that such a hypothesis may be worth considering" (391).

The implication here is that the closer a vernacular language is genetically to the cosmopolitan language, the more likely that literature in the local language will take longer to develop and will do so only sporadically, while with a genetically distant vernacular language, vernacular literature can flourish alongside the cosmopolitan language. While these arguments are convincing for South Asia and Latinate Europe, they present a greater challenge for the purposes of comparative literary history. I attempt to make that argument here with regard to the Caucasus, structured on the one hand by a Persianate ethos and on the other by an overlapping Arabic-based Islamicate one.

The Caucasus has always been a land of exile and deportation, receiving invasions with much the same frequency as India, though invaders who arrived in the Caucasus were less easily assimilated into the social order than in India. Unlike the invaders who flowed into South Asia over millennia, many of the invading populations who settled in the Caucasus never achieved anything other than minority status, as we see for example in the Arab colonies of Dagestan, first settled by *ghazis* (holy warriors) in the eighth century. Invaders to the Caucasus remained small groups among many local constituencies; in India the absorption was more complete, with concomitant consequences for intercultural exchange.

The diversity of languages and cultures in the Caucasus approximates that of South Asia. In the former case interactions are less well documented than in the latter, for reasons that remain to be explored. Modernity has obscured the reasons why we might think of the Caucasus as a civilization unto itself, because the only possible grounding of any such understanding for premodernity would have to be in a politics of cosmopolitanism. And yet, so often for the

Caucasus, any such historiography is written as a nationalistic script, favoring one ground over another.

Any straightforward lingualism linking language to identity is as difficult to maintain for the Caucasus as for India; there were simply too many languages serving too many diverse functions, and the political associations that inhered in every language were simply too inconsistent to derive from these data any kind of useable model for the way in which the cosmopolitan/vernacular relation functions generally. It is, however, evident that the Ur-language models of Latin and Sanskrit cosmopolitan formations do not apply to this world, or indeed to most of the Turkic worlds that flourished under the Persian cosmopolis. No primordial Caucasian tongue existed for the equivalent period in Caucasian history. (The evidence for a prehistoric Ur-Caucasian language, widely accepted by contemporary linguists, lies outside the range of this analysis, insofar as it pertains solely to the pretextual and preliterate.) To obtain a fuller comparative picture of the development of cosmopolitan and regional sensibilities throughout the world we must move away from linguistics and languages considered as autonomous phenomenon and turn to culture and history: the impact of Islam in incorporating peripheries such as Azerbaijan, Dagestan, and Georgia into a broader cosmopolitan formation. It was not a single language but the historical reality of living in the world of *'ajam*, the culture of non-Arab Islam, that characterized the cultural life of the peoples of the Caucasus.

Islam entered Dagestan beginning in the eighth century and soon after penetrated northern Azerbaijan. Our textual sources are richest for Dagestan, because the *ghazis* arriving from the Arab world had a massive fortress waiting for them in Derbent, the foundations for which had been laid by Sasanian rulers centuries before. (The ruins of this fortress are still standing today.) Though there is a long tradition within Islamic historiography of portraying conversion as a violent process, less rhetorically driven accounts of the spread of Islam in the early medieval world argue that forced conversion was

the exception rather than the rule. The recent scholarly consensus seems to be that "Muslim conquerors ordinarily wished to dominate rather than convert, and most conversions to Islam were voluntary."¹⁸ Were this line of historical inquiry to be extended, it would intersect with what we know about the Sanskrit cosmopolis. Cumulatively, these findings would advance our theoretical understanding of power. This is not to say that power in premodernity had no link to violence but that the economy of political oppression functioned differently in the world before the state.

The decentralization of Islamic power on the *'ajam* periphery is further suggested by the fact that de facto sovereignty was secured in the Islamic world by two relatively mild measures: mention of the ruler's name in the *khutba*, or Friday sermon, and the issue of coins with the name or image of the ruler engraved on them. Beyond these two requirements, the prerequisites for membership in the Islamic cosmopolis did not extend beyond formal rituals. As for nonsacral dimensions of experience, pertaining, for example, to literary culture, these were driven by noncoercive modes of power. Though there are obviously wide variations in how sovereignty was maintained, these two formal requirements—the *khutba* and coinage—were sufficient to together hold the vast empires of the 'Abbasids and of the Seljuqs. The Shirvanshahs accommodated themselves to these pan-Islamic idioms of power through identical means.

Conversion of the local population was not a priority for Islamic rulers in the Caucasus. Georgia, a country with strong Christian traditions dating back to the fourth century, did not experience a mass conversion to Islam, nor did any emir seek to impose Islamic law on the region. Nonetheless, Georgia—*Gurjistan* in Arabo-Persian sources—participated in the creation and dissemination of Islamic literary culture. Epic tales such as *Vepkhistqaosani* (*Knight in the Panther's Skin*) were written in the Persian tradition, and the early Persian romance *Vis and Ramin* was translated within a century of its composition into Georgian, after which it played a formative role in the shaping of Georgian lit-

18. Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 244.

erature. One might dispute the extent to which such developments can be understood as part of the framework of Islamic cosmopolis, given their nonsacral implications, but students of Islamic civilization have long perceived the necessity for a not purely sacral, Islamicate understanding of Islamic culture.¹⁹ Tbilisi (*Tiflis* in Arabo-Persian sources) was known under the reign of David Aghmashenebeli (d. 1125) for its large Islamic population and for coins printed on one side in the Arabic language.²⁰ Dmitri (d. 1155), the Georgian Christian king who followed David Aghmashenebeli, attended the mosque service every Friday in Tbilisi and listened dutifully to the *khutba*, as though he were himself answerable to the ethical injunctions of Islam.²¹

Nor was the Islamic cosmopolis framed by a single language. The rise of New Persian as a literary language in the eleventh century meant a shift from Arabic to Persian, but the use of one language did not necessarily entail the exclusion of the other. The Shirvan khanate in present-day Azerbaijan was the location of one of the most remarkable instances of the flourishing of Persian literary culture the world has ever known. Far from being impaired by its peripheral location within fragmenting Seljuq dominions, distance from centralized power enabled the growth of this literary culture. During a few short decades at the court of the Shirvanshahs, Falaki (d. 1157); Nizami of Ganja (d. 1209); his father, Abul Ala (whose poetry is now lost); and Khaqani of Shirvan (d. 1190) collectively altered the future of Persian literature. We are very far from understanding the reasons for this sudden transformation of a literary tradition, but its implications are obvious to any student of Indo-Persian literature. The poets of Shirvan and Ganja gave to Persian literature those very genres that were to have the greatest impact on subsequent centuries, in spaces far removed from the lands of their birth. In this short space of time and in this obscure place, which until then had produced almost nothing

in the way of extant literature in the local Turkic and Udi languages, the *masnavi* was given a new life by Nizami and the *qasida* transformed by Khaqani.

Much like Sanskrit, Persian literary culture developed without stimulus from a centralized power; much of the best Persian poetry was written on the edges of empire, in places such as Shirvan and Lahore, with the prison poems (*habsiyyat*) of Khaqani and Masud Sad Salman, just as the most famous contributions to classical Sanskrit literature, in particular the works of Kalidasa and the prose romances of Bana, were written apart from any centralized governmental entity.²² Unlike in the Arabic world, where the *qasida* was canonized in Basra and subsequently Baghdad under 'Abbasid rule, courtly literature in the Sanskrit and Persian cosmopolises was driven by a different logic of power; the rise to prestige of these literary languages was unattended by analogous rises in political power. The absence of imperial centers within both cosmopolises enabled Sanskrit and Persian literary cultures to flourish, at least in the early days of their establishment. This parallel suggests something specific about cosmopolitan literatures in terms of their relation to power and leads us to conclude that the premodern literary imagination took shape in a world in which the imagination possessed a relation to political life unfamiliar to modernity.

A term such as *Islamic cosmopolis* connotes religion to the modern ear. A strong case can be made for reading the Islamic cosmopolis less in terms of religious categories and more in terms of cultural categories open to religious experience but not necessarily religious in themselves. At the same time, we do not wish to evacuate the word *Islam* of all ideological content; nor is it ever an easy matter to separate religion from culture. Contrasts can usefully be drawn between the various levels of reality and the various orientations to different worlds, but they should be drawn in the awareness that we are

19. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2:293.

20. See, for example, Garnik Asatrian and Hayrapet Margarian, "The Muslim Community of Tiflis (8th to 19th Centuries)," *Iran and the Caucasus* 8 (2002): 25–52.

21. W. E. D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People: From the Beginning Down to the Russian Conquest in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Kegan Paul, 1932), 101.

22. This was observed by Rabindranath Tagore as well: "Kalidasa belongs only to Vikramaditya, Chandvardi to Prithviraj, Chanakya to Chandragupta. They

did not belong to the entire India of their times" (*Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, ed. Sukanta Chaudhuri [New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001], 181). The best study of Persian literature on the periphery is Sunil Sharma's *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salmān of Lahore* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000).

positing distinctions within a continuum rather than oppositions. Binary divisions between the religious and the secular work much better in the context of Christian history and the secular modernity that derives from it than as indexes to medieval non-Christian civilizations.²³

Much like the premodern Islamic world, the Sanskrit cosmopolis was structured by “a symbolic network created in the first instance by the presence of a similar kind of discourse in a similar language deploying a similar idiom and style to make similar kinds of claims about the nature and aesthetics of polity—about kingly virtue and learning; the dharma of rule; the universality of dominion.”²⁴ The central distinguishing feature of the cosmopolitan sociopolitical order was the noncoercive relationship between culture and power. Vast social stratification within the Sanskrit world did not prevent the creation of a political order and a worldview characterized by a more imaginative relationship to power than that known to us today. Perhaps, indeed, the stratification of the premodern sociality enabled power to be cosmopolitan rather than local, for when power spoke and moved in the vernacular, it ceased to speak across borders. Globalization could be contrasted with the premodern cosmopolis in the sense that the former operates coercively, leaving less space for the aesthetic, the imaginative, and the optional. Less space, in other words, for freedom.

I do not wish to suggest—nor do I believe that Pollock, for all the profundity of his apologetics for premodernity, ever wished to suggest—that one temporal order should be ranked above another. While he makes a compelling case for the advantages of premodern South Asian civilization, and those of its superior qualities that contrast with modernity, only a simplistic and partial reading would translate this vision into a new hierarchy. Though Pollock has demonstrated that it was more open than scholarship has commonly perceived, it remains true that the cosmopolitanism of the Sanskrit

cosmopolis was nondemocratic. Persian texts likewise circulated among a literary elite; for the most part, only those with affiliations to a court had access to this form of literature. And few people, at that time or any other, out of the broad mass of the population ever had affiliations to any court. There should be no attempt to erase these problems, intrinsic to the study of premodern power; in some cases, we are called upon to stress them. The relationship between the values of the present and the values of the past is therefore much more complex than any possible hierarchy of values could encompass. A nonhegemonic social theory of the sort that has yet to be written would have to probe these contrasts further and ask if some kind of exchange did not take place between the debasement of the political and its greater availability in modernity, and, if this was indeed the case, what it would mean for a theory of power.

The historical trajectory from the cosmopolitan to the vernacular traces the fundamental philosophical movement from premodernity into modernity, which can be described as a movement from hierarchy to a belief in the moral necessity of equality, founded on a different logic of place in relation to power. According to Pollock, centerless and placeless premodern power did not abide by the formula of domination and coercion for which Gramsci is one of the most eloquent interpreters, and which could also be traced with reference to Karl Marx’s philosophy of historical progress.

Gramsci and Marx enable us to understand modernity; but there is no a priori reason why modernity should matter more to the present than premodernity. To assent to this logic would mean internalizing the prejudices of the modern relation to time. Pollock’s conceptually attuned historical investigation provides us with a prolegomena to a philosophical engagement with the categories of premodernity, modernity, and the so-called postmodern world of the present. We inhabit a world that aspires to get beyond modernity but might better be

23. These remarks contrast with Pollock’s presentation of the Sanskrit cosmopolis as a self-consciously secular phenomenon. However, it seems to me that one mistake often made by those who critique Pollock’s work is to limit to a single point of view a vision that is quite obviously and intentionally multiple. Pol-

lock’s polemical emphasis on the secular content of premodern experience is most fruitfully read as a response to an Indological tradition, rather than as a statement about the structure of premodern experience itself.

24. Pollock, “Sanskrit Cosmopolis,” 230.

characterized as a tertiary modernity, coming after early modernity and the age of colonialism. Does it not follow logically from this that the best means of challenging the hegemony of the modern form of time is through a return to the past and that, particularly when this project is brought to bear upon premodern Asia, there are serious political implications for such a return, rife with possibilities for overcoming Eurocentrism?

Though we would not argue for a complete absence of coercion in the premodern Islamicate world, it stands to reason that both premodern realities shared an important quality: a more fluid conception of selfhood and identity, and therefore also of culture and power, than modernity is able to register.²⁵ The fidelity demanded from the Islamic ruler was nominal and did not impinge upon internal belief systems. Publicly affiliating oneself with Islamic power did not mean accepting an identity that was coercively imposed. Nonpublic experience was not subject to governmental regulation. This noncoercive aspect of premodern power is described in another account from premodern India, by the political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj. In premodernity, he argues, “The sacral was higher than the mundane, the temple and the mosque, the household *puja* [worship] and the *namaz* [prayer] remained more significant than the market and the court; and these interactions did not result in the creation of a public space under the state’s control.”²⁶ If the state was weaker in premodernity than it is now, this too is conceptually significant for those in search of a social theory that pertains to more than modern worlds.

In the world both of *‘ajam* and the Sanskrit cosmopolis, there were public spaces outside the purview of the state. These spaces were related to the institutionalized structures of re-

ligion, be they Buddhist *viharas*, Hindu temples, or Islamic *masjids*. A different space for public life meant a different space for power. Islamic overlords were not interested in the internal subjugation of their subject population. There was none of the missionary zeal so familiar to students of colonialism, none of the insistence on converting souls. Public life was generated by the court, and this placed upon the court a greater burden of ethical responsibility than that experienced by the state. This scenario, analyzed by Norbert Elias as well as by Pollock, accounts for why politics and suffering are so intimately bound together in modernity and why this situation did not pertain to the premodern world.²⁷ The state is the source of social oppression in the modern world because it is propelled by the machinery of conversion; no such machinery existed in the ancient and medieval periods; therefore the sources of suffering were not what they are today.

In the premodern world, a weak state meant that suffering was contained by spheres, outside the cosmopolis, outside the court. Power circulated differently; resistance to power likewise expressed itself in different channels. If the archive of premodernity does not therefore yield the same testimonies to social justice from which the student of modern political life receives consolation, this may be because in the premodern world resistance would have been counterrevolutionary. It would not have resulted in a more dignified life for anyone, because the experience of indignity was not grounded in state oppression. As the premodern state was structurally different from the modern one, a careful survey of its interaction with literary culture has major theoretical implications for the study of the world in which we live now.

Pollock’s call for a temporally attenuated conception of ethnicity in relation to language,

25. Aside from the works cited here, another avenue for exploring premodern identity in literature is opened by Leo Spitzer’s classic work “Notes on the Poetic and Empirical ‘I’ in Medieval Authors,” *Traditio* 4 (1946): 414–22.

26. Sudipta Kaviraj, “Religion, Politics and Modernity,” in *Inventions and Boundaries: Historical and Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, eds. Preben Kaarsholm and Jan Hultin, Occasional Paper no. 11 (Roskilde: International Development Studies, Roskilde University, 1994), 303.

27. Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983). Elias argues that the social science bias against premodernity applies to Europe as well as Asia (2). As he aptly observes: “One can scarcely hope to understand the structure of [court] societies . . . if one is unable to subordinate one’s own scale of values to the one that was accepted then” (29).

culture, and power resonates with and against contemporary scholarship on the Caucasus. Few works published on the premodern Caucasus merit praise. This field labors under the constraints of Soviet—and before that, Russian colonial—scholarship. Until north Caucasian peoples such as the Chechens and Dagestanis have attained political freedom, it is unreasonable to expect any significant scholarship to emerge from this part of the world, least of all for the premodern period.²⁸ Aside from figures such as A. R. Shikhsaidov and M. S. Saidov, who belong to an older and mostly deceased generation, this does not promise to be a hopeful century for Caucasian studies.²⁹

The political constraints that mark this region at present make the sustained archival research in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish sources that the subject demands impossible to undertake. This situation stands in stark contrast to premodern South Asia and accounts for the difference in terms of both the quality and quantity of contemporary scholarship on these respective regions. Whatever the challenges posed by nationalism and communalism, India has known more than half a century of freedom from colonial rule, whereas the north Caucasus has yet to discover what such freedom might look like. It is therefore unsurprising, though tragic, that even nationalist historiography has given way to Russian-oriented rehashings of colonialism. In a field where scholarship on any historical period is weak, premodernity suffers most powerfully of all.³⁰

For much of the premodern Caucasus, communication took place in Kumyk, the trans-regional Turkic language of the region, which has close affinities to Azeri. In others, a neighboring third language was used, or one of the speakers happened to be fluent in his interlocu-

tor's language. But in charting the sociolinguistic map of the medieval Caucasus, we should also look beyond the assertion of linguistic pluralism: in the premodern world, linguistic difference did not delimit identity as it does in modernity. Local differences were less relevant in the constriction of collective identity than global ones. Benedict Anderson has shown us how modern nationalism has been imagined, but we should not confine the implications of his study of the role of the imagination in the creation of collective identity to the modern period: *all* identities, individual or collective, are constructed on the basis of the imagination; *all* affiliations are created and fundamentally transitory.³¹ We should not deny political agency to premodern actors simply because the ways in which their worlds worked are unfamiliar to us. What is unique about the premodern imagined community, in contrast to the modern one, is that it was not delimited by governmental power or at the mercy of local ideologies of difference.

Pollock's most sustained and philosophically suggestive argument concerning the Sanskrit cosmopolis is that the relationship between culture and power in premodern South Asia was unlike that of modernity because language had a different status in relation to the people who spoke it, and therefore, concomitantly, literature operated according to a different register. Rather than marking the boundary of an identity, language was inherently porous. Speaking one language did not take place at the cost of speaking, reading, or writing another; the category of native speaker emerges as distinctly modern in its genealogy. Such a scenario is a precondition for the cosmopolitan, and accounts, I argue, for its specifically premodern morphology. Premodern linguistic identities as

28. Alexander Benningsen's work in particular has contributed to the dichotomies that mar scholarship in this field. For a critique, see Mark Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Edward W. Walker, Research Series no. 95 (Berkeley: University of California, 1997).

29. The classic text by Shikhsaidov is *Islam v srednevekovom Dagestane; VII–XV vv. (Islam in Medieval Dagestan, Seventh to Fifteenth Centuries)* (Makhachkala: RAN, 1969); for work in English, see "The Political History of Dagestan in the Tenth–

Fifteenth Centuries," in Gammer and Wasserstein, *Daghestan and the World of Islam*, 45–54. An important synthetic work of historical scholarship on the premodern Caucasus is Shikhsaidov, T. M. Aitberov, and G. M.-R. Orazaev, *Dagestanskije istoricheskie sochineniia (Historical Sources on Dagestan)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1993). Saidov's work is evident in the unpublished archives of the Institute of History, Archeology, and Ethnography, Makhachkala, a filial of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN). Although most sources for studying the premodern Caucasus are in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and local languages, the secondary scholarship is exclusively in Russian.

30. Gammer and Wasserstein, *Daghestan and the World of Islam*, is the first sign of a new trend in Caucasian studies, and it is hoped that it will be followed by many more such volumes that explore the precolonial past of this vastly misunderstood region.

31. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

they emerge from South Asian and Caucasian contexts were tied to place rather than individual identity. A person spoke (and read) the cosmopolitan language if he or she belonged to the elite; membership in this community did not require any admission ticket beyond that provided by class. Native languages in these worlds did not bear much symbolic weight; relations between culture and power, and identity and selfhood, were likewise noncontinuous with those forms of experience that have been the subject of the richest reflections by modern theory.

Pollock's exploration of the Sanskrit cosmopolis leaves the reader with the perception that political thought can be read from literary legacies. This is relevant far beyond the South Asian context; it is relevant even beyond the academy. "There was once a way of being political," he writes, "that derived in some measure from the forms of expressivity and style that it deployed, from the cultural commitments it produced . . . , and from the moral values from which these commitments sprang. Equally important, these commitments were to all appearances accepted voluntarily rather than coerced. They were compatible with continued adherence to local forms and commitments. . . . And they accordingly entailed a politics that were more voluntaristic than seems possible to those who . . . homogenize all variants of premodern power" (258). Indeed, there was such a way of being political, and it flourished not only in South Asia. It is testified to as well by the fact that Caucasian peoples retained their local languages while at the same time producing literary masterpieces in New Persian. The either/or of native speech versus governmental tongue came with the arrival of Russian to the mountains. That there was such a way of being political is evidenced in the Caucasus by the flourishing polylingual manuscript tradition of Dagestan, in which texts of al-Ghazzali were copied alongside texts from Dargin, Avar, Lak, Kumyk, Tabasaran, Lezgi,

and probably many other less-documented local languages as well.³² And just as in premodern South Asia, the Caucasus operated according to a structure of cosmopolitan power that possessed no imperial center. It is arguably due to this absence that we witness the flourishing of literary culture in these regions. I have focused on Dagestan here because it was the most ancient home of Caucasian Islam and the linguistic and textual legacies are richest there, but this argument could be made more generally for the Caucasus as a whole.³³

The limits of Pollock's model still remain to be explored. Is his theory of noncoercive modern power confined to the Indic world, or is it applicable to the entirety of premodernity, or even indeed to every cultural-political form apart from European modernity? I have traced a line of inquiry that accepts the relevance of Pollock's critique but does not assume that the results reached will be identical in the Caucasian or Islamicate case as they are in the South Asian one. The task of the theorist of premodernity is not to argue about specific polities as isolated entities without reference to parallel cultural systems but rather to look for those aspects of different premodern polities that are genuinely cross-cultural. Looking for common denominators is an effective means of preventing the hegemony of one cultural form over another. Admittedly, this is only a theoretical principle, and the test of any theory lies in its application. It is my position that the cosmopolitan theory of power, as adumbrated by Pollock, is both universal to premodernity and specific to the Indic world. Insofar as *'ajam* partook of a cultural form related to the Sanskrit cosmopolis, the insights Pollock has derived from the study of the circulation of Sanskrit culture offer the best theoretical model available to us for making sense of the circulation of Persian literary culture from the Caucasus to South, Central, and West Asia in the medieval period.

32. For a detailed review of non-Arabic textual sources in premodern Dagestan, see A. P. Shikhsaidov, "The Manuscript Inheritance of the Peoples of Dagestan," chapter 1 in *Arabskaia rukopisnaia kniga v dagestane* (*Arabic Manuscripts in Dagestan*), ed. Shikhsaidov, N. A. Tagirova, D. Kh. Gadzhieva (Makhachkala: Dagestanskoe knizhnoe izd-vo, 2001), 5–36.

33. For example, Stephan Rapp, "Recovering the Pre-National Caucasian Landscape" (keynote address, "Mythical Landscapes: Then and Now," Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia, 2005). Rapp's use of the term *pre-national* could easily be correlated with Pollock's use of the term *cosmopolitan*.

Methods of Comparison

Here I consider Pollock's contribution not just to the study of a specific part of the world and its potential for application elsewhere (as above) but to thinking in more challenging ways about the conditions under which scholarship takes place today, the conditions under which we research and engage with various parts of the world, particularly those that fall outside the "Western" rubric. If *The Language of the Gods* was written primarily to offer an account of the rise of Sanskrit and the subsequent development of vernacular languages in premodern India, a no less powerful aspect of Pollock's own engagement is his critique of the empirical and theoretical conventions that dominate contemporary knowledge production.

The achievements in the realm of Sanskrit philology are best considered alongside the theoretical contributions to the study of the premodern Asian world. Theory of all kinds, schools, and brands is engaged relentlessly at many intervals, explicitly and implicitly. The very material he offers questions foundational modern assumptions concerning culture, power, identity, self, and other. What strikes me, however—and again, I would venture that this is due to the difference in Pollock's material base for argumentation—is that his relationship to theory is different from that of scholars less inclined to consider the ideological implications of the knowledge they produce, whose work is less grounded in the non-European world. Whereas it is commonplace to use theory to substantiate one's case regardless of the subject under discussion, it is far less common that a scholar will use his material to critique the theories inherited until these ideas are extended and transformed.

A theory that seeks to explain premodern India by engaging primarily with premodern Indian realities (rather than, for example, with Hegel, Heidegger, or Montesquieu) makes for thrilling reading. Such a stance as Pollock's is significant not just for the history of premodernity; this stance is significant for the present as well. Work such as his provides us with a model for nonhegemonic scholarship, which reconstructs a past world and thereby helps us to understand and transform our own. I know of no counter-

part in the history of Indology or orientalism of a scholar who creatively engages European philosophic, political, and literary traditions without endowing them with unmerited hegemony. Pollock's method is to transform familiar ideas through material from unfamiliar worlds. It requires genius to accomplish such transformation, but luckily his insights have made possible comparisons that used to be inconceivable. Such work undoubtedly can be carried out by others as well. We merely need to, first, change our attitude concerning the relative priority to be accorded premodern material in our understanding of modernity and, second, acquire the knowledge necessary to make this theoretical shift a practical possibility.

Theory, Pollock teaches us, does not explain the world; it provides an entryway into it. It follows that contemporary theory is inadequate even for understanding modernity, insofar as an object is best understood by taking into account realities external to it. Theory that arises from the modern condition shares many modern limitations, including, most damagingly, colonialism, a structure that has acquired new life in much post- and presumably anticolonial theory. When engaged deeply, theory has the capacity to bring about change; indeed, theory might be defined as a conceptual stance that enables one to generalize from the particular and thereby to, as Nietzsche puts it, reshape the universal into what has never been heard before.

No change in the meaning of culture, power, identity, and selfhood can ever come about that is not theoretical; newness does not enter the world except via a philosophical transformation. Historical changes necessarily bear a relation to material conditions, but the lessons they have to offer cannot be reduced to the empirical realm. Positions are altered and beliefs are transformed according to what is perceived as being right or wrong with the world, in other words, according to the theory one engages and the ideologies one perceives as bearing the deepest relationship to truth. Work that engages most deeply with European theory alone will never be more than that, regardless of the critique it may assume. If the work of provincializing Europe can only take place through an engagement with European intellectual history, it

is equally true that this provincialization can only be fully attained by an engagement with premodern, pre-European realities. The advantage of *premodern* and *pre-European* as cognitive categories is that they have actual, historically documentable, existences, whereas *post-European* and *postmodern* exist much more on the level of hypothetical realities. We have not yet entered the “post” stage of world history.

If it stands to reason that theory can change the world, it also stands to reason that when the nontheoretical is elevated to the status of a theory, and the truly theoretical demoted to the realm of the merely empirical, the obscure, and the historically distant, change is forestalled. Much of theory today has ceased to be truly theoretical and instead all too often serves the sociological rather than the philosophical task of establishing an author’s affiliation with a particular discourse. Though the hegemony of European categories poses a problem even for the student of European history, the limitations of such an approach become drastically more evident for those of us who wish to understand the entire world, and not just one portion of it. It is clear to us that there is a relationship between the truth value of a concept and its empirical basis. That which is most true, and therefore most valuable, is that which derives from the broadest diversity of contexts, and which has been and can be applied in the most multiple ways. Judged by this standard, much of contemporary thought grounded in modern experience would seem quite weak on philosophical grounds. Thinking is provincial not just when its cartographic coordinates are limited but when its temporal scope is demarcated unreflexively.

The hegemony of certain forms of theory is a challenge to intellectual life as such, but in this particular context it is congruent with the hegemony of Europe and America over the world. One way of challenging theoretical dominion is by relocating the grounds of the debate, changing not the question but the material according to which the answer is sought. Here is where Pollock’s oeuvre is of greater assistance than any other body of work known to me. There are (at least) two reasons to compare: you may wish to know more about the relationship between two discrete objects, or you may

wish to understand a question in terms of its broadest possible global relevance. You may be interested in the problem of universality. If an idea is important, it is not just for a particular time and place but demands diachronic and synchronic consideration. One must choose one mode of comparison over the other, with the concomitant expectation of loss on the side of either cognitive clarity or empirical depth.

There is, however, no difference between these comparative acts in the oeuvre under consideration here. Neither the cognitive nor the empirical is sacrificed; the gain of one does not imply the loss of the other. Pollock’s philology is as theoretical as his theory is philologic. He never simplifies his insights for the nonspecialist, except where greater simplicity means greater clarity. He does not shy away from philological webs of reference so dense that they may dissuade nonspecialists. And yet this work is comparative precisely because of its depth with regard to its primary material. The erudition for fields not his own is impressive, but the erudition with regard to Sanskrit makes up the real substance of his magnum opus. This fact alone is ample proof that the comparativist methodology is not intrinsically opposed to the philological method.

Any comparison is limited by its frame of reference. Likewise it is constrained by the theory driving it, or by the material that forms its empirical base. But Pollock’s work suggests that we cannot but compare. Comparisons across broad expanses of time and space also have an advantage over more limited comparative engagements in that they pursue their questions to the very limits of what is known. The only meaningful difference is between those who are comparativists while admitting it and those who are comparativists in denial, confined to their own specializations while meanwhile making comparisons unconsciously.

This oeuvre further demonstrates that it is possible to attain seemingly unattainable depth by virtue of those very same engagements that run the strongest risk of superficiality: the comparative ones that span regions and temporalities. This leads us to an important lesson concerning the ways knowledge can be negotiated today: large quantities of material for as-

simulation do not necessarily entail the reduction in depth that the sheer logic of knowledge production would seem to predetermine. On this count alone, Pollock's work repays deep study; the reader is engaged not simply by the content of the arguments but by the methodology, on which I have focused here. With regard to its methodology, Pollock's work is of greater assistance to the student of premodernity than the classical scholarly texts of past generations, which rival him in terms of their philological depth. Philologists of past generations operated under different conditions of knowledge production than we grapple with today. For a Persianist, Minorsky or, on the Indological side, Scherbatsky may be useful as a model; but a rupture has taken place between contemporary and present forms of knowledge about the premodern Asian world, and it is quite difficult, without the mediation of work such as Pollock's, to determine how this lineage might be reconstituted in new, transformed ways.

The depth of this oeuvre depends upon a commitment to thinking through its material in all its possible modes, including modes methodologically exterior to it. As Pollock has noted, comparative thinking is fundamental to the human episteme; we always conceive of one thing in terms of another. Since this mode of referential knowledge production lies at the core of identity as such, of what it means for a thing to be a thing, is it not better, and indeed even conceptually requisite, to extend the range of our inquiry into every possible sphere? We are driven to compare because the more distant and comprehensive our comparisons, the more they extend to the limits of the known world and take account of all the possible forms of life, of all the options anyone ever had and all the choices anyone ever made, the more likely such comparisons are to stand the test of time and to prove themselves true. That such comparative engagements are in the purest sense impossible is beside the point; the more relevant and salient fact is that without such attempts as Pollock's to think of the world as one—without thinking comparatively—the boundaries of knowledge are liable to be more palpable than its possibilities.

We compare because we want a world capable of understanding itself in all of its di-

versity. Being comparative necessarily means engaging premodernity. From a philosophical perspective, this is not optional. A theory cannot stand if it excludes the premodern archive from its empirical purview. Comparative thinking is not subsumed by contemporary modes of globalization; "the contemporary" is structurally predisposed to disregard that which falls outside the European sphere. No amount of critical theory will rectify this situation. Our problem is empirical and can only be solved empirically. Our theory will change once our empirical grounds are altered, but the logical order through which this transformation will take place cannot be manipulated at will. Shifting our empirical ground is a matter of greater urgency than advancing and revising theories of modernity from within the European tradition. If, according to *śāstric* logic, theory precedes practice, here too the empirical shift is theoretically driven by a moral belief in the necessity of overcoming European hegemony, but a theory that bears no practical fruit is not a theory at all. It is merely a pretext for something else.

Pollock's oeuvre must be read multiply rather than singularly; it is neither theory driven nor theory resistant; it does not belong to area studies any more than it belongs to discourse analysis. It is all these and more: the texts listed here transcend their time and place, even while bearing the marks of the world they inhabit. I know of no better way to make sense of Pollock's contribution than by invoking the category of time, for *The Language of the Gods* is not just or even primarily relevant to the present world, but to the future, and to the future of that future as well. This text, alongside Pollock's many others, reminds us just how much work there is to be done in the world of scholarship. It does so by revealing many paths for others to follow.

I suspect many readers outside South Asian studies would be tempted to presume upon a superficial encounter that Pollock's greatest achievement could be described in terms of his immense erudition. This would be in keeping with the terms according to which his work is most often praised: as learned and philologically dense. These qualities are important dimensions of the reader's pleasure. But none of these aspects lay the framework for a comparative investigation. My intention has been

to suggest what is perhaps less easily perceived: what we have in this corpus is less an archive of erudition than a methodology for relating to knowledge in the contemporary condition in which we find ourselves. Pollock's scholarship is extraordinary because it is driven by a depth of vision, rare not only among scholars but among anyone who has ever undertaken to make sense of the world. The learning is obvious; the critical vision has not been fully addressed. History is rich in examples of the most important insights requiring generations to be understood and even longer to be addressed. We are dealing with one such case here.

Nearly three decades of postcolonial theory have taught us that the knowledge we have of the non-European world is structured by the politics and histories of three centuries of colonial enterprises. Postcolonial theory has been less successful in showing us a way out of this condition; for if we have rejected the politics of colonialism, it still seems that we continue to propagate its ideologies through the normative turn toward European theory that accompanies most contemporary scholarly attempts to interpret the world. Theory is not freed from this problem once it has established connections outside Europe; the empirical problem of Eurocentrism is historically constituted and therefore must be addressed according to a temporal matrix and not merely a geographic one.

The ways in which our hermeneutic capacities stand to be expanded by engaging multiple premodern worlds have been explored before. But no scholar has understood so well both the present and the past, nor has anyone possessed the imagination necessary to derive lessons for the future from the story of their disjunction. European modernity and premodern politics do not converge; they were created for different ends, in response to different realities. The ideologies that inform the premodern

cosmopolis and modern governmentality are not commensurable. But the determination to consider them together is not merely a feat of virtuoso scholarship; it is an act of intellectual courage and the mark of a mind uniquely endowed to "enable us to perceive the simplicity of what is profound and the profundity of what is simple" (to return to Nietzsche), not because of how much it knows, but because of how much it is capable of perceiving and doing with what is known.³⁴ The territory of *The Language of the Gods* has been charted before, but the significance of premodern lifeworlds has not been perceived until now.

It is not only the modern conception of power that Pollock effectively challenges and transforms. A more specialized branch of his work is devoted to exploring the Sanskrit literary aesthetic, *rasa* theory, and King Bhoja's consolidation of *alamkaraśāstra* (poetics) in eleventh-century Malwa, most famously with *Srngaraprakasa*, the longest work in Sanskrit literary theory, for which Pollock has offered remarkable explications of how this literary theorist defined the capacity to appreciate literature as "the capacity to appreciate the world richly."³⁵ As he argues, following the Sanskrit poet-critic Jagannatha, the Sanskrit literary-critical tradition lays the grounds for a framework wherein "criticism of literary form and the criticism of literary representation—criticism of life—intersect."³⁶ Another groundbreaking article traces the device of *kaviprasamsa*, the praise of poets, in Sanskrit literary texts, concluding with the provocative reflection that practitioners of an art tend to have a different temporal relation to their predecessors than theorists, who are more likely to think in synchronic than diachronic terms.³⁷

The dense genealogy Pollock provides for *kaviprasamsa* could be with a great deal of profit applied to similar structures through which past

34. Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

35. Pollock, "Social Aesthetic and Sanskrit Literary Theory"; Sheldon Pollock, "Bhoja's Śrngaraprakāśa and the Problem of Rasa: A Historical Introduction and Translation," *Asiatische Studien/Études asiatiques* 70 (1998): 117–92.

36. Pollock, "Social Aesthetic and Sanskrit Literary Theory," 215.

37. Sheldon Pollock, "In Praise of Poets: On the History and Function of the *Kaviprasamsā*," in *Ānandabhāratī. Dr. K. Krishnamoorthy Felicitation Volume*, ed. B. Channakeshava and H. V. Nagaraja Rao (Mysore: Murthy, 1995), 443–57.

poets are invoked in Persian literary texts. To take just one example, we could explore how and why Amir Khusrau engages with Nizami, seeking both to equal and to surpass him while consistently articulating his relationship to his poetic master in the language of praise. Pollock's article is a major contribution not only to the study of canon formation but also to the culturally specific nature of literary influence. As a dense and, one imagines, unsurpassable study of this particular topic, it is a work that ought to lie at the foundation of any genuinely comparative engagement with literature.

The incidentals of the history upon which Pollock draws are of course far from incidental; my purpose is less to extricate his ideas from their philologic origins than to suggest what can be gained by a turn to premodern sources, even for those with no particular interest in history. I wish to argue for the conceptual necessity of premodernity, because it is unnecessary, and perhaps even confusing, to ground an argument for premodernity in an historicist vision of reality. Pollock's engagement with literature offers a means of thinking beyond the literature/history binary, which is of comparatively recent origins. From a methodological perspective, it is necessary also to refer to his work in translating Sanskrit classics into English, though justice cannot be done to that aspect of his oeuvre here. Translation is a way less of *thinking* comparatively than of *being* comparative. A good translation enables an encounter that scholarship left to itself can never achieve; it supplants analysis, which is always secondary to the appreciation of beauty, with a more direct encounter with the text; it says things that, according to Bhoja's theorization of *kavya*, cannot be said directly.³⁸

One lesson to take from Pollock's oeuvre is that sameness and difference are reflections of the same relation; in comparison we should not be limited by an assumption of one or the other, because these two terms are structurally implicated within each other. Even the most context-

dependant concepts can be translated. In order to forestall the loss involved in the act of transposition from one context to another, it is only necessary to know the world within which the concept originally arose. We must seek to know these things according to the terms that governed them. But we do so for the sake of needs and desires that cannot be reduced to any moment in time, including our own, because they are not entirely subject to the historical flow of time. We engage the past not merely because it may teach us something about ourselves and about others but also because no one, particularly not those who have something of significance to teach us, ever wished to be understood purely according to the values of their time.

Kalhana, writing in twelfth-century Kashmir, imagined for himself an audience of future readers, and it was for them that he sought to enshrine his world in a poem, which he called the *Rajatarangini*, or *River of Kings*. "We pay reverence," he wrote, "to that naturally sublime craft of poets without whose favor even mighty kings are not remembered, though the earth, encircled by the oceans, was sheltered under the shadow of their arms as in the shade of forest trees."³⁹ Those who create monuments for another time most often sacrifice their own time in order to memorialize it. This is why we do not ground the conceptual necessity of premodernity in a historicist relation to time.

Of all bodies of knowledge, literature is the most difficult to compare. Comparative history has been around since the discipline was founded; in theory at least, there is no substantive barrier to comparative philosophy. Science also is easily able to do without context, or at least to imagine itself as context-free. But for the student of literature, no text exists apart from the cultural universe that gives it meaning. Literature is also the most challenging body of knowledge to compare because it is the most contradictory; literary texts compel due to their capacity to confound us. Understanding litera-

38. For some of Pollock's insights regarding translation, see "Philology, Literature, Translation," in *Translating, Translations, Translators: From India to the West*, ed. Enrica Garzilli, Harvard Oriental Series no. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Department of Indian and Sanskrit Studies, Harvard University, 1996), 111–31. Pollock's translations include the *Ramayana*, books 2 and 3; Bhava's *Uttararamacarita*; and a particularly beau-

tiful chapter from Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*, "Aja's Lament," in *Ancient Indian Literature: An Anthology*, 3 vols., ed. T. R. S. Sharma (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2000), 2:421–31.

39. Kalhana, *Rajatarangini: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. M. A. Stein (Kashmir: Verinag, 1991), 1:46.

ture adequately according to any single cultural matrix, so as to appreciate the fullness of its referential relationship, is a near impossibility. How much more daunting then is the enterprise of appreciating literature from the vantage point of multiple cultures. The study of the literary text requires a deeper investment in context than knowledge systems, such as philosophy and even history, not fundamentally engaged with the art of linguistic signification. Such an engagement necessitates a fidelity to the text, or at least a capacity to be loyal if one so chooses, that naturally takes the form of empirical depth and, only with much greater difficulty, of comparative vision.

In 1859, the Indologist Theodore Benfey attempted to set the study of literature on a comparative footing with his research into the Indian origin of the European Märchen. Other orientalist, such as de Sacy, accompanied Benfey's work with research into the Syriac, Arabic, and Persian versions of the *Pancatantra* (roughly translatable as *Five Tricks*) and related *katha* texts. But in spite of the scholarly excitement generated at the time, and the thrill of working toward a new understanding of literature and a new civilizational history, Benfey's scholarship failed to substantively transform the study of comparative literature; he laid the groundwork for a sub-branch of Indology concerned with the *Pancatantra* and related texts and in folklore studies contributed to the "diffusion thesis," which accounts for cross-cultural parallels in folkloric texts historically.⁴⁰ But the study of literature, the discipline to which Benfey intended to contribute, still remains grounded in European models. His research was also marred by his determination to demonstrate the Greek origins of Indic fables, which later scholarship has effectively shown to be grounded in prejudice. Benfey died in 1881, and his name is at present unknown to students of comparative literature. But as I see it, the relationship between India and Europe, South Asian civilization and the

broader trajectory of world history, is not merely one narrative strand among others; it is one of the central ones, if not the *most* central. It has been effectively argued from the perspective of the history of philosophy that "the relationship between ancient Greek and Indian traditions of thought is *the* foundational level of comparative philosophy," and there is no reason to exclude literature from our understandings of civilizational exchange in premodernity.⁴¹

Erudition is of marginal use to the comparativist if unaccompanied by an imaginative capacity to make knowledge matter to the world to which the author belongs, and to the future. There needs to be a way not only to know but also to make it possible for others to know, and even more than that, to account for why certain forms of knowledge matter more than others. Otherwise, no one will be around to keep the tradition of scholarship alive, and it will die, having outlived its purpose, as so many traditions already have. Even worse, it will be subsumed by the industriousness of positivism aligned with the state and with the corporate institution that the university has become. We will become increasingly narrow, with no one reading outside their disciplines, no one knowing what it means to imagine lifeworlds from places and times not easily or empirically accessible. Many of the conventions that guide our work today are mere trends in world history. Why should we presume they will last forever? Is it not better to distinguish that which is universal about good scholarship from that which is contingent and subject to change?

For the comparative methodology considered here, the objects of comparison are far from incidental to the nature of the intellectual inquiry. Perhaps our real debt in discovering the work of Pollock is to Kalhana and the anonymous *praśasti* authors rather than the twenty-first-century interpreter who has brought them to life for us now. But without Pollock's mediation, without his methodology, without

40. The best survey known to me of Benfey's research and legacy is Moritz Winternitz, *History of Indian Literature*, vol. 3, pt. 1, trans. and ed. Subhadra Jha (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963).

41. Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth, 2002), xxxi. Emphasis added.

his vision, it is uncertain whether these legacies would yield anything to those of us who are not Sanskrit philologists. Pollock's work has performed the inestimable service of bringing pre-modern Indian worlds to bear upon our own, in a way sheer intellectual curiosity or political commitment could never have enabled and in a world in which so many other brilliant interpreters of literature have little if anything to say about premodern Asian literary traditions. A project, strange by the standards of contemporary thought, is being pursued here. The reader lucky enough to encounter this oeuvre has embarked on a quest quite unlike anything known before.

It is difficult to assess, much less describe, work that exceeds the capacities of the present world to perceive. It is trivial to revert to greatness, inasmuch as that falls short of the more important and difficult task of engaging an intellectual contribution on nonevaluative terms, simply according to what it enables. But what can one do when forced to characterize a miracle? When whoever is reading this now is no longer alive, when their children as well have passed on, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* will provide a picture of the world we inhabit. It will serve as a testimony of how a few of us in the present—the most visionary among us, that is, the select few, whose numbers are fewer than the fingers of one hand—managed to rise above the prejudices, limitations, and blindness of our era. Pollock's oeuvre will sustain future readers because the author sought to understand the worlds of others according to terms, categories, and details that the present world is unable to perceive, much less assimilate. Most, perhaps even all, of us have failed in this all-important endeavor. Let us be grateful that the passion and courage of one extraordinary scholar have enabled him to achieve the impossible. If books like this can still be written today, there just might be some hope for the future.

An essay seeking to honor Pollock's contribution would never be complete without some attempt to probe the limitations that frame every monumental work of genius. The greatest

tribute to pay to work of this caliber is to seek to extend its insights rather than to rest content with its achievement. There are three issues in particular I would like to see more deeply engaged and with which I will close. These limitations are functions of the condition under which Pollock, as well as all of us, writes. To some extent they are less comments on Pollock's work than on its potential legacy, and the traps that we must seek to avoid.

The first is the famous problem of the status of the secular in Pollock's work. It is widely believed that Pollock exaggerates and over-emphasizes the secular content of premodern South Asian experience, at the cost of ignoring relevant evidence from sacred contexts. Such critiques no doubt contain a kernel of truth, but the empirical concern raised by other scholars suggests a conceptual challenge that neither Pollock nor anyone else has addressed. Once addressed, it would not prevent Pollock from continuing to focus, even programmatically, on the secular over and above the religious.

The conceptual task is to define the pre-modern secular in terms that do not reproduce modern categories. The secular as we know it, in for example its Habermasian articulation, is irrevocably tied to modernity. This does mean that there was no such thing as secular experience in premodernity; what it means is that we cannot base our theories of the premodern secular on the material archive of modernity and the concepts that have arisen from it. Thus far, Pollock has not seriously undertaken to define the premodern secular or to distinguish it from the secularism of modernity. What we have is a category he terms secular, which, if only due to its semantic associations, runs the risk of reproducing modern categories.

For both the Islamic and South Asian context, we need to formulate a vision of secularism more consistent with the language of the conceptual worlds inhabited by premodern texts. If a text invokes Allah or Siva in its opening, clearly it is problematic to label it secular without carefully distinguishing between the modern and the premodern meaning of the term.⁴² An invo-

42. As Pollock himself acknowledges: "To categorically deny any role of religious sentiment in the creation of culture makes no more sense for South Asia than for anywhere else" (*Language of the Gods*, 423).

cation to a deity in the context of a premodern literary tradition may well be formulaic, but this does not mean that it is not an essential feature of the content of experience in premodern life or of the structure of the literary text. If this is so, then one thing about the premodern secular is clear: it is not programmatically antireligious in the modern sense of secularism.

We moderns perceive the necessity of the secular because we are familiar with the coercive legacies of religion in modern history. We live the aftermath of Galileo's argument with the Catholic Church and perceive a tension between the claims of religion and the claims of scientific truth. But was religion coercive in the premodern world when it offered a normative and conceptually unchallenged narrative of experience, before the claims of science and religion came into conflict? If we were to invoke the complex history of Brahmanical exclusions as an example of the coercive content of premodern religion, it could be countered that there is no compelling reason for labeling these forms of oppression religious rather than political. It is far from clear what religion might mean outside a Christian context, though it is amply clear what it means within one, especially as the word itself has a Latin etymology meaning "to bind," indexing yet again its profoundly Christian cosmology. Is not modern secularism a specific response to the failure of Christianity, the rigidity of Catholicism and its progeny, the impossibility of reconciling truth with revelation, and would not therefore a search for secularism in premodern non-Christian sources—if done unreflexively—necessarily reproduce a series of modern dilemmas? That would not pose an inherent problem, if not for the fact that insofar as we are captivated by our own binaries we will not perceive the conceptual distinctions made by others.

If the impossibility of a serious intellectual engagement with religion in a modern context were to be transposed onto a context wherein the category "religion" is entirely incommensurable with its contemporary meaning, we would be serving neither scholarship nor the pursuit of truth. I am concerned that secularism, in its contemporary meaning, inculcates an image of religion that is less than tenable for premodern Asia. Whether or not such a risk exists in

Pollock's work, this is one danger that haunts any search for the premodern secular. As necessary as it is to oppose the religious biases of former scholarship, such opposition should not be merely reactive. An overly steadfast attachment to the secular in our modern sense could take the form of a disinclination to appreciate the nature of historical difference. We must conceptually allow for the possibility that there were worlds in which religion may never have been discredited or, to put it in more provoking terms, in which religion had yet to be born. Invoking the secular in such a context may or may not be appropriate, but a distinction should always be drawn among the different forms taken by secularism in time. In contexts wherein evil and suffering did not generate critiques of the *idea of religion* as much as they generated critiques of *religion's specific instantiations*, it would be manifestly anachronistic and unhistorical to maintain that the content of premodern secular experience could be understood in terms of secular modernity. If we do not specify the specific content of the premodern secular, homogenization will result. The premodern secular is dissimilar from the religious in ways that have yet to be explored; its difference from the modern secular should alert us to a profound divergence in terms of the appropriate categories of analysis to be applied.

My second desire is somewhat related to my first. I would like to have the tools—which it seems to me Pollock alone is capable of generating—to distinguish between different kinds of premodernity rather than have to resort repeatedly to a single term. The words *ancient* and *medieval* occur less often in Pollock's lexicon than *premodern*. But *premodern*—used amply in this paper—is haunted by the same problem that haunts the terms *non-European* and *non-Western*. This is the problem of defining ideas and experiences in terms of what they are not, and not only this, but of defining them in terms that foreground the very category they seek to overthrow and use that problematic category as the standard of measurement and ultimately of judgment. If premodernity is defined as that which modernity is not—and this is an opposition that the term itself implies—then what can it ever be other than an argument about modernity? In terms of its vision, it will be something

more, but the word *premodern* is semantically constrained, inhabited by the weaknesses of discarded assumptions. In Pollock's oeuvre, premodernity is much more than an argumentative strategy or an analytical point of view. It is not merely or even primarily conceptual. Its power derives from its documented existence and not merely its imagined life. This is the kind of premodernity we need, not just a critique, but a historical alternative to contemporary power.

In invoking the concept of premodernity we also run the risk of naturalizing the concept of modernity.⁴³ This presents a problem for the theorization of premodernity. The word is obviously necessary, but only provisionally so and, one hopes, only temporarily. In a utopian world, we would not need to invoke any temporal model that lends itself to binaristic thinking. If premodernity is the counternarrative to modernity, this means that our theorizations of the premodern will be constrained by the same problems that constrain the object of our critiques; insofar as they strategically oppose modern categories, theorizations of the premodern will also reproduce the domains and limitations of modern social theory, even if in inverted form.

I myself know no easy method of transcending the limits language places on the articulation of truth; I merely suggest that a deeper sense of differences between various kinds of premodernity, specifically the ancient and the medieval, should be a constant in the theoretical vocabulary even of those who casually inquire into premodern life forms. If we theorize the premodern, we must do so while insisting on an ancient premodern, a medieval premodern, and perhaps on diversity within those two temporalities, as well as premoderns of many different geographies. Otherwise the category itself runs the risk of becoming the mere shadow of modernity.

My third desire is one this paper has sought, in however minor a way, to enact. I would like to see the relevance of Pollock's work become clearly perceptible beyond South Asian studies. At a recent conference in honor of Pollock's contributions to the field of South

Asian studies, Arjun Appadurai observed that Pollock's achievements and the achievements he inspires in his students and colleagues demonstrate that the area-studies model of disciplinary organization continues to have salience and value for us today. Clearly, South Asian studies is not a dying field. There is no reason for a South Asianist to doubt the vitality of the area-studies model. However, as someone located outside South Asian studies, I feel compelled to observe that there is no analogue to Sheldon Pollock in any other regionally based discipline. Neither Middle Eastern nor Slavic studies—to name the two area-studies disciplines that converge on the Caucasus—can boast of a scholar who combines Pollock's philological depth with his critical vision. Neither field has begun to think seriously about premodernity with anything approaching the philological depth and rigorous critical insight of Sheldon Pollock and those who have made his work their own, nor are any such transformations within these fields anywhere on the horizon.

Therefore I would suggest that Pollock's brilliance and the flourishing of South Asian studies that he is in large measure responsible for is an argument *for* rather than *against* the demise of our contemporary area-studies model. It would be nothing short of criminal to confine Pollock's contribution to South Asian studies. The biggest danger of area studies as it is organized today is precisely the ignorance it enforces of scholarship that takes place beyond the boundaries of a single region. It is no simple matter to argue that a philological account of Sanskrit literature is indispensable to the understanding of not merely Indian premodernity but also of premodernity and modernity as such. It is particularly difficult to do so in a climate of fragmented areal knowledge. This is, however, the difficult argument that this paper has sought to advance.

When it creates borders between regions according to contemporary cartographies of power rather than connecting them in a broad cosmopolitan relation, area studies prevents both Middle Eastern specialists and Slavists (to

43. Similar issues attend the term *early modern*, which I have not chosen to discuss here but will do so elsewhere.

take two examples closest to me) from hearing about, much less reading, groundbreaking works outside their regional discipline. I have yet to see any of Pollock's seminal works used fruitfully by anyone outside South Asian studies. For all the classic status that *The Language of the Gods* has already attained within its discipline, there is not much to indicate at present that it will have an immediate impact beyond South Asia. In the long term, I have no doubt that it will; my hopes for the short term, in a world of area-studies fragmentation of knowledge, are less sanguine.

But when Pollock is the author, scholarship on India is never just "scholarship on India." It is scholarship about the world, and as much as we wish to promote deep philology and local knowledge, that world cannot be confined to a single region. I would like to register my hope that Pollock's vision of premodern political life will be allowed to inform, invigorate, and transform other areas of regional inquiry, as it has already done for the world of South Asian studies. Let us not allow his work to become a casualty of the modern condition, under which disciplines devoted to the study of South Asia, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East—the profound inadequacy of these labels merely confirms my broader argument—are, much like the regions they represent, housed in separate departments, culturally isolated from one another, unaware of each other's life, and unable to influence each other's future. S