TESTING THE LIMITS OF COMPARATISM: THE QUARREL OF THE ANCIENTS AND MODERNS IN PERSIAN AND URDU LITERARY CULTURE

a talk by

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Talk Abstract: At roughly the same time during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, men of letters in Europe and the Persian-using world were debating roughly the same aesthetic problem: What did it mean that contemporary literature was very different from the standard-setting literature of centuries before? In Europe, this debate is charmingly called the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns and is generally thought of as an early chapter in the story of the birth of Western Modernity. In scholarship on the Persian-using world, especially in the context of South Asia, a very similar early-modern debate was until recently dismissed as a symptom of a decadent and hidebound tradition that led nowhere. The contrast in the portrayal of these parallel debates opens up a set of questions about the methods available to us for comparative intellectual and cultural history. What can we learn by considering the European and the Persianate cases in the same frame? What differences between the two cases might disqualify a comparison? How should we in the twenty-first century value aesthetic judgments made in the eighteenth century (or any other century)? This lecture will address these methodological questions as it traces the impact of the Persian debate over poetic authority on Urdu literary culture, especially during the formative eighteenth century.

Speaker Bio: Dr Arthur Dudney is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at Cambridge University, from August 2015 until August 2018. His three-year research project aims to write a history of Persian literary education, focussing on places like India where Persian was culturally important but not the local language of everyday life. Dr. Dudney received his PhD from Columbia University in 2013. His doctoral thesis, A Desire for Meaning: Khān-i Arzū’s Philology and the Place of India in the Eighteenth-Century Persianate World, is the first in-depth study of Sirāj al-Dīn ‘Alī Khān Arzū (d. 1756) in English.