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Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World

Sheldon Pollock

There are two epigraphs I want to provide by way of preface to my brief account of the fortunes of philology. The first comes from Edmund Husserl (about whom what little I know comes from Hans-Georg Gadamer): “Not always the big bills, gentlemen; small change, small change!”¹ I try to be as clear and concrete as possible in this essay because the subject demands it. The second comes from Bertolt Brecht: “Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral” (“chow down first, then talk about moral niceties”).² The core problem of philology today, as I see it, is whether it will survive at all; and it is philology’s survival that I care about and how this might be secured.

In 1872 a now-obscure pamphlet was published by a young—and, for nonclassicists, now equally obscure—philologist. The philologist was Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, and the pamphlet was *Zukunftsphilologie!* (*Future Philology!*), an attack on Friedrich Nietzsche’s just-published *The Birth of Tragedy*. Philology in Europe was at its zenith, one of the hardest sciences on offer, the centerpiece of education, the sharpest exponent if not the originator of the idea of “critical” thinking, and the paradigm of other sciences such as evolutionary biology.³ The dispute between the two authors was not about the place of the classics in the German

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. Quoted in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley, 1977), p. 133.

2. Bertolt Brecht, “Denn wovon lebt der Mensch?” *Die Dreigroschenoper* (Berlin, 1969).

3. See Robert J. O’Hara, “Trees of History in Systematics and Philology,” *Memorie della Società Italiana di Scienze Naturali e del Museo Civico di Storia Naturale di Milano* 27, no. 1

curriculum, for that was absolutely secure; on this point and many others the two were far closer than the vehemence of the dispute might suggest. Their dispute was about the method and meaning of classical studies. For Wilamowitz, true knowledge of any social or cultural phenomenon of the past could only be acquired by examining every feature of its historical context, and by doing so completely abstracting it from present-day perspectives.⁴ For Nietzsche, the approach of the newly professionalized (and only recently named) discipline of philology had completely deadened antiquity and perverted the true aim of its study; the philologists themselves had “absolutely no feeling for what should be justified, what defended.”⁵

Viewed through a wider lens, this was a struggle between historicists and humanists, *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung*, scholarship and life, of a sort not unique to European modernity (Sanskrit pandits often recite the verse, “When the hour of death is at hand, no grammatical paradigm will save you”).⁶ And this time victory went to the historicist, that “cold demon of

(1996): 81–88. O’Hara shows how biology derived its taxonomic models from philology’s tree diagrams of language development and, even more important, manuscript stemmatics.

4. See Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, “Future Philology! A Reply to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*” (1872), trans. Gertrude Postl, *New Nietzsche Studies* 4 (Summer–Fall 2000): 1–32, and James Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford, Calif., 2000), p. 59.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, “We Classicists,” trans. William Arrowsmith, *Unmodern Observations*, trans. Arrowsmith, Herbert Golder, and Gary Brown, ed. Arrowsmith (New Haven, Conn., 1990), p. 371. To some degree their dispute recapitulated the one played out a generation earlier between Gottfried Hermann and August Boeckh, discussed below. An excellent account of the transformation of Greek studies in early nineteenth-century Germany is M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 1–14; for the intellectual history of Humboldtian educational reforms that constituted the background to Nietzsche’s attacks, see Glenn W. Most, “On the Use and Abuse of Ancient Greece for Life,” *Cultura tedesca* 20 (Oct. 2002): 31–53. Philology as an academic field in the modern period was famously invented by Friedrich Wolf in 1777.

6. It comes from the late-medieval hymn *Bhajaḡovinda: saṃprāpte sannihite kāle na hi na hi rakṣati ḡuṅkr̥ṅkaraṇe*.

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knowledge”;⁷ Nietzsche gave up his professorship, as Wilamowitz argued his views required him to do. But it was a hollow victory, prefiguring as it did the crash in cultural capital that philology was to experience over the following century. It is philology’s collapse that I want to try to make sense of in this essay before turning to the task—the rather quixotic task, at what seems like two minutes before our planet’s midnight—of how we might reconstruct it.

First, what precisely do I mean by philology? It is an accurate index of philology’s fall from grace that most people today have only the vaguest idea what the word means. I have heard it confused with phrenology, and even for those who know better, philology shares something of the disrepute of that nineteenth-century pseudoscience. Admittedly, the definition of any discipline has to be provisional in some sense because the discipline itself is supposed to change with the growth of knowledge, and there isn’t any reason why the definition of a discipline should be any neater than the messy world it purports to understand. Still, philologists have not done much to help their cause. An oft-cited definition by a major figure at the foundational moment in the nineteenth century makes philology improbably grand—“the knowledge of what is known”⁸—though this was not much different from the definition offered by Vico in the previous century, for whom philology is the “awareness of peoples’ languages and deeds.”⁹ Perhaps in reaction to these claims, a major figure in the twentieth-century twilight, Roman Jakobson, a “Russian philologist,” as he described himself,¹⁰ made the definition improbably modest: philology is “the art of reading slowly.”¹¹ Most people today, including some I cite in what follows,

7. Nietzsche, “History in the Service and Disservice of Life,” trans. Brown, *Unmodern Observations*, p. 113.

8. August Boeckh: “das Erkennen des Erkannten” (“[re-]cognizing [what the human mind has produced—that is] what has been cognized”) (quoted in Michael Holquist, “Forgetting Our Name, Remembering Our Mother,” *PMLA* 115 [Dec. 2000]: 1977). See also Axel Horstmann, *Antike Theoria und Moderne Wissenschaft: August Boeckh’s Konzeption der Philologie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), p. 103.

9. Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations*, trans. David Marsh (Harmondsworth, 1999), p. 79; hereafter abbreviated *NS*. See also *NS*, p. 5: “By philology, I mean the science of everything that depends on human volition: for example, all histories of the languages, customs, and deeds of various peoples in both war and peace.”

10. Holquist, “Forgetting Our Name, Remembering Our Mother,” p. 1977.

11. Quoted in Jan Ziolkowski, “What Is Philology? Introduction,” *On Philology*, ed. Ziolkowski (University Park, Pa., 1990), p. 6, though the idea is in fact Nietzsche’s, who described himself as “ein Lehrer des langsamen Lesens” (Nietzsche, “Vorrede,” *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. [Munich, 1980], 3:17).

think of philology either as close reading (the literary critics) or historical-grammatical and textual criticism (the self-described philologists).

What I offer instead as a rough-and-ready working definition at the same time embodies a kind of program, even a challenge: philology is, or should be, the discipline of making sense of texts. It is not the theory of language—that's linguistics—or the theory of meaning or truth—that's philosophy—but the theory of textuality as well as the history of textualized meaning. If philosophy is thought critically reflecting upon itself, as Kant put it, then philology may be seen as the critical self-reflection of language. Or to put this in a Vichean idiom: if mathematics is the language of the book of nature, as Galileo taught, philology is the language of the book of humanity.¹² Despite the astonishing assumption in almost all writing about philology that it is the discipline of studying classical European antiquity, philology is and has always been a global knowledge practice, as global as textualized language itself, albeit no such global account of its history has ever been written. Thus, both in theory and in practice across time and space, philology merits the same centrality among the disciplines as philosophy or mathematics.

Or at least in principle it does. In fact, no discipline in today's university is more misunderstood, disdained, and threatened. For many, *philologist* is hardly more than a term of abuse, "what you call the dull boys and girls of the profession."¹³ For others, philology has ceased to be. It is a "now defunct field,"¹⁴ a "protohumanistic empirical science" that "no longer exists as such," its decline "a conspicuous and puzzling fact."¹⁵ To some degree, we philologists have brought this crisis upon ourselves and have permitted such breathtaking ignorance to persist through our failure to make a strong case for our discipline either explicitly or by our practices. But profound changes in the nature of humanistic learning have contributed, too: the hypertrophy of theory over the past two decades, which often wound up displacing its object of analysis; the devaluation of the strictly textual in favor of the oral and the visual; the growing indifference to and

12. Compare Donald Kelley, "Vico's Road: From Philology to Jurisprudence and Back," in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, ed. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Verene (Baltimore, 1976), p. 19.

13. Holquist, "Forgetting Our Name, Remembering Our Mother," p. 1977.

14. Michael Dutton, "The Trick of Words: Asian Studies, Translation, and the Problems of Knowledge," in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham, N.C., 2005), p. 100.

15. John Guillory, "Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines," in *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente (Princeton, N.J., 2002), pp. 28, 30. See also Daniel Selden, "Response to Giulia Sissa," *Classical Philology* 92 (Apr. 1997): 175–79.

incapacity in foreign languages, especially in the historical languages, worldwide; and the shallow presentism of scholarship and even antipathy to the past as such. Further complication is introduced by new and usually unacknowledged inequities across philological areas: South Asian and Middle Eastern studies in the U.S. are far weaker institutionally than East Asian, let alone the classics. Last, and not the least important, there are striking variations in the state of philology across the world. In India, it is perilously close to the point of no return, and whether coming generations will even be able to read the texts of their traditions is now all too real a question. There are financial constraints, too, that make the preservation of philology so dicey, and I will touch on these later. But the serious conceptual issues need to be addressed head-on if philology is even to be worth the trouble preserving.

So “Future Philology?” alludes not just to my brief meditation on what the soft science of philology might yet become in a world increasingly hardened by bottom-line calculation and impatience with languages and texts in history. It means to raise the question of whether philology has any future at all. I know what A. E. Housman said about the sort of exercise I am about to engage in: “Everyone has his favourite study, and he is therefore disposed to lay down, as the aim of learning in general, the aim which his favourite study seems specially fitted to achieve, and the recognition of which as the aim of learning in general would increase the popularity of that study and the importance of those who profess it.”¹⁶ But we are not talking about favorites here but about the survival of the very capacity of human beings to read their pasts and, indeed, their presents and thus to preserve a measure of their humanity.

I try to do four things in this essay: look at philology historically to help us both appreciate its global presence—including a remarkable early modern moment of innovation across Eurasia—and understand its unhappy present states;¹⁷ assess the pragmatic choices facing universities in the current crisis; point toward some components of theory, pertaining especially to the problem of historical knowledge that remains unresolved in philology, as a way of opening a discussion on redisciplining practice and producing a different, truly critical philology; and last, and very briefly, think about what philology might mean as a way of life—not what it means to become a professional philologist, but to live one’s life philologically.

16. A. E. Housman, “Introductory Lecture,” *Selected Prose*, ed. John Carter (Cambridge, 1962), p. 2.

17. This is intended as a modest beginning of the sort of disciplinary history that, as James Chandler urges, needs to be both long-term and global. See James Chandler, “Critical Disciplinarity,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 355–60.

1. Three Very Short Histories of Early Modern Philology: Europe, India, China

The origins of philology in the West have been variously traced, given the multiple understandings of the discipline: to the editors and grammarians of Alexandria in the third century BC; to the Renaissance humanists and the rise of a historical science; and to the Reformation and the problem of understanding the word of God in a world where everyone had suddenly become his own interpreter and needed some kind of secure method in a welter of translations. For Michel Foucault, philology in the modern era began with the transformed understanding of the nature of language itself at the end of the eighteenth century. In the chapter “Labor, Life, Language” in *The Order of Things*, Foucault attributes almost magic properties to what he calls the “discovery” or “birth” of this philology. For the first time in history all languages acquired an equal value, they merely had different internal structures; language came to be treated as a totality of phonetic, not graphic, elements, which unleashed a new interest in oral language; language was “no longer linked to the knowing of things, but to men’s freedom”; and so on. Whatever we may make of these often sibylline pronouncements, Foucault’s main point is clear enough: at the end of the eighteenth century language became historical for the first time in the West. And his large claim is especially compelling: the type of philology then invented was a conceptual event on a par with the invention of two other core disciplines, economics and biology, though philology has had consequences that “have extended much further in our culture, at least in the subterranean strata that run through it and support it.”¹⁸

The validity of this assertion is certainly borne out by the history of higher education. Departments of philology and its various offshoots—Oriental, comparative, and (increasingly unmanageably) modern—grew apace, so that by the end of the nineteenth century the discipline had attained what one recent history of the university calls “academic hegemony.”¹⁹ Its undoing has been less carefully plotted, and various factors have had a role to play at different times. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the rise of literary studies in the face of philology’s antihumanistic

18. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, trans. pub. (New York, 1970), pp. 291, 282.

19. William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago, 2006), p. 237; his sociological explanation however seems simplistic (“Elites rather sought to legitimate themselves charismatically, as mandarins, by their mastery of difficult dead languages” [ibid., p. 238]), though see Peter Goodrich, “Distrust Quotations in Latin,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Winter 2003): 193–215, and Françoise Waquet, *Latin: Or the Empire of a Sign*, trans. John Howe (London, 2001). A good brief account of the pedagogical transformation effected by nineteenth-century philology is Selden, “Response to Giulia Sissa,” pp. 172–75.

scientism and in the service of nationalism and the “humanizing” of the new industrial working class; a little later, philology’s shaping role in European “race science,” which served to further degrade its scientific pretensions; after World War II, the area-studies model, which privileged modern language study and almost completely instrumentalized it—all these factors contributed to the discipline’s demise, helped along by the philologists’ own self-stultification, their refusal—to call once more on Nietzsche’s testimony—to “get to the *root of the matter* . . . [and] propose philology itself as a problem.”²⁰

In the eyes of a historian of philology who thinks of it as the discipline of making sense of texts, Foucault’s account of what made philology modern gets much less than half of the story. A deeper historical appreciation of the real turning points in the field, with their striking parallels across the world of early modern Eurasia, would include not only such celebrated moments such as Lorenzo Valla’s *Declamatio* on the Donation of Constantine of 1440 (discussed below) but also lesser-known yet perhaps more consequential innovations such as Spinoza’s biblical philology in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). Here, understanding Spinoza’s argument for a democratic polity in chapters 16–20 of the *Tractatus* requires understanding that of the fifteen preceding chapters, his thoroughgoing historical and critical analysis and resulting desacralization of biblical discourse. For Spinoza, the method of interpreting scripture is the same as the method of interpreting nature. To understand the text of the Bible there can be no appeal to authority beyond it; the sole criterion of interpretation is the data of the text and the conclusions drawn from them. Nor does the Bible have any special status over against other texts; it is equally a human creation, produced over time and in different styles and registers. Close attention must therefore be paid to “the nature and properties of the language in which the biblical books were composed.”²¹ Among all the intense Bible criticism of the seventeenth century, Spinoza’s alone argued for examining and studying the language of the biblical authors, the way the language was used, and the circumstances under which the books were written, including the intentions of the authors. But here according to Spinoza we confront many hard, sometimes unsolvable, problems. Given the distance in time and space, we have no sure access to the meaning of the words of the

20. Nietzsche, “We Classicists,” p. 372. The place of race science in philology is discussed in Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); on the split with literary studies, see Guillory, “Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines.”

21. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, ed. Israel (Cambridge, 2007), p. 100.

Bible, let alone its primary context, while for some books (the Gospels) the original Hebrew or Aramaic texts have disappeared, and what remains is only the shadow of their imperfect translations into Greek. This focus on the nature of Hebrew, which is explicitly thematized in the *Tractatus*, would prompt Spinoza to begin a grammar of the language in 1677 (the same year as the *Ethics*), evaluating it perhaps for the first time as a “natural,” not a transcendent, code.²² Many of the weapons in the modern philological arsenal are present in the *Tractatus* in the service of a politically emancipatory science.

For Foucault—to whom this earlier history is of no interest—the invention of modern philology as historical-grammatical study is to be credited to Franz Bopp, whose *Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache* (1816) demonstrated the morphological relationship among Sanskrit, Persian, Greek, and the other members of what thereby became the Indo-European language family. As is well known, Bopp was building on the insights of William Jones, an East India Company judge and near-mythic Orientalist, and it would by now be banal to observe (though Foucault failed to observe it) that yet another core feature of European modernity was provided by British colonial knowledge. But, as scholars have recently begun to argue, this fertile seed of modern comparative philology may in fact lie in non-Western premodernity. The linguistic kinship theory had already in part been framed, as Persian Jones very likely knew it had been framed, by an about-to-be colonized subject, Siraj al-Din Ali Khan Arzu (d. 1756, Delhi). Arzu was the first, and knew he was the first, to identify the correspondence (*tavafuq*) between Persian and Sanskrit: “To date no one, excepting this humble Arzu and his followers,” he wrote, “has discovered the *tavafuq* between Hindavi [Sanskrit] and Persian, even though there have been numerous lexicographers and other researchers in both these languages.”²³

22. See Richard H. Popkin, “Spinoza and Bible Scholarship,” in *The Books of Nature and Scripture: Recent Essays on Natural Philosophy, Theology, and Biblical Criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza’s Time and the British Isles of Newton’s Time*, ed. James E. Force and Popkin (Dordrecht, 1994), esp. p. 11; Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 447–49; and Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 324–25. (Gadamer’s history of philological hermeneutics accordingly needs correction; see Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2d ed. [New York, 1989], p. 176.) I hope someday to write more on Spinoza’s philological method and its conceptual linkage with political critique. Some of this method was derived from Hobbes, but radicalized; see Arrigo Pacchi, “Hobbes and Biblical Philology in the Service of the State,” *Topoi* 7 (Dec. 1988): 231–39.

23. Quoted in Muzaffar Alam, “The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan,” in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley, 2003), p. 175. See Mohamad Tavakoli, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (Basingstoke, 2001), p. 65. There were European theories of linguistic kinship as early as the sixteenth century, though it is not clear to me to what degree

The historicity of language may not have been explicitly developed in Arzu's work, or an adequate comparative method, but both are implicit in the very problematic.

Arzu was no anomaly in late premodern (or early modern) India. In fact, Persian philology during this period was marked by astonishing dynamism and inventiveness. It is also no accident that the dramatic innovations in Persian philological practice occurred not in Qajar Persia but in Hindustan, where philology—rather than mathematics or theology—had always been the queen of the disciplines and where as a result analyses of grammar, rhetoric, and hermeneutics were produced that were the most sophisticated in the ancient world. The Persian-language achievements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries very likely were stimulated by those trained in other forms of Indic philology or by conversations with scholars who swam in that wider sea; an example is the first more or less systematic exposition of Brajbhasha (or classical Hindi) by Mirza Khan Ibn Fakhru-d-Din Muhammad as part of his wide-ranging and fascinating philological compendium *Tuhfatu-ul Hind* (*A Gift to India*, c. 1675).²⁴ And wide indeed was that philological sea in the early modern and modern epochs.

It is a source of wonder—and should be a source of no little shame—that we Indologists have provided no comprehensive picture of the great achievements of Indian philologists during the three or four centuries before the consolidation of British colonialism. In fact, the early modern period of the history of Indian philology remains, in some ways, more obscure than the medieval or ancient, as are the conditions that have brought it to its present impasse. One can, however, point to some institutions, practices, and persons that upon fuller investigation would likely prove to be representative of the totality.

In the sphere of institutional histories we can glance at the example of the Brajbhasha Pathasala (Classical Hindi College) in Bhuj, Gujarat, founded by Lakhpati Sinha (r. 1741–1761). About fifty students, originating from Kutch, Saurashtra, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and even Punjab or

these entered into the genealogy of Bopp's work (its debt was to Friedrich Schlegel and Alexander Hamilton rather than to Gottfried Leibniz, let alone Claude Saumaise or Marcus Zverius van Boxhorn; see Anna Morpurgo Davies, *Nineteenth-Century Linguistics*, vol. 4 of *History of Linguistics* [London, 1994], p. 46).

24. On the *Tuhfatu-ul Hind* (only one chapter has ever been published), see Stuart McGregor, "The Progress of Hindi, Part 1: The Development of a Transregional Idiom," in *Literary Cultures in History*, pp. 942–44. Most of the great Persian philologists of the eighteenth century were themselves Hindus; see Alam, "The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan," p. 165.

Maharashtra were admitted every year, with perhaps a dozen of them completing the five-year course. Students studied a Brajbhasha grammar (the work is unknown but would count as the first grammar of a north Indian vernacular), the works of the great sixteenth-century poet Keshavdas (including his treatise on complex Sanskrit metrics, the *Ramchandra-chandrika*, which has since fallen into almost complete obscurity), rhetoric and other philological disciplines, as well as other kinds of knowledge from the preparation of manuscripts to horsemanship. This remarkable, free school was closed around the time of Indian independence (1947) for lack of funds, and its library of 1100 manuscripts dispersed, a fate that befell scores of royal libraries at the time.

Whatever may be the larger causes of collapse, the decline in the study of classical Hindi in postindependence India has been astounding. The level of textual-critical mastery still found as late as the 1950s in such scholars as Visvanathprasad Mishra has given way to the second-rate productions of *sarkari hindiwallahs*—when there is production at all; it is symptomatic that classical Hindi is not currently taught at either of the federally funded universities in India's capital city, Delhi. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the greater part of the Brajbhasha literary heritage—the grandeur of the literary imagination of early modern north India—today lies rotting in Indian manuscript libraries for lack of trained editors or capable readers.

We can chart a similar development or underdevelopment in southern India, as the case of Kannada demonstrates. In the mid-seventeenth century a remarkable philologist named Bhatta Akalanka Deva produced an exhaustive grammar of classical Kannada (in extraordinarily supple Sanskrit) by a striking act of imaginative philology, given that the idiom studied had been effectively dead for some four centuries. Although the history of philology from Akalanka Deva's time to the late nineteenth century is hard to trace, the kind of scholar that comes into view with the great philological projects of the period—such as the *Epigraphia Carnatika* series begun in 1875—are masters of their craft, and there is every reason to assume they were already formed before Lewis Rice, the series editor, brought them into his project. This assumption is borne out in a recent study of the skills—in paleography, historical semantics, and the like—possessed by the Niyogi Brahmans of Andhra, who at the start of the nineteenth century collected materials for Colonel Colin Mackenzie, the first surveyor-general of India. There is more inference than evidence in this study, certainly not enough to warrant the conclusion that these scholars contributed “even to the definition of epigraphy itself as a method for

historical enquiry.”²⁵ It is hard to deny that the strictly *historiographical* interest in inscriptions was colonial in its origins; it also remains unclear how many of these skills developed in the context of court administration and revert to the precolonial period. That said, there is no reason whatever to doubt the general philological talents and interests of this Niyogi Brahman class of Andhra any more than those of their coevals in Karnataka.

Whereas the next two generations of Kannada philology were studied with scholars of equally great talent and energy,²⁶ the situation today is bleak. The Union Government may now, according to newspaper accounts, be “likely to accord the much-awaited classical language status to Kannada,”²⁷ but the language’s political apotheosis is ironically being shadowed by its earthly mortality. It is almost certain that within a generation or two the number of people able to read classical Kannada will have approached a statistical zero.

What I have described for Brajbhasha and Kannada is true in the case of every historical language of South Asia; systematic philological knowledge is fast becoming extinct. The one exception may appear to be Sanskrit, but even here no one would deny that the type of scholarship that marked the tradition for upwards of two millennia has almost vanished. I will not try to chart here the very complicated development of Sanskrit philology over the early modern and modern periods, but I want to try to suggest something of this historical trajectory, from vivacious innovation in the early modern period to exhaustion and sclerosis in the present.

The most remarkable intellectual of seventeenth-century Kerala, Melputtur Narayana Bhattatiri (who died around 1660 and is thus an almost exact contemporary of Spinoza), made a deep and lasting mark in a range of scholarly disciplines, especially grammar and hermeneutics, as well as in poetry. One of his most remarkable works from amidst a large

25. Phillip Wagoner, “Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (Oct. 2003): 810. Paleography, for example, is indeed a very old science in India, and we know that users of inscriptions were concerned enough about the text—and *historical* enough—to produce revisions of dynastic lines and even forgeries; see Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, 2006), pp. 148–61.

26. The names of the scholars I have in mind will be unknown to almost all readers of this essay, but they deserve recording: R. Narasimhachar, D. L. Narasimhachar, B. M. Srikantia, M. V. Seetha Ramiah, M. Timmappaya, M. G. Pai.

27. K. N. Venkatasubba Rao, “Kannada Likely to Get Classical Tag,” *The Hindu*, 4 Oct. 2006, www.thehindu.com/2006/10/04/stories/2006100419510100.htm. This has now occurred; see Pollock, “The Real Classical Languages Debate,” *The Hindu*, 27 Nov. 2008, www.thehindu.com/2008/11/27/stories/2008112753100900.htm. On the politics of “classical language status,” see A. R. Venkatachalapathy, “The ‘Classical’ Language Issue,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 10 Jan. 2009, pp. 13–15.

corpus is a small and today almost unknown treatise called “A Proof of the Validity of Nonstandard Sanskrit,” which he published along with an open letter to the scholars “of the Chola country” (Tamil Nadu) who were his intellectual opponents. Far more revolutionary thinking is contained or implicit in this text than its title suggests. By the middle of the seventeenth century in various domains of Sanskrit thinking a kind of neotraditionalism had arisen, which reasserted the absolute authority of the ancients in the face of challenges from those known as the new (*navya*) scholars (the parallels with the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, save for the outcome, are astonishing).²⁸ Nowhere was this clearer than in grammar, where Narayana’s contemporary to the north, Bhattoji Diksita, vigorously reaffirmed as incontrovertible the views of the “three sages” (Panini, Katyayana, and Patanjali, last centuries BC). Narayana may have sought not to overthrow those views but only to supplement them. (“We are perfectly willing to accept that the school of Panini has unique merits; what we do not accept is that others have no authority whatever.”)²⁹ Yet the upshot of his arguments is far more radical than mere supplementation because they implicitly restore to Sanskrit its historicity and thereby its humanity. For some scholars of the period the old authorities were thought of as avatars of the deity; for Narayana, a core contention is that Panini was not a mythic personage but lived in time. Prior to him there must have been other sources of grammatical authority. Panini may have improved grammar but he did not invent it, and therefore those coming after him (such as Chandragomin in the fifth century, Shakatayana in the ninth, or even Bhoja in the eleventh and Vopadeva in the thirteenth–fourteenth) can be counted authoritative, since the basis of authority is knowledge, not location in a tradition.³⁰ All of this is established not just abstractly but through an empirical analysis of the practices of respected poets and commentators. We see something of a parallel attitude toward conceptual renovation in Narayana’s religious thought; the celebration of devotionalism in his literary work has rightly been seen as a critique of an ossified Brahmanical ritualism.³¹ Poetry and philology—and, by extension, the social and political orders—are homological, as is their reconstruction.

28. See Pollock, *The Ends of Man at the End of Premodernity* (Amsterdam, 2005).

29. Narayana Bhattapada, “Proving the Authority of Non-Paninian Grammars” [*Apaniniya-pramanya-sadhana*], trans. and ed. E. R. Sreekrishna Sarma, *Sri Venkateswara University Oriental Journal* 8 (1965): 21; trans. mod.

30. See *ibid.*, pp. 24–25, 21–22, 28.

31. Francis Zimmermann, “Patterns of Truthfulness,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 36 (Oct. 2008): 643–50. Sanskrit scriptural criticism within Brahmanism never produced a Spinoza, but there were moments of conceptual innovation, especially in the fourteenth century, that deserve and have yet to receive study from within a history of philology (I offer some

The story of Sanskrit philology in the three centuries after Narayana is a complicated one. Suffice it to say that, like intellectual production in the other Sanskrit knowledge systems, philology seems to have plateaued by the end of the eighteenth century—due to some entropic constraint as yet obscure to us, rather than in consequence of the coming of Western knowledge—though the kind of scholarship still being produced during the colonial period bore many of the hallmarks of the great pandit tradition. Modern Sanskrit studies mixing traditional Indian and Western philological styles thrived in the first half of the twentieth century, but has declined precipitously since.³²

So general a collapse in so complex a cultural system across so vast an area as South Asia cannot but have multiple causes. Classical Kannada, for example, as early as the thirteenth century, became the object of a profound intracultural attack from the movement of anticaste renouncers known as the “Heroic Shaivas” (*Virashaivas*), which militated against its wide cultivation. In Gujarat, by contrast, changes in the character of Rajput patronage may have played some role in the weakening of support for classical Hindi, though far more disruptive was the critique from the side of colonized literati themselves. Overwhelmed by the shame of pre-modernity, they saw Brajbhasha literature as the face of a decadent medievalism; in an age when India needed men, as one writer put it in 1910, Braj “had turned Indians into eunuchs.”³³ Persian philology, for its part, began to decline with the decline in the fortunes of the Mughal empire and competition with the new vernacular, Urdu.

Nonetheless, most of the great literary traditions could boast of extraordinarily deep scholarship for the first half of the twentieth century, as I have shown. Something else, some deeper and wider transformation, must explain the disintegration that has set in, at a terrifying rate, in the postindependence era. It is unlikely to have been as simple as the MA requirement for all professors in the new universities of the mid-nineteenth century, which ensured that great scholars who would traditionally have become philologists would be excluded from the academy and unable to

preliminary thoughts in “What Was Philology in Early Modern India?” in *World Philology*, ed. Kevin Chang, Benjamin Elman, and Pollock [forthcoming].

32. The modern lineage in hermeneutics includes Kuppuswami Sastri, Chinnaśwami Sastri, and Pattābhīrama Sastri—and thereafter, no one deserving of mention in the same breath. Mimamsa knowledge has not completely vanished, but it is impossible to identify anyone in India today capable of editing any of the many complex texts still in manuscript.

33. Christopher King, “Forging a New Linguistic Identity: The Hindi Movement in Banaras, 1868–1914,” in *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800–1980*, ed. Sandria B. Freitag (Berkeley, 1989), p. 192.

reproduce themselves, or even the widespread and often misguided anti-Brahman movement that swept out of the south in the 1920s to engulf much of India. And far too predictable is the general socio-ideological shift whereby philology became the softest of sciences in a Nehruvian developmental state, where high dams were famously transformed into “the temples of modern India,” a shift magnified in today’s overdevelopmental state, where all human intelligence is being sucked down the Charybdis of the IT vortex or pulverized against the Scylla of the service industry. Whatever the ultimate cause, the collapse is so widespread that there is every reason to worry whether, in the near future, anyone will be left in India who can access the literary cultures that had represented one of its most luminous contributions to world civilization.³⁴

This all contrasts sharply with the history of the discipline in China, which I can treat only briefly. Thanks to the remarkable work of Benjamin Elman we now have a picture of the extraordinary renewal of philology—or evidential research studies (*kaozheng xue*), to use the technical term—that occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This development was intimately connected with the Ming collapse of 1644 and marked an attempt at moral regeneration geared toward understanding what had brought about the catastrophe and how to amend the classical tradition of philological learning, the “making sense” of the texts of the Five Classics and Four Books. The literati began to read and interpret, as Elman puts it, “with new eyes and with new strategies,” which led them from a Song-Ming a priori rationalism “to a more skeptical and secular classical empiricism.”³⁵ The new philologists rigorously applied paleography, epigraphy, historical phonology, and lexicology, as well as textual criticism—many of them older techniques but revamped to an unprecedented degree in the Qing—to reevaluate the canon of classics, which these scholars approached with systematic doubt and in a relatively secular spirit.³⁶

34. The National Knowledge Commission of India, in its “Note on Higher Education, 29th November 2006,” mentions the humanities only perfunctorily, and language study not at all. The forty universities scheduled to be created in the next five years will all be institutes of science, management, technology, or information technology; see Shailaja Neelakantan, “Indian Prime Minister Describes Plan to Create 40 New Universities,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 Aug. 2007, chronicle.com/daily/2007/08/2007081705n.htm

35. Elman, “Philology and Its Enemies: Changing Views of Late Imperial Chinese Classicism,” paper presented at the colloquium on “Images of Philology,” Princeton University, February 2006; see also Elman, “The Unraveling of Neo-Confucianism: From Philosophy to Philology in Late-Imperial China,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* n. s. 15 (Dec. 1983): 73. It remains unclear to what degree these new kinds of knowledge were due to the impact of the Jesuits; see *ibid.*, p. 85.

36. Several remarkable contrasts with India need separate treatment: India experienced no

In today's China, philology and historical studies generally, perhaps shaped by this early modern turn, have survived both Western and nationalist-communist modernization and indeed have flourished. "The state has spent and continues to spend huge sums supporting students, scholarly projects, and scholars. The quality of philological work is not universally good, but where it is good, it is very good indeed."³⁷ The contrast with India is stunning and sobering; presumably long-term political autonomy in the case of China has played a role, but how salient a role remains unclear. Presumably traditional philology in India would have continued to reproduce itself had colonization never occurred, but evidence certainly suggests it was postcolonial independence and modernization, and not colonial dependence and traditionalism, that killed it.

At all events, the pressures that have driven philology to the brink in India today seem only quantitatively, not qualitatively, different from what we find in the current conjuncture in the United States, where comparable challenges are being exerted.

2. Philology and Disciplinarity

One of the challenges confronting philology in the U.S. today is easy to describe; it's the economy, the hardest part of the new hard world. In a chief financial officer's view of things, philology is a budget-busting nightmare, a labor-intensive, preindustrial, artisanal craft that stands in the starkest contrast to the Fordist method and mass-marketing of most of the human sciences. Few universities consider themselves able to commit the resources to this practice, and when they do, it is often along a descending cline of implicit civilizational worth. Classics is generally the most insulated from cost-benefit rationalization; Second and Third World philological subfields are funded according to their location along the cline, and thus ancient Chinese philology typically fares better than medieval Hindi. A new but depressingly broad consensus now considers it wasteful for tenured or tenure-track faculty to teach the kind of advanced textual course in the original language that constitutes the foundation of philology.

A second challenge is conceptual and harder to describe. Here the play-

seventeenth-century economic crisis; Mughal power (unlike the Qing) was not perceived as a rupture with the past and thus occasioned no soul-searching among the literati (hence the return *ad fontes* in India, which is clear from the sixteenth century on, had some other source yet to be identified); and the Jesuits, though long present in India, played no detectable role in its intellectual history.

37. Stephen Owen, personal communication to author, Mar. 2009.

ing field is more level, and every regional philology seems to be losing. The problem lies, as it has for a century or more, in the nature of philology's disciplinarity or rather in its lack. Philology never developed into a discrete, conceptually coherent, and institutionally unified field of knowledge but has remained a vague congeries of method. This disciplinary deficit is odder than it might seem at first glance because like mathematics philology is both used across fields (or rather regions) and constitutes an object of knowledge in its own right. Given its multiple realizations in history, philology naturally has local inflections, in a way that mathematics does not—I discuss these vernacular mediations below—but these supplement and do not supplant a more general philological theory. Yet, instead of becoming a discipline philology was first confined to the classics (partly hived off in the pre-Department of Linguistics era into short-lived units called comparative philology that continued Bopp's project), then dispersed across the separate domains of Oriental (eventually West, South, Central, and East Asian) studies and—around the turn of the last century—the newly established European national literature departments. From almost all these sites, philology has slowly but surely been exiled.

The story has been told often enough in the case of the European national literature programs³⁸ and, more partially, but to more devastating effect, for Oriental philology, a phrase that in the wake of Edward Said's critique now carries a hint of criminality. While a political project of one kind or another—from the Peisistratean recension of Homer to the philology wars inside the Franco-Prussian War³⁹—has always informed and cannot but inform philology, Said's demonstration of the noxious colonial epistemology that lay at the core of Orientalism paralyzed a field that, by 1978, was already in jeopardy. The demotion of Oriental philology had started twenty years earlier when the new American security state began to transform non-Western philologies from forms of knowledge with major theoretical claims about the human sciences into a mere content provider

38. See Holquist, "Forgetting Our Name, Remembering Our Mother," and Guillory, "Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines."

39. These concerned the rightful ownership of the French *chansons de geste* as well as the correct textual-critical approach (Karl Lachmann versus Joseph Bédier). See R. Howard Bloch, "New Philology and Old French," *Speculum* 65 (Jan. 1990): 38–58 (one of several of his essays on the topic). Luciano Canfora's is an even more narrowly defined political philology, detailing the rediscovery of the ancient Germani in Bismarckian Germany; the critique of bourgeois democracy in Eduard Meyer; Wilamowitz and school reform, and so on. See Luciano Canfora, *Politische Philologie: Altertumswissenschaften und moderne Staatsideologien*, trans. Volker Breidecker, Ulrich Hausmann, and Barbara Hufer (Stuttgart, 1995).

for the applied social sciences that went under the name of area studies.⁴⁰ Philology groaned and produced a mouse: the “service department.”

It is not, however, merely that CFOs and postcolonial critics and federal bureaucrats have done things to philology; we philologists have done some things to ourselves while failing to do others. We have nearly succumbed from a century or more of self-trivialization—talk about the narcissism of petty differences—and we have failed spectacularly to conceptualize our own disciplinarity.⁴¹ What the theorists say about us, “all dressed up and nowhere to go,” hits a lot harder than what we say about them: “lots of dates and nothing to wear.” Philologists invariably deny that theory is of any interest to them, though of course their practices embed a great deal of implicit theory—for example, as typically practiced in the West, theory about the historicity of meaning, which as systematic doctrine has its origins in early nineteenth-century German thought (though we have seen the idea is at least as old as Spinoza).⁴² Some recent attempts to reconceptualize philology have done nothing of the sort. Take Paul de Man’s outlandish argument that regards the “turn to theory” itself as a “return to philology.” Philology here has become a shriveled, wrinkled thing unrecognizable to anyone who considers himself a philologist; it is “mere reading . . . prior to any theory,” attention to “how meaning is conveyed” rather than to “the meaning itself.” A return to—in fact, the invention of—de Man’s “philology” was a turn to a theory of textual autonomy, the text as dissevered from its aesthetic and moral dimension.⁴³ Influential though it may have been, the argument eviscerates the discipline by falsely privileging one of its instruments and doing so incoherently and self-contradictorily, indicating thereby just how much real theoretical work remains for real philology to do.

If we are ever to make an argument for philology’s disciplinary identity, coherence, and necessity, it must be now, when both the national and areal underpinnings of the foreign literature departments seem increasingly

40. See Dutton, “The Trick of Words,” p. 117.

41. Romance philology presents something of an exception; see, for example, *The New Medievalism*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee, Kevin Brownlee, and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore, 1991), and *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, ed. Bloch and Nichols (Baltimore, 1995). (By contrast Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* [Urbana, Ill., 2003], adds little.) The critique of classical studies, from *Classics: A Discipline and Profession in Crisis?* ed. Phyllis Culham and Lowell Edmunds (Lanham, Md., 1989), to *Disciplining Classics—Altertumswissenschaft als Beruf*, ed. Most (Göttingen, 2002), has not to my mind filled the need for a reconstruction of philology as a disciplinary practice.

42. I say “as typically practiced in the West” specifically with India in mind, but note the remarks below on Qing philology.

43. Paul de Man, “The Return to Philology,” *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, 1986), pp. 24, 23.

anachronistic, when comparative literature has been crushed under the weight of its own self-critique and rendered increasingly irrelevant for a post-Western world by the stubborn European bias that marked it at its birth and still does in most universities, and when philology itself is on the endangered species list in large parts of the world.

As I see it, successful applicants for admission into the sacred precincts of twenty-first-century disciplinarity will have to meet certain minimal requirements if they are to qualify as core knowledge forms. Three of these are historical self-awareness, universality, and methodological and conceptual pluralism. First, twenty-first-century disciplines cannot remain arrogantly indifferent to their own historicity, constructedness, and changeability—this is an epistemological necessity, not a moral preference—and accordingly, the humbling force of genealogy must be part and parcel of every disciplinary practice. Second, disciplines can no longer be merely particular forms of knowledge that pass as general under the mask of science; instead, they must emerge from a new global, and preferably globally comparative, episteme and seek global, and preferably globally comparative, knowledge. Last, coming to understand by what means and according to what criteria scholars in past eras have grounded their truth-claims must be part of—not the whole of, but part of—our own understanding of what truth is and a key dimension of what we might call our epistemic politics.

Perhaps no aspirant for inclusion in a new disciplinary order could satisfy these historical, global, and methodological-conceptual requirements better than critical—or hermeneutical or reflexive—philology. But is it sensible to think of reconnecting its cognate practices, fragmented today across departments despite the unity of its object of analysis,⁴⁴ into some institutional configuration that is new and reflexive, conceptually unified, theoretically driven, and globally comparative? Any such restructuring presupposes that the conceptual problems of philology's disciplinarity have been successfully addressed, enabling it to produce not just theoretically informed intellectual practices but practices that are themselves capable of generating new higher-order generalizations or at least contesting those generated by other disciplines. It is this more general philological theory that I want to discuss now. In fact, the aim of my moving beyond Foucault was to point, not only to the Asian premodern

44. In this it resembles, not just mathematics, but, at the opposite end of the spectrum, the study of material culture. At my university archaeology is split into a dizzying array of units: the departments of anthropology, art history, classics, East Asian languages and cultures, Middle Eastern and Asian languages and cultures, historic preservation, and the Center for Environmental Research and Conservation.

foundation of one part of his European modernity, but also to the universal nature of philology itself, something never registered let alone studied comparatively. If we are to have a truly globalized university with a reconceived global curriculum, then recovering the initiatives, theories, methods, and insights of scholars across time and across the world in making sense of texts is a core task of a future philology—and even supplies some large portion of its disciplinary basis. For we learn more about why this discipline is important, and how to do it better, the more we pluralize it by learning how others have done it differently.⁴⁵

Critical to the disciplinary theory of philology, as my definition of it indicates, is textuality as confronted in works in the original language. What does that actually encompass? The history of manuscript culture and what I once called script mercantilism; its relationship to print culture and print capitalism; the logic of text transmission; the nature and function of commentaries and the history of reading practices that commentaries reveal; the origins and development of local conceptions of language, meaning, genre, and discourse; the contests between local and supralocal forms of textuality and the kinds of sociotextual communities and circulatory spheres thereby created—all this and more, seen as both converging in a global theory of the text and in constant tension with diverging local practices, forms one part of the foundation for a fully developed disciplinary self-conception of philology.

Bear in mind that these factors grow in complexity the further removed they are from the reader. It is because of this time-space distantiation that the philology of the historical languages has monopolized the discipline. By a kind of magnification effect the philological reflex becomes ever more present to our methodological awareness the more distant from the reader are the text and its language, while, conversely, it becomes obscured to the point of vanishing the closer they are. We never bring to consciousness, unless we are trained to do so, the tacit philology Nietzsche saw at work in

45. There is admittedly a nineteenth-century—or even a ninth-century—aura to the practices I go on to discuss, and it might be thought that information technology better shows the way to renewal. But, in fact, computation has only allowed philologists to answer better the questions they have long been asking, not to change their nature. The following programmatic statement comes from one of the leaders in the field of philology and computing: “*All philological inquiry, whether classical or otherwise, is now a special case of corpus linguistics. Its foundational tools should come increasingly from computational linguistics, with human and automated analysis. . . . Human judgment must draw upon and work in conjunction with documented mathematically grounded models*” (Greg Crane, David Bamman, and Alison Jones, “ePhilology: When the Books Talk to Their Readers,” in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, ed. Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman [Oxford, 2007], p. 53). If in fact philologists widely believe that this captures the totality of their practice, then we are in much deeper trouble than I think.

“dealing with books, with newspaper reports, with the most fateful events or with weather statistics.”⁴⁶ Indeed, like nationalism, philology grows in exile; the further away you are in space and time from the language the more intense your active philological attention—and vice versa. That is why (spatially) Persian philology is an Indian phenomenon, why (temporally) Valla was concerned not with Italian but with Latin, and why Sanskrit—the eternal language of the gods—is the most philologized of any language on earth.

Also foundational to philological theory are the historical understandings produced through texts. The meaning of the past that lay at the heart of the Wilamowitz-Nietzsche dispute remains central to philology and must itself be made into an object of philological inquiry. But what is uncertain in today’s world, and what has contributed to philology’s fall, is whether the past has any meaning at all that still matters. And here a sort of hermeneutical circularity confronts us: only once we have acquired the means, through the cultivation of philology, to access the textuality of the past can we proceed to dispute the value of knowing it. But we would never bother to acquire the means unless we were already convinced that such knowledge has intrinsic value. There is no simple way out of this circle; arguments about the value of remembering can easily be offset by arguments about the ethics of forgetting. The only exit available is offered by those who have made a kind of Pascalian wager, who provide clear demonstrations of the value of knowing the past by showing that you can eventually win something big. What, however, does “knowing the past” philologically mean?

3. The Philology of History

The relation between philology and history has been discussed for generations, and I have nothing altogether new to say about it. What I want to do here is gather together some strands of a discussion that seem to have come unraveled. And to this end I map out three domains of history, or rather of meaning in history, that are pertinent to philology: textual meaning, contextual meaning, and the philologist’s meaning. I differentiate the first two by a useful analytical distinction drawn in Sanskrit thought between *paramarthika sat* and *vyavaharika sat*—ultimate and pragmatic truth, perhaps better translated with Vico’s *verum* and *certum* (the distinction that Erich Auerbach once called the Copernican revolution in the human sciences).⁴⁷ The former term points toward the absolute truth of

46. Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 6:233. See below nn. 79, 81.

47. The distinction between the “true” or genuine meaning (original to a text) and the

reason, the latter, toward the certitudes people have at the different stages of their history and that provide the grounds for their beliefs and actions. Vico in fact identified the former as the sphere of philosophy and the latter as the sphere of philology. Yet *verum* or *paramarthika sat* remains crucial for philology no matter what importance we attribute, and are right to attribute, to the *certum* and *vyavaharika sat*.⁴⁸ And for its part the philologist's truth, balancing in a critical consilience the historicity of the text and its reception, adds the crucial dimension of the philologist's own historicity.

1. Textual Meaning (the paramarthika/verum)

People often lie, said Kumarila Bhatta, the great Indian hermeneutist,⁴⁹ and so do texts. It may not be very fashionable to say so these days, but the lies and truths of texts must remain a prime object of any future philology. A well-known turning point in the early modern history of European philology was the *Declamatio* on the Donation of Constantine, where Valla used a new historical semantics and other related analytical techniques to prove that the decree of Constantine (d. 337), which effectively granted future popes the right to appoint secular rulers in the West, was an eighth-century forgery. Valla, historicist *avant la lettre*, had a good sense of the kind of Latin that would have been written at the time of Lactantius, and the language of the donation was not it.⁵⁰

"truth of fact" is found already in Spinoza. In the latter he included the truth of the traditions of reception, what Israel describes as the "dogmas and received opinions of believers" (Israel, introduction to Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, p. xi). But what he thereby missed, and no doubt would not have admitted, was the possibility that textual "truth" itself has a history.

48. "Philosophy contemplates reason, from which we derive our abstract knowledge of what is true. Philology observes the creative authorship and authority of human volition, from which we derive our common knowledge of what is certain" (NS, p. 79). *New Science* seeks a critical interpretation that joins philosophy with philology; see NS, pp. 124–31, esp. para. 359. For the Renaissance prehistory to this synthesis, see Jill Kraye, "Philologists and Philosophers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Kraye (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 142–60. Already in the late sixteenth century Lipsius claimed that his understanding of the present-day relevance of Tacitus had enabled him to turn philology into philosophy; see Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 226, 228. And such was Boeckh's aim two and a half centuries later; see Horstmann, *Antike Theoria und Moderne Wissenschaft*, pp. 100–101.

49. See Kumarila Bhatta, *Tantravartika*, in *Mimamsadarsanam*, ed. K. V. Abhyankar, 7 vols. (Pune, 1970–76), 2:170:

*na ca puṁvacanam sarvaṃ satyatvenāvagamyate.
vāg iha śrūyate yasmāt prāyād anṛtavādīni.*

50. See Salvatore I. Camporeale, "Lorenzo Valla's *Oratio* on the Pseudo-Donation of Constantine: Dissent and Innovation in Early Renaissance Humanism," *Journal of the History of*

Saving the world by the textual-critical elimination of lies is an impulse associated with the heroic age of positivist philology. It begins as early as J. J. Scaliger, who in the late sixteenth century famously asserted that “all religious strife arises from the ignorance of grammar.”⁵¹ And it is easily ridiculed. Elementary Sanskrit students know, or used to know, that according to F. Max Müller a stanza in a Vedic funeral hymn sanctioning widow burning was “purposely falsified by an unscrupulous priesthood, and that a garbled version of it . . . was directly responsible for the sacrifice of thousands of innocent lives.”⁵² Müller aimed to stop the practice by restoring the text. Even in our fallen age the impulse continues. The pseudonymous “Christoph Luxenberg” has sought to demonstrate that the oldest linguistic stratum of the Qur’an was composed not in Arabic but in Syriac, and that this hypothesis makes it possible to resolve many textual knots, not least the passage concerning the seventy-two virgins in heaven promised to martyrs; read as Syriac these become seventy-two rare white fruits: “We will let them (the blessed in Paradise) be refreshed with white (grapes), (like) jewels (of crystal).”⁵³

We should not throw out the baby of textual truth, however, with the bathwater of Orientalism past or present. Did the great Sanskrit playwright Bhavabhuti write about Rama, thinking back as a child on his child bride, that she excited the curiosity of his “limbs” (*aṅgānām*) or of the “queen mothers” (*ambānām*)? Was Shakespeare’s flesh too “solid” or too “sullied,” Melville’s fish “soiled” or “coiled”? Such things matter, if anything textual matters. To be sure, sometimes the author may have written both (Bhavabhuti seems to have issued a second edition of several of his plays, leaving irreducible variation) or at least intended both (*solid/sullied* may have been homophones or double entendres in Shakespeare’s English). In addition, what in an earlier age was considered textually transmitted dis-

Ideas 57 (Jan. 1996): 14–15. See also the spirited new translation: Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine*, trans. Glen Bowersock (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

51. “Non aliunde dissidia in religione pendent quam ab ignoratione grammaticae” (quoted in J. H. Groth, “Wilamowitz-Möllendorff on Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 11 [Apr. 1950]: 188).

52. Charles Rockwell Lanman, *A Sanskrit Reader: Text and Vocabulary and Notes* (Boston, 1912), pp. 382–83. Müller emended *Rgveda* 10.18.7—“(ā rohantu janayo yonim) agneḥ” (“[ascend into the womb] of fire”)—to *agre*, “to the raised place / to begin with”; see F. Max Müller, *Selected Essays on Language, Mythology, and Religion*, 2 vols. (London, 1881), 1:333. Müller was wrong about both the reading and the sanction.

53. Christoph Luxenberg, *Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache* (Berlin, 2000). (Arabic philologists are far from unanimous in considering this a work of serious scholarship.) One may still of course ask, as Miriam Hansen asked in conversation, to what degree metaphor is operative in this new reading.

ease has become, for a new world of Text Panic, a celebratory promiscuity, *l'excès joyeux* as Bernard Cerquiglini puts it, where the original turns out to be *nothing but variants*.⁵⁴ But variation is itself variable, of course—some manuscript traditions in India, for example, show no appreciable “textual drift” whatever, whereas variation enters only with the rising of *printing*⁵⁵—so we may need different editorial strokes for different historical folks. The crucial point here is that variation itself is still a textual truth, a real, hard truth that it is philology’s business to capture, even and especially when this is a plural and not a singular truth.

This quest for this kind of truth operates not only for individual lexemes but at every level of philological inquiry, and in fact it does so universally. Indian scholars from as early as the tenth century spoke of readings or passages that were “correct” (or “better”), “authoritative,” “false,” “mistaken,” “corrupt,” “unmetrical,” “ancient,” “interpolated”—and, last but not least, “more beautiful.”⁵⁶ Like Valla, proponents of the new evidential research in eighteenth-century China sought to demonstrate the spuriousness of whole texts hitherto regarded as classics. When, in his “shocking” late-seventeenth-century work “Evidential Analysis of the Old Text *Documents*,” Yan Roju proved—and proved veridically—that some chapters in the *Documents Classic* were a later addition, his reply to outraged traditionalists was, “What Classics? What Histories? What Commentaries? My concern is only with what is true. If the Classic is true and the History and Commentary false, then it is permissible to use the Classic to correct the History and the Commentary. If the History and the Commentary are true and the Classic false, then can it be impermissible to use the History and the Commentary to correct the Classic?”⁵⁷ Not altogether different is the premodern Indian hermeneutical theory regarding words that are found in the Vedic corpus but that are not part of the lexicon of Vedic speech. This theory holds that the only valid interpreters are members of the non-Vedic speech community from which those words derive,⁵⁸ and points to a

54. See Bernard Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris, 1989), pp. 55–69. See also Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, N.J., 1991).

55. See Pollock, “Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India,” in *Literary Cultures and the Material Book*, ed. Simon Eliot, Andrew Nash, and Ian Willison (London, 2007), pp. 77–94. For a remarkable argument on printing and variation, see Tony K. Stewart, *The Final Word: The “Caitanya Caritamṛta” and the Grammar of Religious Traditions* (New York, 2009), chaps. 4 and 6.

56. The Sanskrit terms are, respectively, *sādhu/yukta/samīcīna/samyak*, or *sādhiyān/yuktatara pāṭha*; *prāmānika pāṭha*; *ayukta pāṭha* or *apapāṭha*; *prāmādikā pāṭha*; *duṣṭa pāṭha*; *aśambaddha pāṭha*; *aṣa/prācīna pāṭha*; *prakṣipta śloka*; *sundara pāṭha*.

57. Quoted in Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*, 2d ed. (Los Angeles, 2001), p. 33.

58. See Pollock, “The Languages of Science in Early-Modern India,” in *Expanding and*

much larger verity: the truth of a text—even a sacred text—cannot be whatever any interpretive community, Humpty Dumpty–like, chooses it to be. Or, better put, those interpretive choices also form part of what philology seeks to understand, even while understanding they are not all created equal—contrary to the “dogmatic pluralism” that makes defending a critical position about meaning virtually meaningless.⁵⁹

To state this argument more generally, while the scientificity of philological inquiry cannot be allowed to disappear in a haze of Foucauldian talk about truth regimes, these regimes are no whit less important, and understanding them historically in fact constitutes the prior philological move. Philologists know they cannot go beyond traditions of reception unless they have to (though they ultimately will have to, since no culture is competent to understand itself in its totality). But they also know that they can only go beyond by going through.

2. *Contextual Meaning (the vyavaharika/certum)*

Here what has primacy is “seeing things their way,” as Quentin Skinner has phrased it, that is, the meaning of a text for historical actors.⁶⁰ Why later scholars of Indian jurisprudence (such as Raghunandana in the sixteenth century) “misread” the Vedic funeral hymn and thus sanctioned sati, or why early Islamic commentators understood the Syriac (or Arabic) phrase to signify seventy-two *virgins* and what this interpretation has meant over time for the community of believers, are truths easily as important as the truth of positivist philology. These are what we might call vernacular mediations—competing claims to knowledge about texts and worlds available in past traditions—and they have a key role to play in critical philology. Such claims are most obviously presented in traditional commentaries, though they pervade cultural practices more broadly.

The place of traditional commentaries in contemporary philological training illustrates one of the main things that has been wrong about the field. My own undergraduate training was characterized by a hard Wilamowitzian historicism; we never read the Alexandrian commentaries on Homer, and in fact I never even knew such commentaries on Plato existed (I stumbled on them in the Hermann-Wohlrab edition of 1886).

Merging Horizons: Contributions to South Asian and Cross-Cultural Studies in Commemoration of Wilhelm Halbfass, ed. Karin Preisendanz (Vienna, 2007), pp. 203–21.

59. Jean Bollack, *Sens contre sens: Comment lit-on?* (Paris, 2000), p. 175; see also pp. 75–76, and Denis Thouard, “L’Enjeu de la philologie,” review of *Sens contre sens* by Bollack, *Critique* 672 (May 2003): 349–50 (an excellent brief appreciation).

60. Quentin Skinner, *Regarding Method*, vol. 1 of *Visions of Politics* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 1.

How different my first experience of reading Virgil would have been had I read him through Donatus-Servius rather than through Conington-Nettleship.⁶¹ Although my own Sanskrit curriculum was more open to vernacular mediations, Indology as a whole has tended, from the time of W. D. Whitney, to dismiss such “perverse and wasted ingenuity” as irrelevant to grasping the one true meaning of the works.⁶²

There is a foundational element of historicism in the philologist’s attention to vernacular mediations, which however has drawbacks. One of these is paradoxical and almost, though finally not, self-canceling. Although traditions reproduce themselves through such mediations, the historicism involved is of a sort that ancient and medieval traditions never practiced or even conceptualized in their own right, since this mode of thought is an invention of the early modern conceptual revolution.⁶³ Yet it would be an act of extreme indigenism to forgo historicism because it did not conform with traditional ways of knowing; it would be like abandoning heliocentric theory for creationism. But historicism carried too far can underwrite the ideology of singular meaning; the point of production of a text is fetishized to the complete disregard of the plurality of textual meaning at any given moment and a fortiori of its changeability over time.

For some recent theoretical work in philology, such as Jean Bollack’s, the plurality of meaning produced in history has become the methodological point d’appui.⁶⁴ Seeing things their way has even greater implications for conceptual renovation. A careful and reflexive search for both textual and contextual truth can help us recover not only dimensions of shared humanity but the occluded and productively disruptive otherness of the noncapitalist non-West. Such otherness cannot just be imagined; it must be laboriously exhumed from the depths of the textual past. When Im-

61. No edition of Servius’s commentary on Virgil, for example, is currently in print. I know of no comprehensive history of the role ancient commentaries have played in the modern reception of the classics; a brief but tantalizing discussion of the impact on the Italian humanists of the newly discovered ancient commentaries on Aristotle—and the disciplinary self-assertion of philologists over philosophers—is given in Krayer, “Philologists and Philosophers.”

62. Whitney is here speaking of the grammarian Panini, whom he thought should be “completely abandoned as the means by which we are to learn Sanskrit” (William Dwight Whitney, “On Recent Studies in Hindu Grammar,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 16 [1896]: xviii), somehow forgetting that it was from Panini and the Paninian tradition that many classical writers themselves learned or at least polished their Sanskrit.

63. Though not exclusively of European ways of thinking, as the Chinese data show. Premodern Indian philologists, by contrast, while often showing a pronounced sense of the temporality of languages and texts, never conceived of systematic historicism in the narrow sense.

64. For a good introduction to this work, see Bollack, *La Grèce de personne: Les Mots sous le mythe* (Paris, 1997).

manuel Wallerstein and his coauthors of *Open the Social Sciences* point to a Mahayana theory of political power that “disproves the omnipresence of the [Western] logic of power,” they are fantasizing; there is no such theory.⁶⁵ Yet the impulse here is the right one, and the authors do better with the deeply textualized idea of the multiple avatars of a deity as a way to conceptualize replacing the old Western universalism with a new “pluralistic universalism.”⁶⁶ Radically different, even counterintuitive, maps of culture and power and of their relationship to each other are available from the past to the philologist; two that I have tried to recover from early India are a noncoercive cosmopolitanism, which knew nothing of the tyranny to “be like us,” and, coexisting with this, a voluntary vernacularity, which knew nothing of the compulsions of ethnicity.⁶⁷ Moreover, to discover this domain of philology is to discover one important way out of the dead-end area-studies model of language labor as merely producing the raw data for the Lancashire mills of self-universalizing Western theory.

In this review of my first two types of meaning, textual and contextual, I might be charged with simply updating the old *Methodenstreit* in nineteenth-century Germany, which pitted *Wortphilologie* (largely textual-critical, associated with Hermann) against *Sachphilologie* (largely intellectual- and social-historical, associated with Boeckh).⁶⁸ But in fact, the *Streit* was itself wrongly formulated. Viewed as general tendencies, *Wortphilologie* and *Sachphilologie* seemed to argue, in the one case, that philology was both a necessary and a sufficient condition of knowledge and, in the other, that it was certainly not a sufficient condition but also, possibly, not a necessary one. In contrast to both I want to insist that philology, at least as usually defined, is always necessary but never sufficient. One part of its insufficiency can only be satisfied by attending to contextual meaning, as just described. The other part, equally important, requires including the philologist’s own meaning as an object of philology.

3. *The Philologist’s Meaning*

The last domain of meaning-in-history pertinent to the future philologist is his or her own. I believe philosophical hermeneutics has offered

65. Immanuel Wallerstein et al., *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences* (Stanford, Calif., 1996), pp. 56–57.

66. Michael Burawoy, “Provincializing the Social Sciences,” in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences*, p. 509.

67. See Pollock, *The Language of the Gods*, pp. 567–74.

68. See Wilfried Nippel, “Philologenstreit und Schulpolitik: Zur Kontroverse zwischen Gottfried Hermann und August Böckh,” in *Geschichtsdiskurs*, vol. 3 of *Die Epoche der Historisierung*, ed. Wolfgang Küttler, Jörn Rüsen, and Ernst Schulien (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), pp. 244–53.

arguments for this pertinence, indeed, its indelibility, that are unassailable. Our own historicity is entailed by our very acceptance of historicism. The interpretive circle here can be a virtuous one, and we can tack back and forth between prejudice and text to achieve real historical understanding. It may well be true that a ghost of metaphysics haunts historicism, given that our belief in acquiring historicist knowledge—the conviction that ideas, texts, meaning, and life are specific to their historical moment—presupposes an erasure of our own historical being that is impossible. We somehow assume we can escape our own moment in capturing the moment of historical others, and we elevate the knowledge thereby gained into knowledge that is supposed to be not itself historical, but unconditionally true.⁶⁹ Yet this is a ghost that can be appeased. We cannot erase ourselves from the philological act, and we should not allow a space that is not there to open up between our life and a lifeless past in which unreflexive historicism traps the text. Texts cannot *not* be applied to our lives, actively accepted or rejected. The opposition between philology and this “circuit of exchange between reader and text,” posited in the hopes of allowing us “immediately and without regret [to] relinquish the somewhat perverse impulse to return to philology as if to a mythic or sanctified (albeit pedantic, boring, and sterile) ground of authenticity,” is a false one.⁷⁰ Even less sensible is positing the existence of a text prior to the meaning it produces, as de Man sought to do in promoting what he called “philology” over criticism and humanism. What mode of existence does a text have for us when it has no meaning, when it means nothing to us? Even more stultifying is it to defend philology by celebrating its indefensible unjustifiability⁷¹—more stultifying and more wrong-headed.

Gadamer—and herein lies his unexpected radical potential for me—was therefore right to stress the role of the old hermeneutic stage of *applicatio*, however much he may do this as part of his critique of historicism itself. *Applicatio* is seen most clearly in the case of laws or scriptures, and even more so, if at a more preconscious level, in art. Such texts do not exist only to be understood historically; they exist to become valid for us—not in the sense of “authoritative,” as Gadamer intended, but of “useful”—by

69. See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Weinsheimer (New Haven, Conn., 1994), pp. 11, 111.

70. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Returning to Philology: The Past and Future of Literary Study,” in Harpham and Ansgar Nünning, *New Prospects in Literary Research*, ed. Koen Hilberkink (Amsterdam, 2005), p. 23. On page 26 Harpham offers another hollow dichotomy between philology and criticism deriving, it would appear, from de Man; see de Man, “The Return to Philology,” p. 24, and also Lee Patterson, “The Return to Philology,” in *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*, ed. John Van Engen (South Bend, Ind., 1994), p. 236.

71. See Patterson, “The Return to Philology,” p. 239.

being interpreted. Discovering the meaning of such texts by understanding and interpreting them and discovering how to apply them in a particular legal or spiritual instance, or even thinking about a work of art in relation to one's own life, are not separate actions but a single process. And the principle here holds for all interpretation; *applicatio* is not optional but integral to understanding. Historical objects of inquiry, accordingly, do not exist as natural kinds, but, on the contrary, they only emerge as historical objects from our present-day interests.⁷²

A truly critical philology must acknowledge the claims the past is making upon us, making us thereby attend to it. But it must do so with self-awareness. Here is where Pierre Bourdieu's supplement to Gadamer enters the scene. A double historicization is required, that of the philologist—and we philologists historicize ourselves as rarely as physicians heal themselves—no less than that of the text.⁷³ From this perspective, historicism and humanism, far from being mutually exclusive as Wilamowitz and Nietzsche made them out to be, are complementary, even mutually constitutive.

There is, thus, no inherent contradiction between historical truth and application, any more than there is between *paramarthika sat* and *vyavaharika sat*, between *verum* and *certum*. It's time we got clear on two things. Historical knowledge does not stand in some sort of fundamental contradiction with truth. Nor does it demand our impartiality; objectivity does not entail neutrality.⁷⁴

72. Contra Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 335–36.

73. See *ibid.*, pp. 307, 285. I view Bourdieu's arguments as a supplement to, not (as he himself believed) a subversion of, Gadamer; see Pierre Bourdieu, "The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic," *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, Calif. 1996), pp. 305–6. Eagleton, on the other hand, by his too-quick denunciation—"a grossly complacent theory of history" (Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* [Minneapolis, 1996], p. 63)—loses a potential ally. The older philology was of course aware of this self-historicization, as it was of vernacular mediations, but never systematically built either into its philological method. Auerbach, for example, spoke only hesitantly of application and only in response to criticism for being too "time-bound" in his interpretations, too much determined by the present: "Today no one can view [the broad context of European literature] from any other viewpoint than that of today, indeed, from the Today determined by the viewer's personal background, history, and education. It is better to be consciously time-bound than unconsciously so" (Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask [Princeton, N.J., 2003], pp. 573–74; trans. mod.).

74. On rationalist historicism (or historicist rationalism), see Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity*, trans. Richard Nice (Chicago, 2004), pp. 2, 71–84; on objectivity and neutrality, Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, 1998). Vico's philosophical philology—"in my science Philosophy undertakes to examine philology" (*NS*, p. 5; see also *NS*, p. 79)—offers the closest analogue I have found to the sort of critical philology I intend here; for an exegesis, see Joseph M. Levine, "Giambattista Vico and

4. The Philology of Politics

This brief for the rehabilitation of philology as a discipline within the system of disciplines in today's university has taken that system's presuppositions, and the university's, as givens. Perhaps it would have been better not to do that and instead to contest them, to denounce the shocking corporatization of today's consumerist university and what Malcolm Gladwell has called the "luxury-brand-management business" it has become⁷⁵ and to reject the increasingly absurd cult of academic originality, scholarship's commodification and capitulation to the constant "revolutionising [of] the instruments of production," the "everlasting uncertainty and agitation" that is capitalism.⁷⁶ Teaching students how to become better readers of texts, let alone better readers of life, seems like the last thing we're supposed to be doing and the last thing the dusty philologist would be thought to be able or inclined to teach.

The question that confronts us here—of how to connect the text, the world, and the philological critic—brings us to the late Edward Said, whose almost-last essay was in fact entitled "The Return to Philology" (the third after de Man and Patterson). Said embodied many tendencies, some positive, some negative, that are central to what I have been arguing so far. On the one hand, he was one of the few scholars of his theoretical orientation to give any thought whatever to philology. On the other, he did this more by nostalgic invocation of the canonical twentieth-century Romanist triumvirate (Auerbach, Curtius, Spitzer, a very ill-sorted and discordant triumvirate, by the way) than by his own practice. He defined philology simplistically, with de Man, as close reading, or more precisely (though

the Quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52 (Jan.–Mar. 1991): 55–79, esp. p. 74. And this was the credo of Nietzsche in his early years; his inaugural lecture on "Homer and Philology" ends

It is but right that a philologist should describe his end and the means to it in the short formula of a confession of faith; and let this be done in the saying of Seneca which I thus reverse: 'philosophia facta est quae philologia fuit' ['What was once philology has now been made into philosophy,' reversing Seneca's 'quae philosophia fuit facta philologia est' (*Epistles*, 108.23)]. By this I wish to signify that all philological activities should be enclosed and surrounded by a philosophical view of things, in which everything individual and isolated evaporates as something detestable, and in which the totality and unity alone remain present ("in der alles Einzelne und Vereinzelte als etwas Verwerfliches verdampft und nur das Ganze und Einheitliche bestehen bleibt"). [Nietzsche, "Homer and Classical Philology," trans. J. M. Kennedy, www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/hacp.htm; trans. mod.]

75. Malcolm Gladwell, "Getting In: The Social Logic of Ivy League Admissions," *The New Yorker*, 10 Oct. 2005, www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/10/10/051010crat_atlarge?currentPage=5

76. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, trans. pub., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, 1978), p. 476.

here in fundamental contradiction with de Man), as “a rigorous commitment to reading for meaning,” while ignoring the language, textuality, vernacular mediations, and other constraints on interpretation I discussed earlier. Acknowledging his personal language limitations, he exercised this philology on few non-English and no non-Western texts (those in Arabic, for example) but stuck largely to Austen, Conrad, Kipling, and others in the modern English canon.⁷⁷ As for the *applicatio* that might be developed out of philological engagement, he declared in “The Return to Philology”—disingenuously, some might say—that “understanding” literature and political “commitment” were things he did “separately from each other.” (If this reinforces the shallow decanal ideology that scholarship and advocacy are mutually exclusive, Said undercuts it—contrapuntally, as it were—later in the essay by presenting himself as a “non-humanist humanist” who insists it is “an abrogation of that [humanistic] reading to blind oneself to the similar drama in the battle all around us for justice.”)⁷⁸ And for all the positive value of *Orientalism*, one of its deeply deleterious consequences, however much unintended, was to dissuade a whole generation of students from precisely the sort of philological engagement to which at the end of his life he wanted to return. After all, what’s the point of learning Arabic or Persian or Sanskrit philology, of deeply engaging with these languages and their textual worlds, if knowledge of the non-West is always already colonized? Such has been the implicit, self-paralyzing stance of many post-Orientalists, and I am not aware that the author of *Orientalism* ever tried to rein in the absurdities and abuses to which his theory gave rise.

In returning, however, by way of conclusion to Said’s return to philology, I want to stress, not the politics of his philology, but the philology of his politics. Said’s most important contribution may lie not so much in having taught us to read literature politically—after all, imperialism-and-literature was well-ploughed terrain long before he arrived on the scene—but, instead, to read politics philologically, by demonstrating how the text of a political problem has been historically transmitted, reconstructed, received, or falsified. Indeed, Said was not alone here. This was precisely

77. See Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975), pp. 7–8; he counseled the use of translations.

78. Said, “The Return to Philology,” *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York, 2004), pp. 62, 77–78; hereafter abbreviated “RP.” The same essay may contain the only two pages Said ever wrote on Arabic philology, presumably the sum total of his corrective to those “Eurocentric scholars all too busy extolling some supposedly exclusive humanist Western ideal” (“RP,” pp. 68–69). Related issues are treated in Said, “Islam, Philology, and French Culture: Renan and Massignon,” *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), but even there Arabic texts themselves play no role.

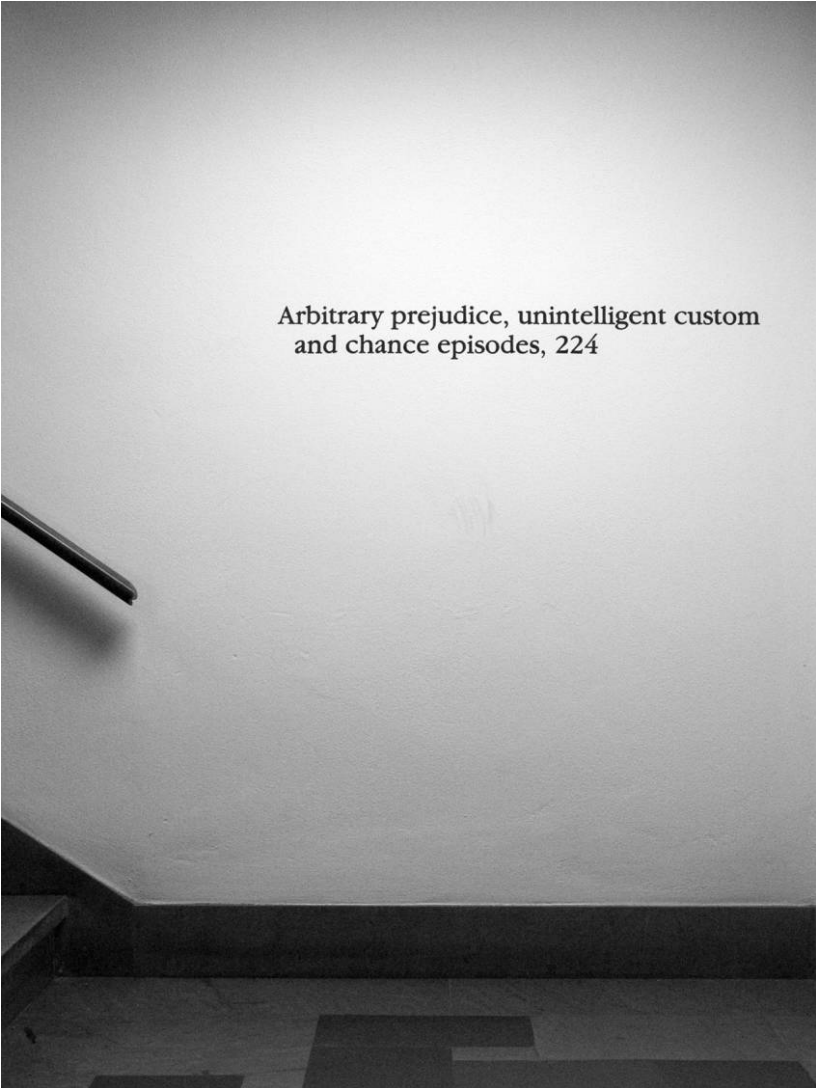
how Nietzsche at his best moments understood the philological enterprise. It is “the art of reading well . . . the most fateful events . . . without losing caution, patience and subtlety in the effort to understand them.”⁷⁹ One could argue as well that Vico’s whole attempt to reconcile philosophy and philology was in the service of universal justice, just as Spinoza’s biblical philology in the *Tractatus* was in the service of democratic theory. Said may never have been very expansive about such a philology of politics,⁸⁰ but it is something that can easily be read off his practice—read, in fact, as an enactment of the three principles I just laid out: Do not capitulate to others by uncritical acceptance, he seemed to tell us; instead, challenge and demand truth, for truth does exist. At the same time, work as hard as you can to try to see things their way, be open to having your mind changed, search for a sharable interpretation, show to others the hospitality of “friendly, respectful spirits trying to understand each other.” Last and most important, be reflective about the fact that your historicity shapes your interpretation and that problems of others touch your own being and have meaning for your life; be resolutely objective but passionately non-neutral.⁸¹

These seem to me lessons very much worth learning—or relearning, since they were known, in their own ways, to early modern thinkers like Spinoza, Melputtur Narayana Bhatta, and Yan Roju—especially at two minutes before midnight. And they are lessons that critical philology is uniquely qualified to teach.

79. Nietzsche, *Antichrist*, 6:233.

80. He would sometimes connect philology to the “attention in reading” about a foreign or military policy, for example, requiring “alertness and making connections that are otherwise hidden or obscured by the text” (“RP,” p. 67).

81. See Said, introduction to Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. xiv, which is elaborated in Said, “A Window on the World,” *The Guardian*, 2 Aug. 2003, www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/aug/02/alqaida.highereducation. See also Nietzsche, *Antichrist*; this text of 1888 (published 1895) strikes me as far more representative of Nietzsche’s views about philology than his “Wir Philologen” (1873–75).

A black and white photograph of a plain, light-colored wall. In the center of the wall, there is a faint, dark handprint. To the left, a dark metal handrail is visible, extending from the bottom left towards the center. The bottom of the image shows the dark, shadowed area of a staircase. The overall lighting is soft and even.

Arbitrary prejudice, unintelligent custom
and chance episodes, 224

