CALL FOR PAPERS — EDITED VOLUME

Intercultural Recognitions

Western Fascinations with South Asian Myths and Rituals in the 20th and 21st Centuries

L'unica conoscenza è l'avvicinamento – e il riconoscere ciò a cui ci si avvicina.
The only knowledge is the getting closer – and the recognition of what you are getting closer to.
Roberto Calasso, *Ka* (1996)

This edited volume aims to explore the ways in which Western writers, artists and intellectuals of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have engaged with the myths, rituals and aesthetic traditions of South Asia. It will approach these traditions – in their textual, iconographic, musical and performative expressions – as the Hindu world, conceived with Wendy Doniger as a polythetic field without a single defining centre, together with the Buddhist and Jaina traditions in their South Asian forms, with which the Hindu world has been in creative dialogue throughout its history.

The notion of recognition that gives the volume its title draws on the sense Roberto Calasso gave to the term. In *La letteratura e gli dèi* (2001) Calasso recalls that the gods once appeared primarily as an event, a sudden epiphany whose "evidence" poetry would later inherit, and cites a line of Euripides' *Helen* in which the very act of recognising loved ones is called a god. In *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* (1988) the gods ask above all to be recognised, and every recognition is the vision of a form: an event that is aesthetic in the first place, in which powers become manifest in a figure, a body, a voice. Secular modernity, in Calasso's view, is marked by a failure to recognise a divine that nonetheless persists. Read in this light, the engagement of Western authors with South Asian myths and rituals can be seen as a series of recognitions, in which forms perceived in a distant tradition suddenly revealed their bearing on the questions of the recognising subject. This sense finds a hermeneutic counterpart in the itinerary traced by Paul Ricoeur in *Parcours de la reconnaissance* (2004), which leads from the identification of something to the recognition of oneself, a movement Ricoeur follows back to the Homeric scenes of *anagnôrisis*, and finally to mutual recognition, as the verb passes from the active voice of recognising to the passive voice of asking to be recognised.

A philosophy of recognition was also elaborated within South Asian thought. In tenth-century Kashmir, Utpaladeva made the Pratyabhijñā, the philosophy of non-dual Śaivism, into an elaborate system in his *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*, the "Stanzas on the Recognition of the Lord". Liberation there lies in recognising one's own Self as Śiva, a Lord who, though our very soul, remains unrecognised within us. Against the Buddhist epistemologists, for whom, in Isabelle Ratié's words, every alteration was otherness and every recognition illusory, the Pratyabhijñā confronted the paradox of self-recognition: remaining the same across a difference from oneself. In the light of Utpaladeva's doctrine, Abhinavagupta later read the

recognition of the suggestive word and meaning that Ānandavardhana required of the poet as a careful scrutiny of what is already, in some sense, known, as distinct from the mere identification of something seen before. The idea of a Lord unrecognised within us and the account of self-recognition resonate with Calasso and Ricoeur, from within one of the traditions the volume addresses.

Contributors are invited to take recognition, in the senses outlined above, as the guiding perspective of their chapters: to ask what was recognised in South Asian myths, rituals and forms, by whom and through which aesthetic means, and what that recognition disclosed about the recognising subject and its own culture. The focus of the volume is on recognition itself; cases of misrecognition or refusal may be considered only insofar as they shed light, by contrast, on how recognition takes place.

The relations between India and Europe have been the object of a vast scholarship, including Raymond Schwab's classic reconstruction of the "Oriental Renaissance" and Wilhelm Halbfass's *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, a hermeneutic study of the encounter between Indian and European thought in religion, philosophy and science, which asked how each side came to understand the other and, through the other, itself. Dorothy Figueira has described Indian exoticism in European literature from Romanticism to the *fin de siècle* as a mode of self-definition oscillating between a model of inspiration and an alibi for despair, depending on whether writers were willing to put their own prejudices at stake in the encounter. In the terms adopted here, her distinction may be read as the difference between a recognition that exposes the recognising subject to what it encounters and one that merely confirms what it already knew; it may be worth asking whether this polarity could also illuminate later engagements, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Postcolonial studies have also developed an extensive critical analysis of Orientalist knowledge. While acknowledging this line of enquiry, the volume intends to adopt a different focus: contributors will not be required to engage with debates on Orientalism and postcolonial theory, and where such questions are addressed they should remain ancillary to the analysis of the works and projects under examination.

Since recognition, in Calasso's sense, is first of all aesthetic, the volume will focus primarily on the aesthetic and creative dimension of these engagements: on the ways in which myths, rituals, images and sounds are read, rewritten, performed and transformed within literary, artistic, musical and philosophical projects, and on the forms of writing and composition that these encounters generate. Particular attention will be given to authors who have approached South Asian traditions as creative writers, artists and intellectuals rather than as specialists, and to figures who have moved between erudition and creative practice.

The examples that follow suggest some of the forms such recognitions have taken. Early twentieth-century cases are well known. Hermann Hesse, whose family history was bound to the Pietist mission in South India, drew on Indian and Buddhist materials in *Siddhartha* (1922).

Alexander Scriabin, drawing on Theosophy, envisaged the performance of his unrealised *Mysterium* at the foot of the Himalayas; his compatriot Nicholas Roerich, also close to the Theosophical milieu, later settled in the Kullu Valley and made the Himalayan world the centre of his pictorial and spiritual vision. From an opposite standpoint, René Guénon, in his *Introduction générale à l'étude des doctrines hindoues* (1921), rejected both the claims of Orientalist erudition and the Theosophical movement, and attributed the Greeks' misunderstanding of the symbols they had inherited from older traditions to an aesthetic tendency pervading their thought; his reading of Hindu doctrines nonetheless exerted a lasting influence on writers and artists.

From the second half of the century, Alain Daniélou, musicologist, translator and initiate of the Śaiva tradition under Swami Karpātrī in Benares, combined scholarly work on Indian music with a personal reinterpretation of Śaivism, in which he recognised the cult of Dionysus and a primordial religion of nature once shared by India and Europe, and which he set against Christianity and the modern world (*Shiva et Dionysos*, 1979). Elémire Zolla, a scholar of Anglo-American literature, set the Indian paths of knowledge, devotion and Tantra within a syncretic mode of thought that kept its distance from dogmatic and historicist attitudes (*Uscite dal mondo*, 1992; *Le tre vie*, 1995). Roberto Calasso ranged in *Ka* (1996) across Vedic cosmogony, the epic and Purāṇic narratives and the life of the Buddha, and explored in *L'ardore* (2010) the ritual thought of the Brāhmaṇas, founded on the *bandhu*, the "connections" between the unmanifest and the manifest, through a form of writing that hybridises narration and essay. More recently, Tiziano Terzani turned the experience of illness into an itinerary through Vedānta teaching and Himalayan retreat, a source of existential renewal and of reflection on Western modernity (*Un altro giro di giostra*, 2004).

Alongside these figures, the field extends across languages, genres and media. It includes, among many others, T.S. Eliot's Upanishadic and Gītā echoes and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924); Alfred Kubin's novel *Die andere Seite* (1909) and his cycle of drawings *Sansara* (1911), Alfred Döblin's *Manas* (1927) and Thomas Mann's *Die vertauschten Köpfe* (1940); the writings of René Daumal, Simone Weil and Marguerite Yourcenar; Mircea Eliade's Indian fiction and Octavio Paz's *Ladera este* (1969); twentieth-century Italian writing on India (Guido Gozzano, Alberto Moravia, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Giorgio Manganelli, Antonio Tabucchi); the music of Alexander Scriabin, John Cage, Olivier Messiaen, Giacinto Scelsi and Philip Glass; theatrical engagements from Jerzy Grotowski's *Śakuntalā* (1960) to Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* (1985); and, in the twenty-first century, writing such as William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives* (2009).

At stake throughout will be the capacity of aesthetics to function as a mode of encounter and as a site where modernity and cultural self-understanding can be rethought, whether in dialogue with or in reaction to the narratives of disenchantment that accompanied Western modernity.

We invite proposals from scholars and researchers, both within and outside academia, working across disciplines such as literary studies, philosophy, visual arts, musicology, theatre studies, history of religions, and cultural studies. Proposals may address the following themes, among others, each approached through the category of recognition:

- South Asian traditions as lenses for understanding and questioning Western cultural frameworks.
- Self-recognition and the reinterpretation of selfhood, subjectivity, society and modernity through South Asian myths, rituals and doctrines.
- Literary rewritings, translations and adaptations of South Asian myths and ritual texts.
- Musical, visual and performative engagements with South Asian aesthetic traditions.
- Travel, immersion and existential transformation in South Asian cultural contexts.
- Borrowings, adaptations and creative transformations of South Asian elements within Western works.
- South Asian materials within heterogeneous intellectual projects (comparative, philosophical, esoteric, traditionalist).
- The role of South Asian teachers, interlocutors and translators in shaping these encounters, and the forms of mutual recognition they made possible.
- The role of aesthetics in translating and transforming religious and cultural traditions, including positions suspicious of aesthetic approaches.

We particularly welcome contributions that offer new perspectives on well-known authors, or that recover lesser-known figures whose engagement with South Asia sheds light on broader questions of aesthetics, cultural encounter and modernity. We are especially interested in approaches that attend closely to the poetics, forms and intellectual aims through which Western authors made South Asian materials a resource for expression in their own cultural context, whatever their genre or doctrinal perspective. Proposals should make explicit how the chosen case engages with recognition in the senses outlined above.

Selected references

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Clarke, J.J., *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, London, Routledge, 1997.

Davis, Richard H., *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015.

Doniger, Wendy, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, New York, Penguin Press, 2009.

Figueira, Dorothy M., *The Exotic: A Decadent Quest*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1994.

Halbfass, Wilhelm, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1988 (German original 1981).

Josephson-Storm, Jason Ā., *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Ludden, David, *India and South Asia: A Short History*, Oxford, Oneworld, 2002.

Mitter, Partha, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977.

Pollock, Sheldon (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2003.

Ratié, Isabelle, *Le Soi et l'Autre. Identité, différence et altérité dans la philosophie de la Pratyabhijñā*, Leiden–Boston, Brill, 2011.

Ricoeur, Paul, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études*, Paris, Stock, 2004.

Sbrojavacca, Elena, *Letteratura assoluta. Le opere e il pensiero di Roberto Calasso*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2021.

Schwab, Raymond, *La Renaissance orientale*, Paris, Payot, 1950.

Torella, Raffaele, and Bäumer, Bettina (eds.), *Utpaladeva, Philosopher of Recognition*, Shimla–New Delhi, Indian Institute of Advanced Study–DK Printworld, 2016.

Submission Guidelines

Proposals, written in English, should include a title, an abstract (max. 500 words) indicating how the proposal addresses the category of recognition, a short list of references, and a brief biographical note. They should be submitted as a single PDF file to michele.felice@unive.it by January 15, 2027.

Notification of acceptance: February 10, 2027.

Full chapters, written in English (max. 35,000 characters including spaces and notes), will be due by November 30, 2027, and will undergo double-blind peer review. Acceptance of the proposal does not guarantee publication, which is subject to the outcome of the review process. Bibliographical references should be given in the notes; no separate bibliography is required.

The volume will be published in the series *Obliqua Nova. Series on Esotericism, Alternative Spiritualities, and Artistic Knowledge* (Ledizioni, Milan), directed by Giacomo Cucugliato: https://www.ledizioni.it/categoria-prodotto/umanistici/obliqua/