

# Max Muller and the theosophists or the other half of victorian orientalism

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Denis Vidal

## **Max Muller and the theosophists or the other half of victorian orientalism<sup>1</sup>**

### Embarrassing readers

It is not a recent phenomenon; it doesn't originate either in Edward Said's famous book on orientalism (1978). It seems that sanskritists have always, for sheer pleasure perhaps, indulged in the art of getting into trouble with their readers. To begin with, as Raymond Schwab has shown (Schwab, 1950), the West's initial infatuation with Indian culture, in the eighteenth and then in the early decades of the nineteenth century, was often due to rather fanciful readings of texts that were themselves inaccurate and incomplete. And when this infatuation gave way to denigration - as was the case in England in the nineteenth century - the works of sanskritists were used once again. Macaulay, for instance, whose certain but questionable gifts as a polemist led him to improvise judgments on Indian culture for which he was never forgiven, never claimed any first-hand knowledge in the matter. On the contrary, he declared that he had based his opinions entirely on extensive reading of the work of orientalist.

Mention must be made, of course, of the particularly harmful interpretations that were based on the analysis of Aryan or Indo-European themes, especially in Germany. But we should also take into account the manner in which the texts of the orientalist contributed to the undeniable wave of popularity of Indian mysticism and spiritualism. A complete anthology could be put together with quotes from unfortunate erudites, specialists in Indian literature or religion, who desperately tried to draw a dividing line between their scholarly books and all sorts of other books, dealing with oriental themes, that bookstores perversely insist on stacking on the same shelf.

It is probably difficult to find a single Sanskritist who hasn't faced the same dilemma as Max Muller. He thought that the only readers who could really understand

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<sup>1</sup> When I stopped for the first time in front of books of theosophy in the Nehru Memorial Library (they are just near by the works of Max Muller) , it was not, I suspect, because of any mysterious astral forces; it was, more simply because of the unsurpassed gift of Shiv Vishvanathan for provoking curiosity about whatever topic he may feel like talking about.

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

his work were the researchers working in the same field. They alone were in a position to realise, for example, that all the contemporary translations of the Vedas were fairly provisional and vastly speculative. He even regretted at times the Middle Ages when he could have quenched his thirst for knowledge, while remaining a mere transcriber of texts.

Still, Muller, perhaps more than anyone else in the nineteenth century, made accessible works that were then only known through oral traditions, scattered manuscripts or rare scholarly studies. We will later see how Max Muller, thinking of himself more in terms of a new Erasmus than of a medieval transcriber, liked to imagine his new readers. One thing is nevertheless clear: they were not the people who came to be most influenced by his works. Raymond Schwab's only remark on the subject would still be considered as ample commentary by most sanskritists: "The other new fact, on which I will not have to dwell, is the appearance, also in 1875, of the Theosophical Society with Madame Blavatsky" (Schwab, 1950, pg. 17)

And yet, in the West, two very different types of people embody orientalism during the Victorian age which is also the heyday of British Imperialism in India.

The first group is well known; it is composed of people who created the academic tradition of orientalism in Europe. I will confine the present study to the works of a single man, who could legitimately be considered the most exemplary, if not always the most innovative, representative of these scholars: Max Muller, Professor at Oxford, editor and promoter of a monumental series of fifty one volumes entitled: "The Sacred Books of the East". He was also the author of the first critical edition of the Vedas and wrote more than fifty other books devoted, on the whole, to Indian culture and civilisation. He had the 'honour' to be made, towards the end of his life, Privy Counsellor to Queen Victoria .

The second group that I will examine, though it is undoubtedly as important as the first, is absent from most debates on orientalism: it is exemplified by the theosophist

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

movement and especially by two fascinating people, be it for very different reasons: Helena Petrovskya Blavatsky (H.P.B. for those in the know), author of works whose merits Jorge Luis Borge would certainly have appreciated (*Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*), and Annie Besant, perhaps the most exceptional radical militant of the entire Victorian age.

### The two sides of orientalism

It has become commonplace to consider orientalism as a particularly spectacular form of cultural imperialism. Edward Said's work dealt more specifically with the Middle East (Said, 1978) but his theses were extended to India, especially by Ronald Inden (1990). However, as David Ludden recently remarked, we must first clarify the meaning and the scope of the term "orientalism" (LUDDEN, 1994, pg. 252). This question is particularly important for the period I'm dealing with. Indeed, one of the remarkable features of Indian orientalism in the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century is that Edward Said's definitions cannot account for it.

Let us use a simple example: when he mentions the forms taken by orientalism in India in the nineteenth century, Said tends to refer to the famous texts by Macaulay where he denigrates Indian culture. It is fairly ironic to see how Edward Said quotes him. Whereas the Englishman undoubtedly voiced the theses of Western cultural imperialism in the most perfect rhetorical form, one can wonder whether his stand can really be defined as a form of orientalism. It is well known, on the contrary, that he tried to suppress all forms of orientalist influence on colonial ideology.

If we examine the meaning that the terms had at the time, one thing at least is certain: not only did Macaulay have nothing in common with orientalists, but he was their fiercest enemy, as well as, perhaps, the man who did most to prevent the identification of orientalism with colonial ideology. Indeed, from 1835 onwards, when Bentinck, then Governor-General of India, decided to ratify the recommendations

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

contained in his famous *Minute on education*, an ever-widening gap was created between orientalism - in the sense that this term had at the time - and the kind of cultural imperialism defended in a sophisticated manner by authors like Mill, Macaulay or Trevelyan. This form of imperialism was echoed by the entire colonial ideology of the time, but in a cruder manner<sup>2</sup>.

We are therefore first faced with a terminological problem: depending on whether we use the term orientalism with its nineteenth century meaning or whether we give it all the connotations that it carries today with Said or Inden, we will in fact be referring to two entirely different things. And if we agree at first to think in nineteenth century terms, we can see that the form of cultural imperialism which dominated colonial ideology had practically nothing in common with what was then referred to as orientalism. It was practically the opposite. Does this mean that we should exonerate orientalism from the charge of imperialism? Certainly not, but I think that the problem must be stated differently.

Let us consider Max Muller: it is indeed difficult to find a more peaceful defender of all forms of imperialism existing at the time, in Europe as well as in the rest of the world. In political debates, he was invariably taking sides with the advocates of imperial policies (Austria and Prussia during the war over Schleswig-Holstein in 1865, and then against France in 1870. Or even Great Britain in South Africa, and finally in India as well<sup>3</sup>).

Strange as it may seem, Max Muller's political courage and the difficulties that he was occasionally faced with, were never due to reservations that he might have expressed about imperialism. They were almost always linked, on the contrary, to the fact that he was in favour of imperial policies as well as a supporter of at least two

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed analysis of the common forms of colonial ideology can be found in "White mutiny, The Ilbert Crisis in India and Genesis of the Indian National Congress" (Hirschmann, 1980)

<sup>3</sup> See J.M. Voigt; the 'solution' that Max Muller would have desired was an imperial alliance between England, Germany and the United States.

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

(English and German) imperial powers and that he never really accepted to defend one rather than the other.

Max Muller's imperialism made him translate "God save the Queen" into Sanskrit. It did not however lead him to identify political imperialism and cultural imperialism. Of course we find in his works all the cultural stereotypes that orientalism has associated with India: a so-called "real India", that of Vedic antiquity and high Brahmanic culture to which he refers through his own experience as a Sanskritist; an India of the villages as well which he opposed, like many others, to the reality of large Indian cities. Nor did he fail to succumb to the common stereotypes about a contemplative and meditative India opposed to a more action-driven Western world.

Was this then despite his orientalism or more probably because of it? We could give a multitude of examples showing that Max Muller took a firm stand against the forms of cultural imperialism of his time. He was, for instance, no less severe than Ronald Inden when he denounced the ethnocentric and extremely contemptuous nature of Mill's history. Likewise, he never hesitated to denounce the racial and cultural stereotyping rampant amongst the British in India.

The same remark applies to his vast contribution to Indo-European studies. It would be equally difficult to accuse him of having used his erudition to try and widen the gap between the East and the West. The same thing could be said of the distinction between Semitic and Indo-European cultures: Max Muller always regretted, for example, that the Bible was not included in his collection of "Sacred Books of the East"<sup>4</sup>.

We could add other examples: his defence of Tilak (as an orientalist, of course, and as an orientalist only) or his increasing skepticism towards racial theories. The same goes for his defence of Indian culture, which included respect of, and real concern

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<sup>4</sup> there also, Max Muller could acknowledge the value of jewish culture without too much compassion for jewish people themselves: "*disgraceful as the antisemitic riots have been in Germany and in Russia, there can be no doubt that in this as in most cases, bothh sides were to blame and there is little prospect of peace being reestablished till many more heads have been broken*" ( Muller, 1901, p.70)

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

for, the movements of religious reform that were then emerging. In all these cases, although Max Muller's orientalism voiced some cultural prejudices, it was nonetheless turned against the most blatant ones of his time.

Thus, the work of Max Muller, despite all the recognition that it may have enjoyed in his time, does not testify to the importance of orientalism in imperial ideology. Max Muller didn't oppose a hypothetical use of his science to imperial ends. On the contrary, he often regretted that it was so little used and that he wasn't offered the opportunity, for instance, to train the elites of the Empire more decisively.

Max Muller was certainly proud to hear that when the Prince of Wales embarked on his voyage to India in 1875, his baggage contained several copies of Muller's critical edition of the Vedas which he was taking as gifts for the Hindu sovereigns that he was to meet (Cohn, 1987, pg. 652). It is hardly likely though that the future King would have taken so gracious a part in the diffusion of the works of Annie Besant though her book certainly played, in India, a role as important as that of Max Muller's. Besides, at the time, Annie Besant, who had not yet joined the theosophists, was very busy collecting tens of thousands of signatures on a petition that she wished to present to Parliament. Its objective was to oppose the voyage of the Prince of Wales and to denounce British imperialism in India.

There is something singular about the life of Annie Besant. Before turning into a convinced theosophist, and then succeeding H.P. Blavatsky, the founder of the movement, as its leader, she had been the young wife of a pastor. She then changed for the first time. Having lost faith in Christianity, she became one of the most famous radical militants of her time in Great Britain. To this day, it is difficult to find a single "progressist" theme - from women suffrage, access to contraception to the defence of free love, from anti-racism and anti-imperialism, not forgetting atheism, to socialism and the union movement - whose cause was not thrust forward by Annie Besant, often

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

in a decisive manner, at one period or the other of her life. And it would be difficult to find Annie Besant or most theosophists, making the slightest ideological concession to discriminations based on sex, race, religion or any imagined superiority of the West<sup>5</sup>.

It would also seem that historians encountered particular difficulties in assessing the exact role played by theosophists in the Indian nationalist movement. A. O. Hume, for instance, was greatly influenced by this movement when he took part in the launching of the Congress Party; he was also considered by some to be an unofficial agent of the English, whose aim would have been to impede the nationalist movement rather than help its cause. Annie Besant too was never forgiven for having more or less condoned the Amritsar massacre; besides, this signalled the end of her political influence in India.

Nonetheless, it is a fact that before Gandhi assumed the leading role in the nationalist movement, Annie Besant and the theosophical movement played a very active catalyst role. Not only were a large number of those who were to become the leaders of the Congress influenced by theosophy and the theosophists, but on at least three occasions (creation of the Congress, formation of the Home Rule Leagues, establishment of the Hindu College), they played a central role in the establishment of organisational and institutional structures that were going to be rapidly appropriated, consolidated and fully utilised by the nationalist movement.

There is, of course, another dimension to the theosophist movement which must be analysed. No one perhaps, contributed more than the theosophists - and Annie Besant, here too, played a decisive role - to the spreading, towards the end of the nineteenth century, of an extravagant imagery of the East and of India in particular. They thus reinforced, as perhaps never before, all the stereotypes available on oriental spirituality as opposed to the materialism of the West. What more can be asked to support such a point of view than the wild theories contained in H.P. Blavatsky's

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<sup>5</sup>Absolute non-discrimination is, besides, the first of the three commandments of the theosophical faith.



Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

*Secret Doctrine*, the beginnings of Krishnamurti - the new Messiah - if not the flourishing of imaginary Mahatmas and great masters of all sorts who started to blossom then, all over India and the world. Even the most serious Marxist historians, having read a little too much of Kipling in their youth, saw there, for more than a century, the irrefutable proof of the all-powerful imperial order (cf. Bipin Chandra, 1988). If we really need to identify what sort of orientalism it was that corresponded most effectively at the time to the type of discursive formation defined by Edward Said, there is little doubt that one of the most outstanding manifestations can be found with the theosophists.

Let us now take stock: Macaulay was certainly a partisan of cultural imperialism but was he really an orientalist? Max Muller and Annie Besant were, without doubt, orientalists, each in their own way, but were they also advocates of cultural imperialism? If Max Muller was definitely an ideologist of imperialism, in the political sense of the term, can one say as much in the case of Annie Besant?

All these questions certainly call for complex answers. From a methodological point of view, the real problem lies in establishing the importance of such complexities. If we take the notion of "hegemonic discourse" too seriously, it is clear that we will underestimate the nuances of the various types of discourse. We can see clearly that if we take all manifestations of orientalism to be simple variations of a single form of discourse, we run several risks: firstly, as Jayant Lele (1994) demonstrated, that of giving not only a monolithic but a deeply reduced vision of the subject.

Thus, when he excludes all references to the theosophist movement in his analysis, following a firmly established tradition, Ronald Inden not only clouds the understanding of an essential side of orientalism. He also does exactly what modern historians reproach colonial historiography with doing, i.e., only taking into account the elitist forms (academic or governmental) of a social and cultural phenomenon, without

examining their links with manifestations of more marginal appearance but of no less real influence.

There is a further risk — if we do not take into account the ambivalence as well as the diversity of orientalist discourse, we will distort, almost as deeply as orientalism itself could, the historical reality to which this discourse belongs. Let us consider for example this comment of Edward Said one of Macaulay's most often quoted pronouncements: "Macaulay's was an ethnocentric opinion with ascertainable results. He was speaking from a position of power where he could translate his opinions into the decision to make an entire subcontinent of natives submit to studying a language not their own. This is in fact what happened." (Said,1984, P.13). As Bruno Latour remarked, even though he was thinking of the supremacy of scientific method: "To imperialism that is only too real, we do not need to grant total imperialism."

The risk does not lie solely in perpetuating the idea of a total malleability of colonised populations or even that of their complete absence from participation in the fashioning of the culture of an epoch. It lies perhaps more in giving forms of governmental rhetoric that were often extreme and provocative (even if we judge them by the criteria of the time) a sort of omnipotence that the authors themselves did not claim, and that these forms have never of course acquired to this day.

By endeavouring, on the contrary, to differentiate between the various forms assumed by orientalism during the Victorian age, we do not only uncover the very distinct modes of knowledge, positions of power and social or ideological commitments, all things that we could finally reduce to a "field" of common interest, in the sense that Bourdieu gives to this term. We are also forced to follow a network of extremely heterogeneous actors whose interactions make it necessary to shift the analysis continually along lines of research that are often unexpected.

Missing links

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

Max Muller's access to the Veda was through the copying and compilation of manuscripts that were available in libraries in Paris and London, or of texts that had been entrusted to him by contemporary Sanskritists (Burnouf and Wilson in particular). His critical edition of the Veda was accompanied by the commentary, written by Sayana, a fourteenth century author, who paraphrased it exhaustively with various annotations and analyses<sup>6</sup>.

One of the main problems in Vedic studies is to decide what value should be ascribed to exegeses not only in the interpretation of the Vedic texts but, even more fundamentally, in the very definition of their most literal meaning. We need only read Louis Renou's work, devoted to the masters of Vedic philology, to understand the large variety of stands taken by different parties. On the whole, though, it would seem that most of the Sanskritists adopted the position advocated most systematically by Roth, another great Sanskritist and Max Muller's contemporary — disclaiming almost any importance whatsoever of the Hindu tradition, of Sayana's commentary in particular, for a literal interpretation of the Veda.

From this point of view, Max Muller's work is rather ambiguous. It would be difficult to reproach him with having completely ignored the importance of Hindu tradition in understanding the Veda. The very fact that he included a version as complete as possible of Sayana's commentary to his first critical edition of the Rgveda proves it. And yet, if Max Muller was considered to be one of the greatest scholars of his time by his contemporaries, it is not because he published the text of an Indian erudite of the fourteenth century but rather because he flattered himself that he had printed the "oldest book in the world" for the first time<sup>7</sup>. Going by Louis Renou, the same remark would be applicable to Wilson, who supervised Max Muller's work for a

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<sup>6</sup>See Louis Renou's critical appreciation of Sayana's annotations (Renou, 1928, pg. 8)

<sup>7</sup>We have Muller's own testimony about his career (Muller, 1901). There is also a vast correspondence which has been extensively consulted in the biography by Nirad Chaudhuri (1974) about whom it mustn't be forgotten however, that he is himself first a polemist and a great writer

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

long time in the name of the East India Company : "But no matter what Wilson says in his preface, his work is less a translation of the Rgveda than a translation of Sayana"<sup>8</sup>.

Several Sanskritists have a tendency to consider the deciphering of the Vedas as an Western speciality. They deny nearly all relevance of the Hindu tradition, only conceding that it was instrumental in the literal preservation of texts or in the most ancient exegetic traditions, but wrote off its recent or contemporary manifestations with a few brief lines. Even Max Muller, who was perhaps the Sanskritist most open to Indian religious reformers of his time, said about Dayanand Sarasvati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, that "his ignorance of English deprived him of much that would have been helpful to him, and would have kept him from some of his wild ideas about the Vedas" (Muller, 1982, pg. 96).

This is why there is a certain irony in drawing a parallel between the work of Sanskritists and that of theosophists of the Victorian age. H.P. Blavatsky, founder of the theosophist movement, was rightly reproached with having written her most famous books (*Isis unveiled* and *The secret doctrine*) as though she had had first hand knowledge of the material she treated. In a pamphlet fairly humourously entitled 'Isis very much unveiled', W.E. Coleman proved that in fact she had not looked at more than a hundred of the 1400 books cited in her first book's bibliography, and had drawn all her references from them (Farquhar, 1915, pg. 224). Even more interestingly, he showed that most of the information contained in 'The Secret Doctrine' in fact came from three books including Wilson's *Vishnu Purana* and Dowson's *Hindu Classical Dictionary*. Likewise, she used information contained in the *Asiatic Researches*

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<sup>8</sup>The passage deserves to be fully quoted : "But whatever Wilson might say in his preface, his work is less a translation of the Rigveda than a translation of Sayana. Convinced that Sayana was in a position to understand the Veda much better than an European interpreter (these are his own words), he followed the Hindu author even in his worst contradictions : going to the point of replacing the vivid or precise term in the text with the proper or generic equivalent provided by the commentary. (Renou, 1928, pg. 5)

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

(Campbell, 1980, Pg.41) without giving references. Besides, her book begins with a Vedic hymn whose translation was directly lifted from Max Muller.

It may accordingly be appropriate to say that the champions of scientific orientalism in Europe suffered the same fate at the hands of the theosophists that Brahmanic tradition did at the hands of the former. They did not hesitate to appropriate anything that could serve their purpose, especially the most ancient references. They did not hesitate either to belittle, marginalise and sometimes even remove explicit references to the intermediary process of transmission and exegesis of texts without which they would not have had access to them. For Max Muller as well as for the theosophists and most of the erudites of the time, it was the western libraries that provided privileged access to knowledge. Except that those who had adequate training worked in the manuscript room of course, while the others made do with the public reading room.

Even if we confine our study to sanskritists and theosophists (not taking into account, for example, administrators, missionaries and so many others), we can see now that there are at least two missing links for the understanding of the scope of orientalism during the Victorian age. The first is the better known and is also the subject of current enquiry and criticism — the process of disjunction between western knowledge of the Veda and Hindu exegetic tradition.

The second missing link is the one corroborated by the seeming conjunction between movements of western inspiration (like the theosophist movement) and the Hindu tradition with which they identified.

Yet another hiatus exists, as significant as the two preceding ones, but which seems to have never really been analysed. It is created by the efforts of learned orientalist, theosophists and spiritual movements to be differentiated from each other.

Scientific orientalist had only disdain or scorn for the work of theosophists. This is understandable insofar as the books of the theosophists (like their modern

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

equivalents) had at least as much influence and success as those of the scholars, while representing the most total negation of their work that could be imagined. The orientalist devoted years if not decades to publishing manuscripts to try and clarify their meaning or their history. On the other hand, the theosophists, when they were not simply fabricating these texts, seemed to take delight in making matters more obscure, claiming a perfect knowledge of their ultimate meaning when they didn't even have first hand knowledge of them.

There was also another characteristic of the theosophists that vastly displeased most erudites. Max Muller, for example, may well have been a German by origin, was perhaps not always regarded as sufficiently orthodox in matters of religion or politics, had also perhaps an excessive penchant for Indian or oriental cultures. He was nonetheless an extremely respectable personality, holding a chair at Oxford and being a private counselor to Queen Victoria.

The least that can be said is that the main leaders of the theosophist movement were rather different. It would certainly be difficult to find personalities as little respectable and as 'shocking' as Colonel Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the co-founders of the theosophist movement. Though the former may have claimed that he was a hero of the American civil war and the latter that she was a Russian aristocrat, other rumours also abounded about them. They were suspected of having abandoned husbands, wives or children and of having led the dissolute lives of adventurers and charlatans in different parts of the world. They were not only accused of it, it was proved that they had exploited the naiveté of their audiences during the spiritual seances which then enjoyed a large wave of popularity in all classes of society in the West. Finally questions arose about the real finalities of the theosophist movement in India and H.P. Blavatsky was suspected of being a spy in the service of the Czar.

The couple who more or less took over their role at the head of the theosophist movement, i.e. Leadbater and Annie Besant, weren't any more reassuring by the

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

standards of the time. Leadbater was publicly implicated in a homosexual scandal with a teenager, Krishnamurti, destined, according to the theosophists, to become the new Messiah of his time. As for Annie Besant, she had actively supported, as mentioned earlier, most 'subversive' causes of the period.

But, if Max Muller wished to place as much distance as he could between his work and that of the theosophists, the feeling was mutual. H.P. Blavatsky did not acknowledge any debt towards Wilson and other Sanskritists any more than Wilson did towards Sayana. Instead of appealing to science to ascertain the singularity of her work, she referred to the supernatural nature of the inspiration that served as her guide. And just as Hindu tradition could serve upon occasion as a foil for the Sanskritists, the Sanskritists served as foil for the theosophists. It was even, according to H.P. Blavatsky, the blatant falseness of Max Muller's and other contemporary scholars' interpretation of the oriental doctrines that had incited her to reveal publicly, quite simply, "the outline of a few fundamental truths from the Secret Doctrine of the Archaic Age".

### Conclusion

In order to understand what forms orientalism assumed in the second half of the nineteenth century, it seems to me that one must take into account not one but at least three or more processes of reading:

- the first one is well known; it is exemplified by scholars who worked on texts they progressively assembled from manuscripts and copies of manuscripts, and who published critical editions, translations with commentaries and learned exegeses.
- the second process is equally important. It is carried out by readers who were extremely different, both socially and culturally, from the scholars, and who tended to make theirs the works of the latter. In doing so, they altered both meaning and purpose

Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

of the works, because they reintroduced a sacred dimension into texts which the sanskritists had tried to eradicate, or else because they introduced a fair amount of confusion and obscurity in texts which the scholars tried to read with as much precision and clarity as possible.

- The third process, no doubt, the more influential one but which is beyond the scope of this paper, would be then to compare and to analyse the reception of these different brands of orientalism in India itself

Such processes of recycling of learned works are rarely analysed as such, because they are both concealed by the authors and despised by learned scholars. But if we concentrate on the processes of transmission and distortion of knowledge, Victorian orientalism appears as the hybrid result of multiple readings and misreadings, revelations and concealments, rigorous scholarship and sweeping generalisations. In order to analyse it one must not be overly impressed by the “ivory tower” of the scholar and the rather fanciful spirituality of the theosophists.



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Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists

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Denis Vidal, 23/03/2016, Max Muller and the theosophists