

1. Some Thoughts on Philology

JULIA HAIG GAISSER

Bryn Mawr College

THERE'S NO ESCAPING THE FACT THAT PHILOLOGY has a bad name in some quarters—even in the American Philological Association, and even in its highest reaches (our Directors from time to time wring their hands over our fusty and, as some see it, outdated name). But irritation with philology is nothing new. We find it in such diverse characters as Seneca, Nietzsche, and Yeats, to name only a few. Recently, however, philology has found an unexpected champion, Edward Said, who presents a brilliant apologia in his essay “The Return to Philology.” The “abiding basis for all humanistic practice,” says Said, is “philological, that is, a detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history” (Said 2004: 61). In this paper I will consider what philology—and by extension its servant the *TLL*—has to offer us as classicists in the twenty-first century. I will explore some of the charges leveled against it, mention some of its successful Renaissance practitioners, and suggest that philology is important to us at this moment in the intellectual life of our discipline not because it is a positivistic science that will bring us to “the truth” (it isn’t and it won’t), but because it is a dynamic study that helps us to understand both our own historical contingency and that of the ancient authors.¹

Language is a slippery thing. In the preface to his famous dictionary Dr. Johnson warns of the impossibility of defining the most common English words like “do” and “get” and “put.” He says:

... while our language is yet living and variable by the caprice of every one that speaks it . . . these words are hourly shifting their relations, and can no more be ascertained in a dictionary, than a grove, in the agitation of a storm, can be accurately delineated from its picture in the water.²

¹ See the collection of essays, *On Philology*, 1990 edited by Jan Ziolkowski.

² Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language*. 1755 ed. (1979 reprint) b2r.

The languages we deal with are dead, but their words are as hard to describe as those of Johnson's English. The branches of the groves of Greek and Latin are no longer shifting, but we do not have a pool of contemporary living usage to mirror even a distorted image of their twigs and leaves. The words themselves have lasted, but the world—or rather the worlds—they came from are long gone. The context of events, custom, world view, and artifacts that every speaker in a culture takes for granted is lost, and generally we must seek the shifting nuances of words only in a context of other words.

Even the word philology will hardly sit still long enough for us to describe it: a Greek loan word that has passed through classical and late Latin, into Renaissance Neo-Latin, and finally into Italian and the other modern languages. (It seems to have made its way into English first in the 17th century.) In antiquity its senses ranged from “love of reasoning or argument,” to “love of learning and literature,” to “love of learned conversation,” to “love of words, period,” from which it shaded off into the idea of empty rhetoric, the conventional foe of wisdom and truth. It is in this last sense that Seneca complains about it, attacking teachers who teach “how to debate and not how to live” and students who want “to develop not their mind but their wit” (*Ep.* 108.23). He laments: “what was philosophy has become philology” (*quae philosophia fuit, facta philologia est*). His indictment would be repeated many times: that philology neglects or fails to comprehend potentially life-altering ideas by narrowly focusing on the words with which they are expressed.

Seneca seems to have thought of philology primarily in terms of rhetoric on the one hand and antiquarian interest in language on the other.³ Nietzsche and Yeats, 2000 years later, were thinking strictly of nineteenth-century German philology. This philology could trace its ancestry back to Seneca's antiquarians and—more recently—to the Renaissance humanists, but in reality it was a child of the Enlightenment. Its purview was above all text criticism, and its practitioners were engaged with what they believed was a scientific and objective reconstruction of the past.

Nietzsche knew the field from the inside out, for he had studied under Ritschl in Leipzig, published several important articles in *Rheinisches Museum*, and become professor of classical philology at the University of Basel at the remarkable age of twenty-four. But almost from the beginning he had a distaste for his profession. Like Seneca, he saw it as misdirected, and as pursuing small matters at the expense of essential ones. In his first year at Basel he wrote to a friend of the philologist's “joy over the captured worm

³For examples see *Ep.* 108.

and . . . utter indifference to the true and highest problems of life.”⁴ A few years later he would ask (and the question has probably occurred to many of us): “What does the teaching of Greek particles have to do with the meaning of life?” (WCI 63 [340]). Nietzsche’s dislike turned to loathing when his masterpiece, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, was excoriated by the young Wilamowitz as philologically unsound. By this time Nietzsche’s methods were far different from those of his opponents, but his aspiration and claims were not dissimilar: in *The Birth of Tragedy* and other works he aimed at nothing less than what he termed “a unified perception of Greek antiquity.”⁵ He was as confident as any of his enemies that he saw the past as it really was. In one chapter of his unfinished polemic on philology, *Wir Philologen*, he contrasts “the Romans, with their boring seriousness” with “the cheerful Greeks” (WCI 77 [362]). In another, he presents a detailed list contrasting the qualities of Greeks and philologists: Greeks “pay homage to beauty, develop the body, speak well”; philologists “are windbags and triflers, are repulsive, stutter” (WCI 59 [358–59]). And again: Greeks “are listeners and observers”; philologists “are hairsplitters and screech owls.”

A generation after Nietzsche, William Butler Yeats lodged a similar complaint in a poem called “The Scholars,” which ends

All shuffle there; all cough in ink . . .
 . . .
 All think what other people think
 . . .
 Lord, what would they say—
 Did their Catullus walk that way?

Yeats’s shuffling, bourgeois scholars (obviously philologists) bear a close family resemblance to Nietzsche’s “windbags and triflers.” And they are equally inadequate to the romantic genius of their subject. (It is only a slight defect in the parallel that Yeats’s ancient poet is Catullus, a “boring” Roman, and

⁴ Writing to Rohde (November 20, 1868), he complained: “Now that I see once more the swarming breed of classicists at close range—so that I must daily observe all the mole-like efforts, the full cheek-pouches and the blind eyes, the joy over the captured worm and the utter indifference to the true and highest problems of life—it seems even clearer to me that we two, if we remain uncompromisingly loyal to our genius, will not proceed along life’s path without being struck at and thwarted in many ways.” Quoted from Arrowsmith’s introduction to *We Classicists* (*Wir Philologen*), henceforth abbreviated WCI, at p 308. (All quotations from Nietzsche are from Arrowsmith.)

⁵ Writing to Rohde (March 30, 1870) he said: “I am approaching a unified perception of Greek antiquity, step by step and with a timid amazement” (Arrowsmith 1990: 309).

not Nietzsche's "cheerful Greek.") But Yeats is also like Nietzsche in another respect: he is confident not only of the essential ignorance of the philologists but also of his own perfect understanding of the ancient author. Both writers took an imaginative leap from their own sensibilities to those of men⁶ in the long-dead past, eliding cultural distance since they were confident that their own instinctive affinity trumped tedious historical detail.

The nineteenth-century philologists they disdained had an equal conviction of the truth. Perhaps they did not fully know antiquity—yet—but they surely would, they thought, if they just kept on with their scientific researches into the facts of the past. These philologists had inherited much of their optimism from their Renaissance predecessors, beginning with the great humanists of the fifteenth century.⁷

The Renaissance humanists were obsessed with the classical past. But they were not monolithic in their motives, interests, or approach. They did not work according to a fully-developed method, and for the most part they could not be described as even remotely "scientific." They seem not to have called themselves philologists.⁸ They read their texts in different ways, but the greatest scholarly accomplishment of the movement as a whole was to understand not only that the past was qualitatively different from the present but that different periods of the past differed from each other. This understanding grew out of a close study of the language of their texts, which they recognized, as Said would put it, as "the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history." Lorenzo Valla undermined the temporal claims of the papacy by demonstrating the linguistic and historical anachronisms in the Donation of Constantine. Angelo Poliziano used manuscripts and other ancient authors to interpret classical texts: by reading Catullus through Martial he produced his famous obscene interpretation of Catullus's sparrow. Filippo Beroaldo never touched a manuscript if he could help it, but successfully corrected Apuleius by immersing himself in the words and world of the ancient author.



At least from the Renaissance on, both philologists and their critics occupied a fixed position they were sure was correct—all so sure either that they knew the

⁶The maleness of both the ancient authors and their critics is a given for Nietzsche and Yeats, but Nietzsche's opinion of philology is so low that he predicts that someday it will be an occupation for women, leaving men free for creative work (*WCI* 170 [382]).

⁷See Rabil 1988, Grafton 1991, Kallendorf 1994, all with earlier bibliography.

⁸Even Angelo Poliziano does not claim the title, describing himself simply as grammaticus (*Lamia* 16, 1986 ed. Wesseling, with Wesseling's notes ad loc.). For Renaissance Latin usage see http://www.lrz-muenchen.de/~ramminger/neulateinische_wortliste.htm.

exact meaning of the past or that the knowledge was within their grasp, and all so unaware that the past they saw was of their own creation.⁹ But modern theory has taught us to be less sure of matters. We know, or should know, that the past is forever strange and unknowable, and that our own perceptions and historical moment cloud and direct our judgment of it. Both we and the authors we study are imbedded in history—and in separate histories at that. The world of the ancients is fixed—like a fly in amber, we might say—but its DNA, unlike that of the dinosaur in *Jurassic Park*, cannot be completely recovered. Meanwhile, our own history keeps changing, and with it our perception and understanding of the past—and our philology, too.

In my view, the awareness of our own historical contingency gives us a great advantage over our predecessors. Knowing that the past can tell us only what we are able to understand in our own historical moment frees us from their complacency and encourages us to continue delving into the texts we study with renewed attention and with all the philological tools at our command, including the *TLL*. Beroaldo used to talk about getting into “the blood and marrow of words.” Said puts it a little differently (Said 2004:59): “A true philological reading is active; it involves getting inside the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what may be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we have before us.” Our understanding will always be provisional and incomplete, but that very fact should spur us on to more reading and thinking. I can’t think of a more enjoyable prospect.

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⁹Nietzsche does note that “the past . . . has always been understood only in terms of the present,” but seemingly exempts himself (WCI 62 [340]).