




Philology and Technology: Notes

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Abstract

This essay for the inaugural issue of *Technology and Language* contrasts two visions for the future of philology. One seeks to establish it alongside philosophy and mathematics as a cross-cutting discipline for making sense of texts. The other takes technology seriously and renders texts materially present, exploring texts as untamed objects. What is happening with the love of language in a world in the overwhelming presence of so many things defined by their technicity? It is not content to discover the meanings of words and sentences, it seeks out the textualities of technology.

Keywords: Philology; Textualities of Technology; Hermeneutics; Love of Language

Аннотация

В этом эссе для первого выпуска журнала “Технологии в инфосфере” (“*Technology and Language*”) противопоставляется два направления будущего развития филологии. Одно из направлений стремится утвердить филологию, наряду с философией и математикой, в качестве сквозной дисциплины для понимания текстов. Другое – широко использует технологии, и тексты исследуются как неизведанные материальные объекты. Что происходит с любовью к языку в мире, где огромное количество вещей определяется их технической стороной? Ей недостаточно обнаружения значений слов и предложений, она ищет текстuality технологий.



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Philology is experiencing its own encounter with technology and the world technology is creating. There are debates going on within the field, not always clearly thematized, about what is (or may be) happening with the love of language in a world infatuated by the λόγια or the words of technicity.

As one example, consider *World Philology* (Pollock et al., 2015), a collaborative effort to revive the discipline. In his introduction, co-editor Stephen Pollock outlines historical developments in the field and its problematics. The philological seminar of late eighteenth century Germany offered, Pollock says, the model for Wilhelm von Humboldt's university. The collapse of that model began during the late nineteenth century. Friedrich Nietzsche was its last great exemplar. The dissolution.

occurred over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, when philology's subdisciplinary children, including national literary histories, literary criticism (and later, "theory"), comparative literature, and (kin of more proximate origin) linguistics, believed themselves sufficiently mature to rebel and leave home.... [W]eakened by subdivision, both philology and its components, instead of hanging together, have now all been hanged alone after the contemporary attack, unprecedented for its depth and extent, on the humanities as representing little more than a market inefficiency in the newly corporatized Western university. Philology does not produce patents, say the administrators; indeed, say the students, what is the point of learning to read well when all you need to know is how to count? (Pollock, 2015, p. 3).

Philologists have further contributed to their marginalization "by narrowing their sights to the smallest questions [and turning] the discipline's vaunted 'rigor' into rigor mortis" (Pollock, 2015, p. 4).

Since the 1990s, however, a modest "return to philology" effort has emerged across a small to large spectrum. At one extreme are reaffirmations of the value of scholarly skills in historical text curatorship, especially with the use of new technologies of imaging and data processing (digital philology, computational philology). At the other are efforts "to rethink the very nature of the discipline, transhistorically and transculturally" (Pollock, 2015, p. 6). Israeli filmmaker Joseph Cedar's (2011) *Footnote* dramatizes the tension between these extremes in the form of antagonistic father and son philologists: The former has spent his life comparing words in different versions of the Jerusalem Talmud, the latter is an academic rock star of creative Talmudic interpretations.

Pollock and colleagues opt for the latter. Their basic take is to de-provincialize the discipline by inquiring into and engaging with "what philology has been over time and space, in the rest of the world no less than in Europe, and before the modern era" (p. 12). To this end, *World Philology* collects 14 essays by as many authors examining cases of emergence, practice, and theory in classical Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese, Persian, Turkish, Japanese, and German in Europe, the Middle East, India, and China.



“On the evidence offered by the essays,” Pollock posits

philology in the singular as a unitary global field of knowledge [reincorporating the lost disciplines of hermeneutics and linguistics] as the discipline of making sense of texts, whatever sense we may wish to attribute to “sense,” and however much the corpus of “texts” to be included in this discipline may change over time. Philology is neither the theory of language (that is now the domain of linguistics) nor the theory of truth (that is philosophy), but the theory of textuality as well as the history of textualized meaning. If philosophy is thought critically reflecting on itself, then philology may be seen as the critical self-reflection on language. Under this description, and with the materials offered in this book, we recognize that philology has been at once as historically deep as any other form of systematic knowledge and as global as language itself. Both in theory and in practice across time and space, accordingly, it would seem to merit the same centrality among the disciplines as philosophy or mathematics. (Pollock, 2015, p. 22)

This is a hyperbolic thesis. It is, Pollock nevertheless asserts, one that is “gaining traction [through] the decades-long critique of disciplines” that are promoting “attempts at reconstruction, reform, or renewal of the university ... all over the world — most prominently in China, India, and the European Union, but also in the United States — [as also] often prompted by market imperatives ... to produce a new, truly global institution” (Pollock, 2015, p. 23).

The failure of any essay in the collection to systematically rather than rhetorically address the power of science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) and economics cannot help but call Pollock’s belief into question. While noting the use of technologies in philological work, there is little recognition of philological methods in making sense of the data produced by technoscientific instruments as texts (as in the work of Bruno Latour and others). Pollock to some extent confirms his earlier admission that internal factors have contributed to the decline of the discipline. Ignoring the scientific and technological foundations of the globalization on which he proposes to rebuild—further weakens his case – even more so since that globalization at the time of the publication of *World Philology* had been revealed as a problematic power by the economic meltdown of 2008-2009. The situation is made even more fraught by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020-2021, and can only be projected to intensify further as the capitalist driven engineering of the Earth introduces new paradoxes of power and fragility into the tactile world, not just our languages.

Another thesis regarding philology, one with a place for philological engagement with the textualities of technology, is presented in *The Powers of Philology* by confessed non-classical philologist, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2003). Like Pollock, Gumbrecht distinguishes the technical craft from hermeneutics. Yet contra Pollock, Gumbrecht (2003) gives priority to the craft of engaging with physical objects: “What I want to discuss under the title ‘the powers of philology’ [is] disruptive within the official academic image and self-image of philological practice” (p. 6).

To practice the techniques of philological craft at the root level enacts a series of formative desires for presence in a world that has become progressively subordinated in the scholarly world to hermeneutics. For Gumbrecht, hermeneutics as such is not enough and in fact rests, we might say, on tangibilities. The careful handling of the shards of



damaged codices, identifying and piecing together parchment fragments, grasping a magnifying glass to detect palimpsest obscured letters, all manifest a desire for physical possession. Archeological philology in rural China, digging in the earth for oracle bones and then examining their surfaces for glyphs to be catalogued and discussed in multiple re-examinations is scholarship for dirty hands. Additionally, combining philology, archeology, and computers, papyrology is now “Revealing Letters in Rolled Herculaneum Papyri by X-ray Phase-contrast Imaging” (Mocella et al., 2015). Here technologies are making present again texts buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

Such text editing first seeks to re-embody a text as a basis for then imaginatively re-embodying an author. Commenting grows out of and reinforces a desire for explanation with context. But hermeneutic historicizing leaves the text itself as a sacred object. Philological pedagogy presents texts again as untamed objects inviting exploration. In diverse ways, Gumbrecht (2003) writes, “all philological practices [are generated by and] generate desires for presence, desires for a physical and space-mediated relationship to the things of the world (including texts), and ... such desire for presence is ... the ground on which philology can produce effects of tangibility (and sometimes even the reality thereof)” (p. 6).

University humanities programs today, Gumbrecht (2003) maintains, over-emphasize what Wilhelm Dilthey stands for, namely “the movement from the material — and we may add, the philological — surface of the phenomena to the spiritual depth” as the core of the humanities (Gumbrecht, 2003, p. 76). The argument echoes Walter Benjamin’s lament about the loss of aura in technological reproduction, become internet mediation, emphasizing how aesthetic experience “makes present” in concrete encounters that affect a person’s physical environment or body.

Gumbrecht’s (2004) subsequent *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* is an extended brief for his ontological criticism of literary studies in the technological world. In his view, humanities in the West have been complicit in “a process of progressive abandonment and forgetting of presence.” By contrast,

Some of the “special effects” produced today by the most advanced communication technologies may turn out to be instrumental in reawakening a desire for presence.... Presence effects ... exclusively appeal to the senses [so that] the reactions that they provoke have nothing to do with *Einführung*, that is, with imagining what is going on in another person’s psyche. (Gumbrecht, 2004, p. xv)

Instead, Gumbrecht (2004) seeks to “get [his] hands awfully dirty” in trying “to reach and to think a layer of cultural objects and in our relation to them that is not the layer of meaning” (p. 54).

What then is happening with the love of language in a world in the overwhelming presence of so many things defined by their technicity? The short answer is perhaps both many things — and we do not know.

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