

Liberating Philology

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of whom watch it on their smart phones and like to comment on it via microblogs—is being made available for Chinese to watch via the YouTube-like Youku service before being released on American television. As interesting as things like shifts in academic fashions, terminologies, and the contours of fields may be, they sometimes pale when placed beside the recent changes in technologies and geopolitical configurations that, among many other things, can lessen the chasm between youths with means living on opposite sides of the globe, while widening that between how these people do these things and how members of different generations who share with them a ZIP code and a social status may do them.

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Liberating Philology

SHELDON POLLOCK

Rather than choosing among the three questions the editors have raised—Where do we go from here? How do we productively extend our fields? What is worth preserving from the past?—I try to combine them all in this short essay on the need to refashion the old yet still entirely undisciplined, and hence potentially very new, form of knowledge called philology. There are two aspects to my call for refashioning: one institutional, the other intellectual. These have been historically inseparable because they are ontologically inseparable, given that academic knowledge is authorized by academic structures, and the reverse. I discuss them individually only in the interest of clear exposition.

A struggle has long been going on in the American university, sharpening especially in the past two decades, between area-based and disciplinary knowledge. The distinction between the two often maps closely against another, which differentiates humanistic from nonhumanistic knowledge. This is most obviously the case in philology, which in American universities has always been organized entirely according to areas and has had, accordingly, a serious disciplinary deficit. The fragility of the humanities today—of the humanities in general and of philology in particular—is hardly news, and the arguments offered in their defense are equally, and tiresomely, familiar (the humanities make us better workers,

better managers, better citizens, better humans). Less attention has been paid, however, to the structural causes of that fragility. I want to discuss two in particular.

Like the humanities overall, philology has been profoundly weakened by fragmentation, with the dramatic proliferation over the past century of philology departments—Romance, Slavic, East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Uralic-Altaic, to say nothing of English and classics—along with philological subfields such as comparative literature. It hardly matters whether this resulted from intellectual pressures, such as residual forms of cultural nationalism or “arealism,” or from institutional ones, such as the empire building and rent seeking endemic to the academy. The net result has been the dispersion of a core knowledge form across ever smaller, weaker, and more disposable academic units, with all the institutional liabilities that “small,” “weak,” and “disposable” entail. There is an analogy, or rather disanalogy, here with mathematics. Whereas, like mathematics, philology’s theories and methods are adopted across the disciplines, unlike mathematics, philology has no unified disciplinary home in any American university—indeed, under the description of philology I offer in what follows, it has never had one anywhere.

A second cause of the debilitation of the philological humanities has been the attack on area studies, some five or six decades from the time of their founding, which has led to an unprecedented separation of disciplinary from areal knowledge in the social sciences. This development, in addition to (and ironically running somewhat athwart) the growing dominance of “problem-focused inquiry” and the preference for applied in contrast to basic science, has been one of the most striking transformations in the contemporary American academy. There has certainly been resistance to this divorce—the “perestroika” movement in political science was in part about this—but its existence and effects are indisputable. For many social scientists, “the consensus has formed,” as the then-president of the American Political Science Association put it almost twenty years ago at the start of the Great Separation, “that area studies has failed to generate scientific knowledge” (and, he added—confirming the mapping just mentioned—“area specialists [have] defected from the social sciences to the camp of the humanists”; Bates 1996, 1–2). Although arguably only the most recent stage in a long history of the Western academy’s inability to figure out what to do with the non-West, the demotion of area-based social science has proven consequential for the humanities across the board but, again, most particularly for philology.

The disciplines have dealt with their uneasy relationship with areas

by simply exiling area scholars (or creating conditions that prompted area scholars to exile themselves). At the same time, administrators have dealt with the problem of those small and weak philology departments by combining and transforming them into “studies” programs where the refugee scholars could be relocated (a good example is my own department at Columbia, “Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies”). To be sure, although this entire transformation has typically occurred without a well-articulated sense of purpose, let alone critical self-understanding, there are some good arguments to be made in its support. For one thing, it can be salutary to have social science situated outside of “social science” and looking in at the disciplines, and thereby better able to contest the false and sometimes harmful generalizations of Western theory. For another, these new formations can capture transdisciplinary and transregional processes concealed by disciplines and regions more narrowly construed, replacing containers with connections, as some observers have put it. Clearly, bringing together expertise across disciplines and areas makes good sense.

The obverse side to this shiny coin of neo-area studies is rather unpretty, however. The relocation of non-Western expertise to studies departments leaves an impoverished and astonishingly provincial American social science. The call for transdisciplinarity inevitably weakens, if not destroys, the disciplinarity on which its very existence is predicated. As for philology, which in its contemporary form is generally untheoretical, unmodern, un-*trans*, and uncool, it has now been buried at the bottom of the departmental closets where these other non-Western disciplinary appointments—theoretical, modern, *trans*-, and cool—are being placed.

If these various institutional currents have contributed to the endangerment of philology, the principal cause has been intellectual failure on the part of philologists themselves. It is because we have been misconceiving philology that its full potential as a unified transregional and transhistorical academic discipline has not been realized—and, in fact, has never been realized, anywhere. Serious reconceptualization is required, accordingly, if philology is to have a disciplinary home, something that would not only help reverse its decline but would also stimulate the creation of the new knowledge that it is uniquely capable of creating and that will do more than anything else to ensure its academic survival.

Scholars in the West have wrangled over the nature and definition of philology for two centuries or more, taking us from the sublime—Friedrich Schlegel’s “monstrous” conception of its scope as “all erudition

in language”—to the ridiculous, its current shrunken, desiccated little embodiment as corpus linguistics (for references and further discussion, see Pollock 2014). What they have never bothered to provide, however, are warrants for philology’s disciplinary autonomy. These would have to include at least the following three features. The first is a distinctive object of study, which for philology is human language as concretized in texts—all texts, from oral to electronic, those of mass culture no less than those of elite, “everything made of language” (Sanskrit’s lovely term *vānīmaya*). Philology is not the theory of language as such (that’s linguistics) nor the theory of truth in language (that’s philosophy) but the theory of language-as-used-in-texts. If philosophy is thought critically reflecting on itself, then philology may be seen as the critical self-reflection of language embodied in texts. Making sense of texts, their history, their mode of existence, their very textuality, and of course their content, is philology’s object of study. That study becomes more challenging, more apparently philological, the further in time and space the texts are removed from us, but in fact all texts are philology’s object.

The second feature is a distinctive theory, which for philology is something called “interpretation” (this is not me speaking but Wilhelm Dilthey), which was developed in Europe, India, and no doubt elsewhere to make sense of texts. Philological interpretation has a multidimensionality—the interpretation of the text in its genesis, in its tradition of reception, and in its presence to our own subjectivity—that, adequately recognized, is critical to the discipline’s regeneration (I argue this out in detail in Pollock 2014). The third is distinctive research methods, which for philology include grammatical, text-critical, rhetorical, and historical analysis (this is not me speaking but Friedrich Wolf; recall too that for Vico, history was just a subfield of philology). Although philology can be seen, as Nietzsche was the first to see it, as a practice of everyday life, in its existence as a knowledge system, it is the work solely of professionals within the academy. In this it differs markedly from other knowledge forms, such as anthropology, which, John Comaroff recently observed, is “a discipline that takes to doing work that could as well be done, and be done as well, by journalists.” Philology thus possesses precisely the “distinctive subject, distinctive theoretical concepts, distinctive methods” that a discipline requires; what it currently lacks is Comaroff’s fourth component, “a distinctive place in the disciplinary division of labor” (Comaroff 2010, esp. 4).

Viewed more broadly, philology may in fact be the leading representative of disciplinarity in the twenty-first-century university, especially a university that takes globalism seriously as a condition of knowledge and

not just as a marketing tool. Philology is (1) a universal—wherever there have been texts, there has been philology—and not a particularistic form of knowledge masquerading as universal (unlike, say, political science, which is basically a mathematized form of American studies); philology has been as ubiquitous a discipline in time and space as philosophy or mathematics. As a result of this ubiquity, philology is (2) constitutively self-aware, awake to its own factitiousness and historicity as a knowledge form, and hence infinitely adaptable; in true disciplinary character, it “treats its own nature as the subject of reflexive analysis” (unlike, say, economics, which has naturalized itself and strategically erased its own disciplinary past). As a result of this self-awareness, philology is (3) 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 (for references and further discussion, see Pollock, forthcoming).

For such institutional and intellectual reasons as these, then, philology requires a disciplinary home uniting textualists across areas. And this should be one component in a new and broader paradigm: the problem of areality (and disciplinarity) will never be solved unless and until areas are reconjoined with disciplines (and vice versa). Both kinds of knowledge must be produced simultaneously and interactively; scholars should not have to choose between the two because the extrinsically verified and the intrinsically validated are intimately linked: the former recovers its richest meaning in the dense web of connections that exist only areally, and those connections only become meaningful when embedded in a disciplinary matrix—at least one that is historically reflexive, transregional and comparative, and conceptually pluralistic, as the discipline of philology shows to be possible.

This sort of philology—a critical or reflexive or hermeneutic or, better, liberated philology, which also, when properly cultivated, promotes the cultivation of core political-ethical values and becomes a sort of liberation philology—is for area humanists an essential next step both conceptually and institutionally. It is a necessary extension of our fields. And it is one of the great ideas from the past that, if thoroughly reconstructed, is most decidedly worth preserving.

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Islamic Art History: Yesterday, Today, and the Future

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The discipline of art history has changed a great deal. So has the study of Islamic art, my field. And I'd like to believe that we, on the periphery of the discipline, have had a great deal to do with the changes that have been wrought. We've been driven to inventiveness, I think, both by that peripheral status, which freed us from some of the disciplinary fetters that made art history long a conservative field, and also by forces operating in society more generally, Islamophobia in the case of my part of the discipline.

Some thirty years ago, when I wrote on the architectural patronage of an Indo-Islamic sultan, the Italian Renaissance was the center of the discipline, and Islam fit into no area studies configuration, except perhaps Middle East studies. But that excluded my interest in Indian Islam and, in any event, circumscribed geographically a global religion. My investment in the world beyond Italy introduced me to texts on Islamic kingship that opened my eyes to an Islamic realm that transcended any particular venue in the Muslim world. As a pan-Islamic phenomenon, this world produced texts on ideal governance that were relevant from at least the eleventh through the eighteenth centuries. But despite my interest in a global Islam, I encountered at job interviews a very resistant attitude. I recall when interviewing at a major research university in the Midwest, one professor on the search committee told me outright that he would never hire me as I worked on peripheral material—Islam in the Indian subcontinent, not the "genuine" Islam of the Middle East. Indeed, I was not hired, but later that day the same individual had the courtesy