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Article

## Philology in three dimensions

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**Abstract** Philology, the discipline of making sense of texts, orients itself along three planes of meaning: the text's genesis, its tradition of reception and its presence to the philologist's own subjectivity. While the three meanings may all resolve into forms of historicism, they are typically not disaggregated; instead, they are viewed as mutually hostile if not exclusive. The conflict between the first, the 'historicist' more conventionally viewed, and the third, the 'presentist,' is ubiquitous in everyday philology. What is generally ignored, however, is the 'traditionist,' pertinent here both for the moment of its suppression in early capitalist Europe and for the means and meaning of its reclamation. Enacting philology in three dimensions requires a delicate balance – essential if we are to cultivate the important political–ethical values that are only possible by learning to read well.

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If there is reason to be pessimistic in intellect about the fate of philology, in view of the extraordinary imperilment of the humanities, of which philology has historically been the most important if most misunderstood component (Turner, 2014), is there any reason to be optimistic in will? I have long thought that if we spell out what is at stake as clearly as possible in every possible forum, surely decision makers in universities, foundations and governments will see that if we lose philology we stand to lose something precious and irreplaceable. For at stake in philology is not the mere ability to locate information in a text – that will be preserved one way or another – but something larger: the discipline of making sense of texts (Pollock *et al.*, 2014).



Philology in that large sense is as central to education as philosophy or mathematics. 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. Philology's very history demonstrates that it may be the leading entrant in the contest over disciplinarity in any twenty-first century university that takes globalism seriously as a form of knowledge and not just as a marketing tool. Philology is constitutively self-aware, awake to its own factitiousness and historicity as a knowledge form, and hence infinitely adaptable (unlike, say, economics, which has naturalized itself and strategically erased its own disciplinary history). Philology is a universal form of knowledge, and not a particularistic or areal form masquerading as such (unlike, say, political science, which at most US universities has become a mathematized form of American studies). Philology is by nature methodologically and conceptually pluralistic, because part of making sense of texts is learning how others have done it, and often done it differently.

Related to these disciplinary virtues is the fact that philology inculcates an awareness of two other core requirements that may seem contradictory but that are equally integral to knowledge. Philology enhances critical understanding and sharpens the demand for truth. At the same time, it enlarges the very domain of truth by enlarging our capacity to see things the way other people, people earlier than or otherwise different from us, have seen them. I have argued, further, that philology promotes the best pedagogy, a specifically radical pedagogy resistant to instrumentalization and profiteering. It stimulates care for memory and helps shape a usable sense of the past, preserving memory from surrender to its enemies while opening the past to responsible, evidence-based critique. It enables us to acquire new 'equipment for living' by making available to us different conceptions, sometimes astonishingly different conceptions, of what it has meant to be human. Lastly, philology makes possible not only an encounter with the enduring intelligence and beauty of texts that embody the creative labor of several thousand years of human consciousness, but also the incomparable intellectual excitement and astonishing magic of speaking with the dead (Pollock, 2009, 2011).

If philology is the discipline of making sense of texts, and making sense of texts is making sense of life, what does making sense of texts actually consist of? Answering this question would seem to call for some heavyweight philological theory, but what I want to offer instead is rather lightweight autobiography: a reflection on how I myself have come to reconcile what for me were seriously conflicting modes of interpretation. I was trained to a very hard historicism, but also, as a Sanskritist, heir to a brilliant tradition of reception with its own strong claims to knowledge. Over time, I have also been tempered by a critical hermeneutics of understanding and a neopragmatist conception of truth. This autobiography has prompted me to conceive of a philological practice that orients itself simultaneously along three planes of a text's existence: its moment of genesis; its reception over time; and its presence to my own subjectivity.

‘Making sense’ of a text resides in the sum total of the varied senses generated on these three planes, their lively copresence to our mind.

Such a vision of interpretive pluralism is likely to strike more than a few readers as philosophically incoherent, though I will try my best to argue otherwise. Though this philology asks a lot of its practitioners, it seems to me to be empirically the richest, cognitively the most informative and ethically the fairest kind of philology. Equally important, this kind of philology helps us cultivate three broader sets of values that are of special significance today: commitments to truth, solidarity and critical self-awareness.

### Three Dimensions of Philology

When Nietzsche defined philology as ‘slow reading’ (Nietzsche, [1881] 1980a, 5), he meant, or should have meant, reading in a state of heightened self-awareness about what exactly we are doing when we are reading. Such self-awareness arises in direct proportion to the time-space distance that separates us from the origins of the text. The closer the text is, the less conscious we are of the processes by which we make sense of it: ‘The more language is a living operation the less we are aware of it’ (Gadamer, 1976, 65). The more distant it is, conversely, the more present to our awareness those processes become. Of course, all texts are in some measure unknown to us or we would not be reading them in the first place; but time-space distance increases that measure in a directly proportionate manner. This has been the case historically, too, and explains why, in spatial terms, Persian philology was largely invented in India rather than Iran; why, in temporal terms, Lorenzo Valla was concerned not with Italian but with Latin; and why Sanskrit – the eternal language of the gods, and thus evincing the greatest possible time-space distantiation – is the most philologized language on earth.

While we may naively believe the contemporary text to be transparently accessible, making sense of it is always a matter of the second-order judgments made possible only by philology. (An analogy with philosophy may be useful here. Philology is to reading as philosophy is to thinking: the better our appreciation of each the better we are able to perform the associated practice. But just as we do not explicitly philosophize our every thought, so we do not explicitly philologize our every text.)<sup>1</sup> The more present to our consciousness this discipline of sense making becomes, the more effective it becomes. When we read forms of literature that are maximally distant in time and space – when modern Westerners read non-modern non-Western texts, for example – philology becomes maximally present, and for someone thus disciplined, philology tends to become present for all texts, however near. Herein, incidentally, lies the true vitality of historically dead languages.

The time–space matrix also actively shapes our reading practices, once we begin to grasp that ‘distance’ is not a single thing but varies. It can be plotted

1 Indian philosophy distinguishes between *svārthānumāna*, ‘inference for oneself’, and *parārthānumāna*, ‘inference for another’: in the former, syllogizing is tacit, a matter of practical consciousness, in the latter, explicit, a matter of theoretical consciousness and formalized in a five-stage ‘scheme’ (*prakriyā*).



along the three planes of sense making: the time-place of the text's genesis, of its earlier readers and of me reading here and now. There are thus three, potentially radically different, dimensions of meaning (the author's, the tradition's and my own), and three, potentially radically different, forms of textual truth (historicist, traditionalist and presentist). My own struggle with reading over the course of my professional life arose from the belief that these truths are mutually exclusive – indeed, that two of them are not even truths at all. And my personal struggle recapitulates a long disciplinary history.

A lot of thinking about texts in the West since the Renaissance has been concerned with historicist reading (Plane 1) in tension with presentist reading (Plane 3). The contest between the two modes is found in every sort of textual appropriation, whether literary, religious, legal or philosophical; it remains a source of continuing dispute, in everything from theological literalism to constitutional originalism. An *historical* account of this tension has been offered by Anthony Grafton. The Italian humanists distinguished historical from rhetorical or allegorical reading, the latter serving the purposes of the present (producing what Grafton called 'ahistorical classics'), with some scholars using both types of interpretation as circumstances dictated (Grafton, 1994, 44 and *passim*). A *theoretical* account has been offered in philosophical hermeneutics, which demonstrated, in the teeth of triumphant historicism, the untranscendable historicity of the reader's subjectivity. What the text is 'really about,' for Gadamer, 'can be experienced only when one is *addressed* by [it]' (Gadamer, 1996, 283; emphasis in original). As Gadamer shows, our belief that *our own historical being* can be erased in grasping that past historical meaning is the ghost of metaphysics haunting historicism.<sup>2</sup> Last, an as-yet-unwritten *philological* account of the tension between historicist and presentist reading would locate it at the very semantic heart of the word 'philology' itself, which a Heideggerian etymology might explain as combining 'art' [*philia*], or meaning consonant with the reader's subjectivity, with reason [*logos*], objective meaning ascertained by historical inquiry.

Although I know of no good sociology of knowledge devoted to the tension between Planes 1 and 3, others besides me must have also found it not only unresolvable but unproductive, especially those once committed to Marxism as a historical-political practice. That commitment entailed the belief that you could remake the future because you knew that the past itself was made, and that reading literature was one way to gain this knowledge. For me, an unintended consequence of this view, sharpened in 1982 by Jameson's injunction 'Always historicize!' (Jameson, 1982, 9) and by his example, was to erase any living critical appropriation of the past text. You would learn something about the nature of ideological blindness in a novel by Balzac, a royalist by conviction transmuted into a republican by unconscious novelistic compulsion. But the novel itself had no meaning for you in your present; it had meaning only because it was purely historical – which implied that it was dead. Marx himself was sensitive to a work's mysterious capacity to escape from history: 'The difficulty lies not in

2 I am sure others have made this argument but I encountered it first in Grondin (1994, 11, 111).

understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development; the difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure' (Marx, [1857–1858] 1973, 111). Yet making sense of this 'pleasure' (or whatever the work afforded me on the third plane of meaning) did not seem to be part of Marxism or any of cultural-critical project.

More could be said about the tension between the historicist and presentist planes. But virtually all accounts exclude the second plane of philology, the readings offered by tradition. Most scholars simply ignore these, as my classics teachers always did, for whom no traditional interpretation, whether of Hellenistic scholiast, Roman commentator or medieval scribe, could make any claim to truth. Even those who do not ignore them, like my Indian teachers or Sanskrit colleagues, rarely offer an account of why we should take the meanings, or the truths, of tradition seriously.

### Traditionist Reading and Reading Tradition

Structurally, the reading practices of those in a past tradition do not differ from one's own here-and-now reading. Instead of asking the historicist question 'what did this biblical passage mean in 800 BCE' or 'what did the US Constitution mean in 1787,' I can ask 'what does this mean to me, here and now?' Like me, past readers in a tradition tried – had to try, given the nature of their own subjectivity and historicity – to make sense of the text in their present moment. The difference lies in my assessment of their truth claims. Whereas I believe in my own interpretation, I dismiss past ones as a succession of misunderstandings, both because of a belief in the growth of knowledge, but also, more tacitly, because my own interpretation, and my own self, would otherwise become unnecessary.

The dismissal of the reading of tradition has a more particular history than such epistemological naturalism might suggest. In the West it is tied up with the intellectual revolution of the early modern world, as typified by *La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, which broke out in France in the late 1680s. Its first real philological manifestation, however, came a decade earlier with the publication in 1670 of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*. The work has come to be viewed as nothing less than the charter document of Western modernity: according to one recent appreciation, Spinoza is 'the renegade Jew who gave us modernity' (Goldstein, 2009). Spinoza's philological project, though, is usually ignored. In fact, the treatise could easily have been entitled *Tractatus Philologico-Politicus*, because at the heart of the work lies the conviction that good reading makes good polity – that learning a philological method for reading the Bible can transform relations of knowledge and power, thereby producing a just democracy.

What is good reading according to Spinoza? Nothing less than the basic methodology of modern philology. The contemporary philologist will recognize



its components as the rudiments of his or her own training and practice, enunciated for the first time as a complete and coherent program in the *Tractatus*. Good reading comprises: as deep a familiarity as possible with the text's original language, based on usage in the corpus; the history of the text's transmission and its current text-critical state; the salient aspects of the text's genre; the history of its canonization; a form of discourse analysis that depends, not *a priori* on doctrine, but on the text's coherence with itself; the assemblage of all parallel passages within the text and the author's other works that can illuminate the obscure; a reconstruction of the historical context; the relevant biography of the author and the historical constraints of authorial intention; the nature of the original audience and their thought-world; and all relevant intertexts. Spinoza's method is historical in spirit – all anachronism must be avoided – but also historicist: there is a mode of thinking and being specific to a text's own time.

Even more important is Spinoza's conceptual absolutism. His philological method is the only true one:

hanc [rationem interpretandi Scripturam] unicam et certiore esse viam ad eius verum sensum investigandum ... . haec nostra methodus ... unica et vera fit. (Spinoza, 1882, 467–468; brackets in original)

[We have offered a method for interpreting Scripture and at the same time demonstrated that this is the most certain and only way to uncover its true meaning ... . Our method, based on the principle that knowledge of the Bible is to be sought from Scripture alone, is the only true method.

(Israel and Silverthorne, 2007, 105–106)]

Spinoza bases philology's truth claims on science. The method is 'wholly consonant' with 'the [correct] method of interpreting nature,' which 'consists above all in constructing a natural history, from which we derive the definitions of natural things, as from certain data' (Israel and Silverthorne, 2007, 101, 98) ['hanc viam non tantum certam, sed etiam unicam esse, eamque cum methodo interpretandi Naturam convenire' (Spinoza, 1882, 461)]. The goal is to achieve pure objectivity: there must exist a 'genuine' or 'true' sense of a passage, which derives solely from its 'use of the language'; it is the 'mind of the authors of the Scripture' (Israel and Silverthorne, 2007, 100, 98) ['verum sensum ... ex solo linguae usu'; 'mentem authorum Scripturae' (Spinoza, 1882, 463, 461)]. And this true meaning, given the nature of truth for Spinoza, is singular.

The 'true' meaning that Spinoza references can be discovered only if we readers 'free our minds from theological prejudices and the blind acceptance of human fictions as God's teaching,' that is, the interpretations of other, earlier members of the tradition (Israel and Silverthorne, 2007, 98) ['nec temere hominum figmenta pro divinis documentis amplectamur' (Spinoza, 1882, 460)]. Moreover, 'we are not permitted to adjust the meaning of Scripture to the dictates of our reason or our preconceived opinions' (Israel and Silverthorne, 2007, 101) ['ne nobis non

licet ad dictamina nostrae Rationis et ad nostras praeconceptas opiniones mentem Scripturae torquere’ (Spinoza, 1882, 464)]. Good reading requires, thus, not only the erasure of all earlier readers and all earlier possible truths but the complete erasure of the reader himself. This one right way – the complete and total victory of Plane 1 reading – eclipsed two millennia of patristic and other approaches situated on Plane 2, and thus constituted a veritable capitalist revolution at the level of philology, where the whole ‘train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions,’ as Marx was to put it (Marx and Engles, [1848] 2012), was ‘swept away’ at a stroke.

Whether or not it is historically correct, or even intelligible, to claim that the *Tractatus* is the charter text of philological modernity, the values that animate it eventually became values for everyone. Whatever the history of each separate item in Spinoza’s toolbox of philology – and they all had antecedents – no one before him ever assembled them into a coherent method. And from philology’s struggle with those patristic proponents of ‘finalist’ interpretation – whereby textual interpretation had to conform to pre-existent doctrine – and with all others who took tradition seriously, philology emerged as victor.<sup>3</sup>

At its moment of origin Spinoza’s treatise was a heroic defense against those wielding social and political power through the power of interpretation: Dutch theologians and clerics adducing scripture to defend whatever would enhance their interests. But one may well ask whether Spinoza’s attempt to reduce the plurality of interpretation should really go unchallenged. Should we continue to attribute invincible ignorance to the long generations of previous readers? No less problematic is the attempt to erase the reader’s own historicity. It is less ironical than inevitable that Spinoza’s own reading should reveal such presentism: as many commentators on the *Tractatus* have remarked, ‘the true meaning’ of the Bible turns out to be the meaning that conforms to Spinoza’s philosophy. Finally, the proposition that there exists a singular, unchanging meaning that is entirely historicist and determined in accordance with the procedures of the natural sciences evinces a radically unhistorical understanding of meaning. In short, it becomes unavoidable to ask today whether Spinoza’s good reading is everywhere and always good.

For classical and other philologists, however, the Spinozistic view became the purest of pure common sense, buried deep below the threshold of consciousness, let alone critique. This history leads from post-Spinozan Biblical criticism in Germany (Reimarus) to classical philology (Wolfe, Boeckh) and thence to non-Western subvarieties. It has been on prominent display in my own field of Indology almost from its beginning. At the end of the nineteenth century, William Dwight Whitney, the first great American Sanskritist, could write, in reference to a medieval commentator on the Vedas, that ‘There are, in fact, in my opinion, few figures more absurd than that of “Sāyaṇa” posing as one who comprehends, and can teach others to comprehend, a difficult Vedic passage’ (and he goes on to add, ‘Among the few exceptions is to be reckoned that of the Occidental scholar who

3 On finalist interpretation, see Todorov (1982, 164). Early printed editions of classical works encased the base text with ancient and medieval commentaries, thereby celebrating the tradition of reading as much as, if not more than, the original poems (Tribble, 1993, 59–61). The margins began to shrink in the seventeenth century, and the commentaries to disappear.



professes to listen to him with admiring reverence'). Not surprisingly, this view of tradition was coupled with a strong endorsement of the exclusivity of the historicist truth offered on Plane 1 (Whitney speaks of 'the true Veda' with its 'true meaning, which must have been one, and not many') and a complete suppression of the truth of the reader's subjectivity on Plane 3 (Pollock, 2014). This modernist philology becomes especially incomprehensible in India, where the exegetical tradition sought to proliferate rather than reduce meaning, and where genres were developed precisely to demonstrate language's capacity for riotous polysemy.<sup>4</sup>

Recovering the truth of tradition, after centuries of this sort of dismissal, is clearly no simple thing. I am not of course the first to argue that this second plane of traditionism must be a constituent of the discipline of reading. Two well-known advocates – methodologically and politically ill-sorted though they may be – are the medievalist-turned modernist Hans Robert Jauss (in his programmatic reading of the reception history of Baudelaire's 'Spleen') and the classicist Jean Bollack (in his four-volume account of several hundred years of reading 'Oedipus the King'). Indeed, when I reread Jauss after many years and saw that he, too, had adapted a tripartite philology (derived from Gadamer, who took it from medieval hermeneutics), I felt at once annoyed at being anticipated and pleased at being corroborated. But the method of Jauss and Bollack, and the purpose of their reception history, are very different from what I am driving at here.<sup>5</sup>

Jauss's hermeneutics sees the meanings available on Plane 2, a tradition's own interpretations, as basically a history of error. Earlier interpretations can be 'falsified,' as he puts it, if the interpreter has posed untrue or illegitimate questions (Jauss, 1982, 139–185; see also Jauss, 1980). Similarly, Bollack aims to establish a singular understanding of the text (*compréhension simple*), resolving the multiplicity of views into one (*se rallier à l'une des positions inventoriées*) and rejecting the 'dogma of openness' in the conviction that the text must be accorded some degree of resistance to interpretation (Bollack, 2000, 175 [emphasis added], 75–76; see also Bollack, 1991, xiii, xv). Jauss's and Bollack's very subject of study differs fundamentally from the recuperation I have in mind here. Bollack largely restricts himself to the past two centuries of Sophoclean scholarship; he has little interest in premodern reading, rarely citing the tradition of reception from the ancient scholia.<sup>6</sup> And Jauss inspired the current understanding of reception that largely equates it with literary influence or even literary history (who read Ovid and what impact Ovid had on them) rather than with hermeneutics (*what sense they made of Ovid's texts themselves*) (Martindale and Thomas, 2006).<sup>7</sup>

The notion of past reading as error, as Jauss and Bollack think of it, has deeper implications for both a general theory of interpretation and for philology. The German literary theorist König has recently put the question pointedly: 'How can one acknowledge the historicity of misunderstanding without simultaneously surrendering oneself to a historicity of reason altogether – a historicity that

4 Thus a commentator on a twelfth-century court poem (the *Naiṣadyacarita*) finds 12 meanings in the first verse. For the genre of *śleṣa*, double entendre, see Bronner (2010).

5 Others have also proposed tripartitions, but all ignore tradition: Friedrich Ast (grammatical, historical and 'spiritual,' that is, the spirit of the author, the spirit of all of antiquity [Todorov, 1982, 150]); Emilio Betti (cognitive, performative and normative, whereby we would seek to understand the origins of a play, how to execute it and what it might say about our lives [Weinsheimer, 1995, xvii]); Jerome McGann (the originary discursive moment, secondary moments of discursive production and reproduction, and the immediate moment of interpretation [McGann, 2006, 141–143]).



- 6 That a history of classical reading is entirely possible is shown by Easterling (2006). Bollack does occasionally refer to the fourteenth-century Byzantine commentator Moschopoulos.
- 7 Admittedly that sense is often implicit in any creative appropriation.

insinuates that there is, in principle, no such thing as a correct interpretation of a text?’ (König, 2014, 295). Instead of saving reason by asserting the possibility of one correct interpretation, I want to defend here just the opposite position: in relation to the meanings and truths on Plane 2, there can be no such thing as an incorrect interpretation. Since all interpretations are embodiments of human consciousness, which have been called into being by certain properties in the text, such forms of consciousness cannot be correct or incorrect *in their historical existence*. What we philologists aim to capture when we read along the plane of tradition – which, remember, is only one of three – are those forms themselves, what about the text itself summoned those forms of consciousness into existence, and how readers’ worlds shaped their view of the text.

Obviously, we need to apply a scale of judgment in reading tradition. Not all interpretations are worthy of philological attention to the same degree. People in a tradition inherit bad textual variants, or make simple grammatical mistakes, and these misunderstandings, unless they are productive of interpretation, carry a dimension of historical consciousness lower on the philological scale of value than others. In other words, not all errors (or what appear from Plane 1 to be errors) are equal: some falsehoods (or what appear to be falsehoods) carry deeper truths than others, especially in their historical effectivity. Again, it bears repeating that this plane of meaning does not, or not only, tell us about the historical consciousness of readers; it also tells us about the text and the properties the text possesses that might have prompted this or that interpretation. Second-plane reading is not a means toward the one true interpretation; it ends in true interpretations of its own.

Let me cite two examples that I have given elsewhere. For readers who have inhabited the second plane of traditional truth, a famous passage in the Qur’an speaks of ‘seventy-two virgins’ promised in heaven as reward for martyrs to the faith. First-plane historicism often reads the passage not as Arabic but as Syriac (the language, it is argued, in which the Qur’an may have originally been redacted), and thereby argues that the passage is really referring (and literally, not figuratively) to ‘seventy-two rare white fruits.’ In the same way, historical text-criticism of the *RgVeda* has argued that in a passage justifying *sati*, the self-immolation of a widow, the tradition mistakenly read *agneh*, ‘fire’ (‘[go into] fire’) for *agre*, ‘forward’ (‘[go] forward’). In both cases, the truth of the ‘false’ second-plane interpretation is precisely as true, bearing the same or even greater historical weight, as the truth of first-plane interpretation. The sense early Islamic commentators made of the Qur’anic phrase and the sense medieval scholars of Indian jurisprudence made of the Vedic funeral hymn (the promise of seventy-two heavenly virgins, the justification of *sati*), and what such interpretations have meant over time for the community of believers, are truths as important to textual meaning as the truth of historicist, first-plane philology (Pollock, 2009, 952).

These claims about the truthfulness of the reading tradition, the second plane in my time-space matrix, may sound merely contrarian or perverse. But they have a



respectable pedigree, at least as old as Leopold von Ranke's celebrated lecture of 1854 on the 'points of departure and core concepts' of his historiographical method. Here he rejects the view that each generation should be seen as functioning merely as a conduit for the next: God shows no iniquity in apportioning historical significance; every epoch has value 'in its existence itself, in its own self' [*in ihrer Existenz selbst, in ihrem Eigenen selbst*] (von Ranke, 1960, 58–60, my translation). Similarly, for a secular Rankean philologist like myself, every interpretation is correct – not because it would otherwise suggest divine injustice but because of the simple fact that every reading is evidence of human consciousness activated by the text in its search to make sense of it. Let me now show how the three planes interact in some examples from Sanskrit literary history.

## Reading the Sanskrit Tradition

The *Rāmāyaṇa* of Valmiki, the most important literary work in the Sanskrit tradition and vastly influential in the literatures of South and Southeast Asia, was composed probably in the last century or two before the Common Era. It has an obscure moment of genesis and an even more complex history of reception. Reading as a historicist upon Plane 1, one could argue (as I have argued) that the *Rāmāyaṇa* belongs to the thought-world of post-Ashokan India. It bears the clear impress of Ashoka's new *quasi*-Buddhist political theology, where power takes on a marked and unprecedented spiritualized dimension. Within this specific historical horizon, the *Rāmāyaṇa* appears to seek an imaginative answer to the profound problem of the centrifugal dynamic of power: How is it possible to produce a political order that can both acknowledge and transcend the violence constitutive of the political?

Seeing the *Rāmāyaṇa* on Plane 2 with the eyes of some traditional Hindu readers (other traditional readers, such as Jains and Buddhists, had other eyes to see with), we recognize the presence of scripture. Such a vision of the text emerged only in the early second millennium, and even if derived from the older political theology, it is no longer recognizably such. For these readers, medieval theologian-commentators, the poem is an absolutely true record of God's deeds on earth – Rama as avatar of the god Vishnu – a conviction that made the vernacular versions, above all the sixteenth-century Hindi adaptation *Rāmcaritmānas*, among the most important religious texts of India.

Reading as presentists, upon Plane 3, we encounter the astonishing spectacle of an ancient text repurposed as an anti-Muslim tract by Hindu fundamentalist politicians – which in 1992 led to the destruction of a mosque in Ayodhya, Rama's putative birthplace, brought the nation-state to the brink of civil war and

8 In February 2014, Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* was withdrawn by its Indian publisher in the face of a lawsuit claiming that the book hurt the religious feelings of millions of Hindus by declaring that the Ramayana is a fiction.

is still producing social upheaval.<sup>8</sup> Such a reading prompts us to reflect on the presence of past texts in contemporary India, on this particular text's malleability and availability for repurposing, and, not least, on our obligations (via Planes 1 and 2) to critically register the history of this malleability and repurposing. All of these meanings – the historicist, the commentarial-traditionist and the presentist (including the political and my own reading of the text's contemporary presence) are true: none more or less true than the others (Pollock, 1986, 1993).

Anyone who has ever been asked to teach world literature is likely to have encountered *Śākuntala*, the fifth-century Sanskrit drama by Kalidasa. And when you do teach this work to undergraduates, you inevitably encounter a third-plane reading that finds the play's gender imbalance – especially Kalidasa's enfeeblement of the heroine who appears so strong in the epic source, the *Mahābhārata* – to be nearly fatal to any contemporary literary appreciation. This type of deeply antihistoricist approach typical of our students is the most powerful impression many take away from the experience of teaching the text, but it is an approach that carries its own kind of truth, measuring (positively) the distance in consciousness between now and then but also (negatively) the failure of students to register that distance and enter into other planes of reading.

Second-plane reading, for its part, is concerned with an array of issues, given the long and broad history of the work's reception. The Sanskrit commentarial tradition, for example, was largely uninterested in the play as 'drama' in the radical Greek sense of a linked series of actions. Instead, that tradition was concerned with the play's emotional states, and above all with specifying the architecture of this aesthetic (how each state linked to the others). Another traditional approach, a sort of latent vernacular sociology, sees the work as an ideal-type family history. As a verse in circulation for centuries asserts, the essence of Sanskrit theatrical literature lies in *Śākuntala*; the essence of all its seven acts lies in the fourth act; the essence of all the poems in the fourth act lies in the four verses spoken by Shakuntala's foster father, a forest-dwelling renunciant, as he bids her farewell to join her husband – and the essence of these four verses lie in the following: 'My heart is touched with sadness/since Shakuntala must go today, .../If a disciplined ascetic/suffers so deeply from love,/how do fathers bear the pain/of each daughter's parting?' (Miller, 1984, 126). For many traditional 'sociological' readers, Kalidasa's play is *about* the primal separation of fathers and daughters, a core fact of everyday Indian life.

Later traditional readers – with their own vernacular sociologies – include Goethe around 1800, an age and a world away, but still part of the history of reception. As the first Indian literary work made known to modern Europe, *Śākuntala* constituted for Goethe a perfect embodiment of the purity of imagination from the infancy of the culture that ultimately (it was then believed) produced Europe. But it was also, if less explicitly, further evidence of Indian culture and civility, and thus of the irrationality of the growing European colonial rule over the country. A century after Goethe, the Bengali poet Rabindranath



Tagore read *Śākuntala* in a way especially hard for contemporary readers to credit, since he insisted that the play's central themes are sexual fall and redemption. It hardly matters that in the terms of the play itself the heroine's behavior is nowhere viewed as blameworthy. The new Victorian sensibilities of late-colonial Bengal and, perhaps more important, the need for a morality suited to the coming independence of India, led Tagore to find in the play – indeed, to see as its ultimate meaning – a concern with tempering freedom by restraint.<sup>9</sup>

Historicists reading upon Plane 1 are likely to be concerned with none of the Plane 2 or Plane 3 questions. While *Shakuntala* may appear to stand for Young Woman as such, she is far more than this. As the daughter of a celestial nymph and a powerful earthly sage, having grown up among ascetics in the forest, she embodies the force of nature itself in a kind of potential state. Her husband-to-be, Dushyanta, too, is no ordinary man, but a king – ‘a god who walks the earth in the form of a man,’ as Vālmīki had put it in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Pollock, 1986, 4.18.38) – and an embodiment of the great god Shiva. The union and reunion of these two remarkable beings is no accident either, but part of a celestial design alluded to throughout the play and most conclusively at the scene of their reunion in heaven. Several careful Plane-1 readers have perceived what no Plane-2 reader, all 2000 years of them, ever has: how the playwright has correlated the concept of cosmic design with an antiphonal structure – a symmetry of action balancing Acts 1 and 7, 2 and 6, 3 and 5 – that recapitulates the design of the destiny that joined the human-divine king with the elemental power of nature in order to produce a son who will rule the four quarters of the world. This son is Bharata, whose eponym – Bharatavarsha (Clime of Bharara) is an ancient name of India – gestures toward the new imperial formation of the Gupta kings under whom Kalidasa wrote. The gender trouble of the presentist reader, the vernacular sociologies of the traditional (both modern and medieval), and the political-cultural semiotics of design for the historicist are all, and all equally, part of making sense of *Śākuntala*.

9 For Goethe and Tagore, see my comments in Damrosch *et al.*, (2004, 1034–1037).

## The Balancing Act of Reading in Three Dimensions

Learning to read in three dimensions, which is the autobiography of my own philology, is learning to practice a delicate balancing act that requires both training and untraining. The act is especially difficult for hardcore historicists such as myself, but real historicism requires not only consistency but history. No practicing philologist has any doubt that there is always a deeper, an ever truer, textual truth to be obtained along the first plane of reading, and cannot but continue to strive toward it along that scientific path. We may call this view of original meaning historicism<sup>1</sup>, which no doubt often produces a truth that can be distinguished, and dramatically so, from later interpretations. Absolute textual

10 The ‘bifurcation thesis’ – that different domains of inquiry require different kinds of inquiry (Kraut, 1990) – makes this kind of understanding coherent with the (qualified) neopragmatism I subscribe to here.

11 I thought I had invented the term ‘critical philology’ (in the hopes of encouraging reflection on what might appear to be its tautology) for a workshop organized at the University of Chicago in 2004. I now see I was anticipated by Judet de la Combe, whose definition I largely endorse: ‘Une “philologie critique,” c’est-à-dire une philologie [entendue au sens classique de science des œuvres] qui associe à son travail d’interprétation des textes une dimension autoréflexive, et pour cela examine les conditions de possibilité et l’histoire de l’interprétation’ (‘A “critical philology,” in other words, a

truth will forever be beyond our reach however much we must continue to seek it. It is certain, as Nietzsche proclaimed, ‘on the basis of his entire philological experience ... that there *is no all-saving interpretation*’ [‘Kurz, der alte Philologe sagt, aus der ganzen philologischen Erfahrung heraus: es gibt keine alleinseligmachende Interpretation,’ cited in Schrift, 1990, 164; my translation]. That said, ‘wir Philologen’ are obliged to proceed as if there were, with honesty and justice (*Gerechtigkeit* and *Redlichkeit* in Nietzsche’s words) and in the conviction that the text is about itself at least as much as it is about the many readers including ourselves who have read it.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, we are obliged to understand that there are truths in the historical consciousness concretized in the false – or what may seem to be false – interpretations of the past no less than in the true – or what may seem to be true – interpretations. In *their own existence*, as well as in whatever in the text may have elicited them, these interpretations are true. The same holds for the assessments of our own here-and-now reading, which is inevitably going to be vastly different from the two other types, mediated as it is by our own historicity. We may of course think of the appreciation of traditionism as a kind of historicism<sup>2</sup>, and that of presentism as a historicism<sup>3</sup>, at least in the mind of the self-aware historicist physicians who know that we must heal ourselves. But as the history of historicism demonstrates, starting with Spinoza himself, we cannot learn to read across the three planes of philology actively and simultaneously unless we fully disaggregate them. Only then will we begin to acknowledge that what a text means can never be anything but what the text has been taken to mean by the people who have read it. Its one true meaning can be nothing but the assemblage of all these other meanings, which we use in our different ways depending on the kind of sense we are aiming to make of the world: what the text may have meant to the first audience; what it meant to readers over time; what it means to me here and now.

The balancing act required to read this way is indeed delicate, especially since we want to allow all three to represent forms of truth, while feeling no compulsion to rank or even to reconcile them. There is an unease with such multiplicity, which some have traced back to a very peculiar kind of Platonic monism. This unease is not only specific to a particular tradition but may well be philosophically questionable in itself. ‘We contain copresent but distinct sets of equally coherent sets of desires,’ Rorty once argued: ‘These may not always be able to be made coherent with one another, but they may not be any the worse for that. Plato was wrong: you don’t have to get everything to get together’ (Rorty *et al.*, 2002, 63). The great intellectual challenge of a critical philology is to simultaneously respect the scientific value of truth, the pragmatic value of pluralism, and the hermeneutical necessity of asking ‘What possibility does the text give me to understand my own being?’ (Rudolph Bultmann, cited in Jauss, 1980, 105).<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, appreciation of philology’s three dimensions might encourage the cultivation of some important political–ethical values in a way made



possible only by 'reading well' – whether in Thoreau's moral sense, in *Walden*, Chapter 3 (Thoreau, [1854] 1950), or Nietzsche's hermeneutic one, in *Antichrist*, Sections 52 and 59 (Nietzsche, [1895] 1980b). Here I prefer to think of philology as a way of life, where it becomes the practice of what I would like to call 'liberation philology.' For reading, or philology, is an enactment of such values – this is Spinoza's fundamental insight and it is unarguable: you are how you read, and learning to read differently means learning to be differently. Three-dimensional philology is actually the way human understanding works: there is no reason to refuse to acknowledge both the presence of the past and the inescapability of the present. When we start facing up to these two aspects we are at once doing liberation philology and liberating philology. The political-ethical values such philology helps us to cultivate can be framed both negatively and positively.

Philology on Plane 1 (historicism) helps us to discipline the arrogance of readers-as-consumers who want only what pleases them, whose sole lives are taken to be the measure of all previous lives. Philology on Plane 2 (traditionism) helps us to counter the insularity of monologists who believe that all meaning must be singular, and that they alone are in possession of it. Philology on Plane 3 (presentism) helps us to dispel the illusions of historicists who believe historicism applies to everyone but themselves and who refuse to believe that they can – in fact, that they must – gauge the text by their own experience.

At the same time, and more positively now, philology on Plane 1 (historicism) helps us to better comprehend the nature, or natures, of human existence and the radical differences it has shown over time, that is, the vast variety of ways of being human. Philology on Plane 2 (traditionism) helps us to better understand and to develop patience for the views of others, and so to expand the possibilities of human solidarity (this is the great value of reading a deep and distant past like India's, since it is precisely the presence of a long and very unfamiliar history of reading and interpretation that lets us exercise so effectively the virtues of the quest for understanding and solidarity). Philology on Plane 3 (presentism) helps us to come to understand our own historicity and our relationship to all earlier historical interpretations, including the originary, and thereby to gain a new humility for the limits of our capacity to know and a new respect for the importance to keep trying.

It may well be there are other intellectual practices that can teach us these lessons both negative and positive, but I know of none that can do so as consistently and immediately as reading well through the discipline of philology.

philology understood in the classical sense, as a science of texts], but which adds to its usual work of interpretation a reflexive dimension, and to that end investigates the conditions of possibility of interpretation and its history') (Judet de la Combe, 1997, 10–11; my translation).

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