

Philologia Rediviva?

Sheldon Pollock

Mesopotamian scholars began writing commentaries on Babylonian and Assyrian texts as early as 800 B.C. Some four centuries later, scholars in India brought systematic order to the language and discourse of the (by then very ancient) Vedas, while those in Alexandria for the first time became aware of variation in the Homeric poems and the need to address it through textual criticism. In the seventh century, Arab scholars were confronted with the problem of clarifying the language of a new revelation, the Qur'an. Across the early modern world, the problem of textual understanding became acute: scholars in fifteenth-century Italy realized that language is historical and that texts in newer languages that pretended to be old (like the *Donation of Constantine*) were forgeries; a little later, scholars in Timbuktu and neighboring regions invented ways to adapt the Arabic script for writing West African languages; those in late seventeenth-century China were convinced they had lost the empire to barbarians because they no longer understood their classics, and developed "evidential research studies" in response; and scholars in eighteenth-century Japan believed that if they could learn how to read their most ancient texts (like the *Kojiki*), they could therein find an original Japan, one that had existed long before the influence of Chinese culture.

These scholars were all philologists: contributors to the discipline of making sense of texts – all texts – whether oral, written, printed, or electronic, whether literary, religious, or legal, those of mass culture no less than those of elite culture. If philosophy is thought critically reflecting on itself, philology is the critical self-reflection of language. If mathematics is the language of the book of nature, philology is the language of the book of human being. And under this description – and not its older and narrower definitions (grammar or textual criticism or corpus linguistics) – philology has been as ubiquitous a discipline in time and space as either philosophy or mathematics. Human history from Mesopotamia to Japan for almost three millennia is evidence enough. Philology once defined education itself: every educated person learned languages and texts, and how to interpret them.

Today, however, philology is confronted by two closely related problems. First, almost everywhere in the world, the field is vulnerable in the academy; to some, philology's very survival now hangs in the balance. Second, philology has no secure disciplinary geography in today's university, nor has it ever – in my sense of the term – held one in the era of the modern university. The solution to the existential problem may, to some degree at least, be dependent on the solution to the institutional one.

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Charting the global endangerment of philology is complicated. In the United States, the American Academy's own Humanities Indicators project offers a starting point, though philology itself has not been studied (note that it is not even identified as a humanistic field), and extrapolating information about it from the Indicators is difficult. Generally speaking, the last forty years have seen a startling decline in the growth of humanities faculty in general, with the number of full-time positions nearly cut in half over the period. The Indicators reveal that the percentage of doctoral degrees that were awarded in the humanities fell to its lowest level in 2007 (5.6 percent) before recovering slightly (to 6.2 percent) in 2013. Further, the share of degrees in languages and literatures other than English (including classics) ranged from a mere 1.2 percent to 1.7 percent in the past two decades. This general trend was corroborated by a February 2015 report of the Modern Language Association describing steep, even drastic (as in the case of ancient Greek), declines in foreign language studies.

What all this suggests, in a word, is that the population of academic professionals in the United States responsible for preserving, understanding, and transmitting a large segment of historical culture – for making sense of the vast world of texts – is hardly more than a rounding error in academic demography. This population stands in inverse proportion to the size, and significance, of its object of study.

The situation outside the United States is considerably worse, though hard data are still more difficult to get. In Europe, while esteem for philology may remain high, anecdotal evidence points to a serious diminution of professorial positions. Consider the fact that as of 2012 – for the first time since 1821, when Franz Bopp was appointed professor and introduced, according to Michel Foucault, the science of philology itself – Sanskrit is no longer taught in a

university in Berlin. And in India, the world's greatest philological laboratory (to which I have devoted myself for over forty years) seems almost on the verge of shutting down. It is now conceivable that within a few generations, the number of people able to make sense of texts in many of India's almost two dozen premodern languages – which together constitute the world's longest continuous multilingual textual history – will have approached a statistical zero.

In short, we may well be standing on the verge of a historic event: the inauguration of a world without philology for the first time in three thousand years.

In response to these developments, but at the same time recognizing the opportunities that challenges offer, scholars across the globe have begun to take action. Five years ago in Berlin, a number of young scholars from across the geographical and historical spectrum initiated a project, called *Zukunftsphilologie* (“future philology”), aimed at rejuvenating the field with new research programs, postdoctoral fellowships, and workshops held in the Arab world, Africa, and South Asia. In 2008, a conference organized by scholars at the Institute for History and Philology at Academia Sinica (Taipei) gave rise to *World Philology* (Harvard University Press, 2015), the first book to chart the global history of the field. Fellowship programs, such as “The Learned Practices of Canonical Texts” at the Max Plank Institute (founded by Academy Fellow Anthony Grafton), have been initiated; conferences have been held and scheduled for the future, including “The Languages of the Past and the Future of Ancient Studies” at the University of Pennsylvania this October; influential new books have been published, including *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2014) by James Turner; and new journals – such as *Philological Encounters* and *Philology: An International Journal on the Evolution of Languages, Cultures and Texts* – have been founded while older journals – such as *Geschichte der Germanistik* – have been updated to account for recent global developments. Further, Harvard University Press has inaugurated several notable multilingual book series, including the I Tatti Renaissance Library (Latin; 2001), the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library (Byzantine Greek, Medieval Latin, and Old English; 2010), and the Murty Classical Library of India (at present, fourteen different languages in nine different scripts, 2014). New York University Press, meanwhile, launched the Clay Sanskrit Library (2005) and the Library of Arabic Literature (2012). There is now even talk at the international level of forming a World Philology Association.

But if such efforts are to be sustained, philologists must develop a new disciplinary formation, with a new intellectual core. For as defined here, philology, unlike philosophy and mathematics, has never had a disciplinary home in which its real capacities could

develop. If it did achieve some measure of institutional dominance in the nineteenth-century European university, this was because of the veneration then paid to the study of the classics. Philology's fall from grace in the course of the twentieth century was caused in part by the classics' loss of centrality, but even more from the proliferation of philology's subfields, such as linguistics and comparative literature, and, more recently, by the transformation of language and literature departments into area studies. In fact, philology today is not defined as a unified discipline, but is divided by and confined to geopolitical units, whether national traditions in the West (such as English, French, and German) or regional traditions in the non-West (such as those in South Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East). These are admittedly important conditions of understanding – texts exist in social and political contexts, after all – but they need to be complemented by a structure that acknowledges what unifies philologists, encourages comparison and synthesis of diverse traditions and their interpretive multiplicity, and fosters larger generalization from particular cases. It is through the disciplinization of philology that its real intellectual contribution – as the basic science of the humanities – can be realized.

How broad this science is, both within the academy and outside, is easily demonstrated. Textual interpretation – the core of philological theory and method – is central not just to literary and religious studies but to history and law (philology being like mathematics in the vast dissemination of its techniques, but unlike mathematics in its lack of a disciplinary home). Beyond the academy, philology – though one that does not know its name – continues to broadly influence the public domain. It is ironic to observe, given the decline I have charted, how significant are the philological energies across the Internet on sites like “Rap Genius” (<http://rap.genius.com>), a self-described “crowd-sourced (and artist/producer-sourced) annotation of rap lyrics/beats, from ‘Rapper's Delight’ to ‘To Pimp A Butterfly.’” Users, including original creators, provide annotation to the often complex lyrics of songs, as well as intertextual linkages and contextual material. The purpose of Rap Genius, originally named Rap Exegesis, is precisely to make sense of texts. It has recently been branching out to include other musical forms, as well as law, history, and more; it is, in fact, now simply named “Genius.” The site seeks to “annotate the world,” “to help us all realize the richness and depth in every line of text.” This is pure philology in terms of practice, albeit practice that as yet has little awareness of its history, theory, or method. Providing that context, and formalizing the discipline, is the role of the university; and today's academy must also recognize and channel the energies of these popular philological enterprises.

Columbia University hopes to help in this effort via a new program in World Philology. We are starting small, with just two new courses (one undergraduate and one graduate) to be offered in the academic year 2016 – 2017 and a lecture series that will bring many of the most thoughtful historians, theoreticians, and practitioners of philology to campus. At the same time, new teaching materials will be developed that will eventually produce one or more *Readers in World Philology*, showcasing by way of annotated translations of primary texts – online and crowd-sourced, in fact, though also peer-reviewed – the key contributions to the discipline from around the world and through time.

Our goal is not only to enable students to gain a historical and theoretical grasp of textual understanding – to understand why Supreme Court Justice Scalia is wrong to assert, about the text called the U.S. Constitution, that “words mean what they mean,” and “their meaning doesn’t change” – but also to see the remarkable continuities in global philology, and, equally important, the differences, sometimes startling differences, in what it has meant for people to make sense of texts. We also want to show them how philology can be more than an academic discipline; indeed, it can be a way of living. You are how you read, and learning to read better – with greater precision, self-awareness, and, above all, respect for the diversity of textual truth in a world ever more unified and ever more in need of unity – means, potentially, learning to be better.

My colleagues and I are aware that far-reaching social and technological developments may be working to the disadvantage of philology, and even to the disadvantage of the very literacy philology rests upon. But every society will continue to have texts of some sort, and the need to make sense of them is assured. Philology’s defenders may not be certain they can secure its future, but they must do everything possible to prevent its demise. ■

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Author’s Note: This essay draws on a number of my earlier publications, including “Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (4) (2009): 931 – 961; “Crisis in the Classics,” *Social Research* 78 (1) (2011): 21 – 48; “Philology in Three Dimensions,” *postmedieval* 5 (4) (2014): 398 – 413; “Liberating Philology,” *Verge* 1 (2014): 16 – 21; and “Introduction,” in *World Philology*, ed., Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin Elman, and Kevin Chang (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1 – 24.