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THE SPACE OF MEANING
APPROACHES TO INDIAN PHILOLOGY

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“Indian Philology”
Edition, Interpretation, and Difference

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The very fact that we Indianists have assembled to discuss, not a particular religious or philosophical or literary question, but “Indian philology” as such marks an important occasion in our discipline and area of study. Even if some of us usually think of ourselves also as students of religion, philosophy, or literature, we are all in the end philologists, insofar as we are concerned with *making sense of texts* — the minimalist definition of philology, that much-defined term, that I offer you provisionally and will defend momentarily. All of us were trained by scholars who even more explicitly thought of themselves as philologists, if for no other reason than that most were educated in departments with names that referred in one way or another to “philology.” That was before the great transformation beginning in the 1950s that created the area-studies programs where people like me, and now many of you in the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands (though notably not — yet — in France) have spent our careers.

It is surprising, then, that despite its central place in our professional lives philology should be so rarely discussed. Not a single one of my own teachers (whether in Greek, Latin, or Sanskrit) ever cared to explain what it is, where it came from, or, most important, how and why we practice it as we do. This holds for one of the great Sanskrit philologists of the last century, Louis Renou, in whose honor the conference upon which this volume is based was organized. Although one of his first books (1928) concerned the “masters of Vedic philology,” and the term “philology” is sprinkled throughout his four decades of scholarship, he must have assumed its nature was too well-known to need any discussion for he offers none, anywhere. That these issues are now on the table here in

Paris and in many other venues around the world shows that it is not so, and this recognition merits reflection.

I myself have thought that the renewed engagement with philology has to do with its fall from grace, ever more accelerating over the course of the last several decades. The loss of status and support and university positions almost everywhere — most catastrophically in India itself, where the brilliant tradition of *pāṇḍitya* has vanished, only to be replaced, in many places, by lifeless routine if not pure quackery — have left us with the prospect that we may soon be facing a world without philology for the first time in three millennia. Indeed, its death has already been announced by observers as thoughtful as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the philosopher Richard Rorty, who when contemplating their own endangered disciplines hold up philology's fate as a warning of how forms of thought die, or are believed to die.¹ Others will no doubt have less apocalyptic and more intelligent explanations than mine, but whatever the cause, the happy effect is that we are at last collectively inquiring into the nature of our discipline and its areas, and asking how "Indian philology" can thrive and contribute more broadly to humanistic inquiry.

A volume I recently co-edited, called *World Philology*, was one attempt to jumpstart this conversation.² But while working on the book I was struck by three broad areas of silence among our many distinguished contributors. None of them contested the singular number in our title ("philology," not "philologies"), though none tried to show, or even considered for a moment showing, that philology might well have had a general form, analogously to mathematics or philosophy.³ Second, while many essays record, sometimes explicitly, sometimes only implicitly, the tension between what I shall argue are philology's two core components, edition and interpretation, they present that tension only as a historical

1. "It puts one in mind, all this coming apart at the seams [of anthropology], of departed universes: philology, natural history, political economy, the Habsburg Empire" (Geertz 1983: 91). "By now [philosophy] runs some risk of being ignored altogether, regarded in the same way that classical philology is, as a quaint, albeit rather charming, survival" (Rorty 2007: 184).

2. Pollock *et al.* (2015).

3. The failure of comparative projects to actually compare is widespread. The new book of Grafton and Most on scriptural philology (2016), for example, offers wonderful comparative data — but leaves it to the reader to draw the larger comparative conclusions. The same can actually be said of much of *World Philology*, a deficit I try, haltingly, to correct in the present essay.

fact, not as the continuing puzzle it actually is. Most remarkable was the third silence, regarding the question whether, and if so precisely how, the *history* of philology the contributors were busy writing should (or should not) relate to the philology they actually *practice*. These issues were ignored because they are difficult — as I recognized only after I was foolhardy enough to commit myself to trying to address them in the present essay.

I just made mention of our “discipline” and its “area,” so let me start with offering some thoughts about both. We philologists are heirs to an ancient knowledge that humans have found central to their existence as text-making beings since they first began to make texts. Here I want to offer and defend a hypothesis, addressing the first of the silences just mentioned, that like mathematics or philosophy, philology has indeed had, in respect of its basic objects and objectives, an elementary or general form across history; that there does exist a specific object of analysis for us to study in premodern “philology,” along with a set of methods and (after a certain historical point) an explicit theory. And it is this form that we can identify existing in particular — or as I prefer to call them, *areal* — instantiations.

Within the practices relating to this disciplinary form, a struggle has taken place over the primacy of this or that component as the defining feature of the form. More often than not this struggle has focused on the supposed distinction between textual criticism and interpretation (the second of my silences), perhaps not dissimilar to the struggle in philosophy between, say, the concerns of epistemology and wisdom (or, instead of that old word, let’s say, with the American philosopher Richard Rorty, “talking about our hopes and fears”). Although the struggle is discernible across time and space and continues into the present, philologists themselves know, or should know, not only that the one cannot operate without the other but that they are in fact mutually constitutive activities.

For most scholars, I suspect, “understanding philology” means only understanding our own contemporary practices in making sense of texts. But a second dimension of such understanding pertains to philology’s history and thus to the practices people in the past developed to make sense of their texts. The former has been an object of renewed interest in recent years across areas — and Indian studies is no exception — and has produced strong text-critical work, often stimulated by new methods in

the digital humanities.⁴ Typically this work, so far as I can judge, tacitly (and unwittingly) accepts universalist proposals enunciated in the principles of modern textual criticism. These proposals include both those thought to be applicable across space (thus the Latinist Alphonse Dain, for whom "Les règles élaborées par les philologues classiques ... valent ... au domaine de l'Orient") and applicable across time (thus the American literature editor Thomas Tanselle, for whom "editing ancient texts and editing modern ones are not simply related fields; they are essentially the same field").⁵ As for ancient Indians' own philology of Indian texts, it has only recently entered the research agenda.⁶ It is that traditional Indian philology I will focus on here (mainly on the Sanskrit side), not only for the evidence it offers of the disciplinary coherence of general philology but also for those aspects of *difference* that even a universalist, scientific, philology needs to take into account, and that may encourage us to modify our own practices.

With this, I already have begun to address the third of the silences noted earlier, about what knowledge of that past might have to do with our present aims. Distinguishing between the practice of philology and its history is hardly audacious; an analogous contrast could be drawn for philosophy, where we want on the one hand to learn how to think (or live our lives better) and on the other to learn how other people have thought (or sought to live their lives), without positing any necessary connection between the two goals. What requires audacity is to ask whether we are in some way called up to synthesize history and practice, why we might wish to do so, and how. The history of philology is not, like, say, that of biology, a history of ignorance overcome and where accordingly the past has truly passed away. One obvious difference between them is that every Indian

4. I have in mind Patrick Olivelle's editions of Manu and Yājñavalkya; the scrupulous editing of scientific, philosophical, and commentarial texts of the sort that has never been done before, e.g., the Vienna *Cārika* project, Philipp Maas's *Yogasūtra* edition, the *Nyāya-mañjarī* editions of Kei Kataotka and Alessandro Graheli; Dominic Goodall and Harunaga Isaacson's *Raghuvamśapañcikā* of Vallabhadeva. But critical editing has reached a point of fetishization, it seems to me, with dense mathematical analyses and bloated apparatusi critici reporting scores of manuscript readings to no purpose, almost in an attempt to return, after a period of theoretical excess, to a "heroic age" of text-criticism (Tarrant 2016: 18-21).

5. Dain (1949: 8); Tanselle (1983: 68).

6. The credit for initiating the discussion goes to Gérard Colas (1999). I have sought to add more evidence in two recent publications (Pollock 2015, 2018).

text that we possess was edited and interpreted by Indian philologists, and knowing something of their procedures helps us make better sense of the texts they bequeathed us. A less obvious reason has to do with the sense of “sense-making” in the provisional definition of philology I offer above.

For all philologists I am familiar with — and this has been the case at least since W.D. Whitney explicitly announced the position in 1876, in the course of an attack on the commentarial tradition of the Veda and the Western scholars who wanted to take it seriously — the “true meaning” of a text must, commonsensically, be “one, and not many.” I myself have sought to defend just the opposite position: because “meaning” is a quintessentially historical phenomenon, a text cannot even have a “true meaning” that consists in anything other than the sum total of *meanings* attributed to the text over the course of its history. To “make sense” of an ancient text therefore *requires* including the meanings of ancient philologists like the Sāyaṇa whom Whitney denigrated. In philology, at least in my expanded sense of “making sense,” the past is not something to be overcome, and is never passed; it is always present and needs to be accounted for.⁷

Let me provide a little map, then, of what I want to do in this essay. First I will try to describe something of that elementary form of general philology, the precursor of our own. We shall find generally familiar the understanding of *edition*, but also, in cooperation or sometimes tension with it, a strong commitment to *interpretation*, which for its part shows strikingly comparable forms prior to the modern European invention of historicism. I want next to consider how far the textual culture of historical India, both the explicit philological practices and the more tacit phenomena of that culture, corresponds to this general form, and where by contrast we might identify particularity: what the original conference proposal refers to as the “*peculiarities* of Indian textual traditions,” or what I would call areal difference within a disciplinary matrix. Last, I will explore some ways our philology today might be enhanced by acknowledging these past ways of knowing.

I am well aware that these topics are too many and too complicated to do them real justice in a single essay. But then, real justice is not my goal. I

7. For a fuller exposition, see Pollock (2014), and Pollock (2016a) (where Whitney is discussed on p. 135-136).

aim only to offer a few *pakṣas*, not *siddhāntas*, that may contribute to what I hope will be an ongoing conversation, inaugurated in our conference volume, about Sanskrit, texts, and knowledge.

1. THE GENERAL FORM OF PHILOLOGY

At the very start of our enterprise we are confronted with a standard hermeneutical dilemma, no easier for being so common. We cannot determine whether there is a "general form" of philology across time and space without first defining "philology," but we cannot define it until we know what its general form is. The Indian shastric tradition was well acquainted with the problem. As Śābara put it, we either know or do not know what something is; if we know, there will be no desire to inquire into it, and even less so if we do not know at all. Śābara's response is to take a middle path: The thing in question is known to some degree, but it is an object of multiple understandings, or as Śāṅkara puts it in a parallel passage, there is general knowledge about a thing but disagreement about its specifics.⁸ Our response to the dilemma will be something like Śābara's and Śāṅkara's. The way they knew something preliminary about *dharma* or *brahma*, that is, through *āgama*, is analogous to the way we know something preliminary about philology: through tradition itself. The main task is to sort through the disagreements about its specifics.

Given that we are conducting our search across traditions we are of course confronted with conceptual disunity of a sort Śābara and Śāṅkara did not face. But even within a single tradition we encounter very considerable disagreement. The term *philologos* itself is of course a Greek coinage, ascribed to the second Alexandrian librarian Eratosthenes, who sought thereby to express the universality of his erudition.⁹ From Eratosthenes' time onward, *philologia* has been constantly redefined — to a degree perhaps unparalleled by any other Western knowledge form — with each new purpose it has been called upon to serve occasioning a new definition. Vico (1725) includes among the philologists "all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and deeds of peoples." It was just a step from here to Friedrich

8. *Śābarabhāṣya* v. 1: 10 (*dharmam prati vipratipannā bahuvidaḥ*), *Śāṅkarabhāṣya*, v. 1: 28 (*tadvīṣeṣam prati vipratipatteḥ*). Neither explicitly states how we know initially at all, though clearly that first knowledge derives from enunciation of the term(s) in *śruti*.

9. Pfeiffer (1968: 156-159).

Schlegel (1797), who understood philology to be “all erudition in language,” and to the expansive visions of Niebuhr, Leopardi, or Nietzsche. How vast was the transformation philology experienced, however, by the time of Michel Foucault (1966), who reduced it to comparative grammar, and the many scholars today who think of it as corpus linguistics.¹⁰

The *vipratipatti* with regard to a concept so variously understood in its own tradition, as in modern Europe, is going to expand vastly when we begin to look elsewhere and try to place our general sense of philology, decocted from those Western developments, onto the conceptual maps of other regions. In Abbasid Arabia *ṣināʿat al-adab* (“the art of literary culture”), for example, and in China the varieties of textual practices that coalesced in the late imperial period into *kaozheng* (“evidential research”), seem to overlap with that general sense toward which Schlegel was over-enthusiastically gesturing, while also comprising materials largely excluded from it (such as creative writing in the former case, and narrow historical analysis in the latter). In the India of Sanskrit learning, no comprehensive term was available to describe the (provisionally) relevant set of knowledge practices. Instead, that set was distributed across a range of disciplines: *vyākaraṇa* and *mīmāṃsā* in the first instance, but also *nirukta*, *chandaḥśāstra*, and the sub-discipline *vyākhyā*, or exegesis (which, while never theorized, was fully conceptualized as a particular textual practice).¹¹

It is hardly surprising that the contours of a form of knowledge should have varied across cultures and, within a shared culture, across time. But however much conceptual variation “philology” has undergone, it

10. For the Vico and Schlegel references, see Pollock (2016a: 10) (Schlegel’s vision remained alive to modern philologists such as Leo Spitzer: “Philologie, die Wissenschaft, die den Menschen zu verstehen sucht, soweit er sich im Worte (Sprache) und in Wortgebilden äussert,” 1945-1946: 576); Foucault (1966: 292-307) (he traces the very “invention of philology” to Bopp’s comparative historical grammar; he is imprudently supported by Ian Hacking, see Hacking 2002: 140-151); for the last, see for example Bamman and Crane (2010). Altschul (2010) adds additional European materials, as does the editor’s introduction to the volume in which that essay appears; also Gurd (2015) for a review broader than its title suggests.

11. Aside from the clear concepts of exegetical theory embedded in practice, we know that commentary was also taught as a separate subject. See for example the Kadiyur *agrahāram* land-grant (in Kannada) of 929 CE for the study of grammar, political theory, literary criticism, history, logic, and, “commentary writing” (EI 13: 332: v. 30: *vyākaraṇam arthaśāstra-ānīkaṃ sāhitya-vidhyey-itiḥāsaṃ mikka-ekākṣaramunitarkkaṃ tīkaṃ-bareyat sam- agrar ābhyāsisuvar*).

is evident that this has always been variation within a stable domain of intellectual inquiry defined by a stable object of study. The domain in question was constituted everywhere by attention to language as configured in texts, by the concern with the things people do with texts and how they do them. The concern was not with numbers, colors, tastes, or anything else but texts and how to make sense of them. The presence of that domain and that object, however various the particular manifestations, *define* a knowledge practice as *philology*. If we may be permitted to repurpose Uddālaka Aruṇi's insight (*vācārambhaṇam vikāro nāmadheyam*), behind all the different designations we are dealing with a single cognitive phenomenon.

While philology thus has a general form, that is, "doing things with texts," the things that have been done divide into two major categories: edition, or getting the text right, and interpretation, or understanding what it says. This division — about which the second silence I mentioned has long been maintained — is one of emphasis, not of substance, as I will argue. The fundamental, indeed infrangible, complementarity of the two categories notwithstanding, however, the division has sometimes been taken as disagreement, even estrangement. And although this may appear to be a recent development, having been explicitly formulated in 19th-century Europe, it has a genealogy that is far deeper in time and space. I have never seen a historical review of this — to my eyes astonishing — bisection, certainly not a deep history, so let me offer a thumb-nail sketch here, working backwards from the modern period. There is no straight path to follow, but twists and turns, as thinkers worked through their uncertainty about what textual knowledge is and how it comes to be produced.

For thinkers like Schlegel, it was because textuality and conceptuality, reading and thinking, were united in a single knowledge form that he could define philology as *alle Sprachgelehrsamkeit*. Within a generation, however, it was to be fractured and reduced to one of its parts, a reduction that has been traced to the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. The "comprehensive philological conception of critique" as present in Schlegel's "Philosophie der Philologie" (1797) can be dramatically contrasted with the diminished version in Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutik und Kritik* (published posthumously in 1834), which restricted "philological criticism" to textual criticism, and separated off interpretation to an in-

creasingly segregated subdiscipline.¹² While Schleiermacher may have still emphasized, residually, their mutuality, the scholarly study of texts would soon orient itself toward a narrow paradigm. The most extreme expression of this is found in the mechanistic methodology trumpeted by Karl Lachmann: “*recensere sine interpretatione et possumus et debemus.*”¹³ The split between edition and interpretation has now hardened into a disciplinary division and a conceptual given. Interpretation in the form of hermeneutics has become the province of philosophy (and, in the form of philosophical hermeneutics, largely divorced from its foundational textuality), and, in the form of literary theory, comparative literature. As for philology, it has been reduced, slowly and pitifully, to one or the other of its constituent parts: textual criticism, bibliography, historical (or corpus or other) linguistics.¹⁴

The Romantic-era tension and its contemporary stalemate recapitulate a far older development. Consider the state of the question of philology half a millennium before Schlegel. In medieval Europe, the idea of reading, *lectio*, was a comprehensive one, in which edition and interpretation were continuous: one moved from the letter to the sense to the content (*littera, sensus, sententia*) — such is the schema of the *Didascalicon* of Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141).¹⁵ This apparently long-settled way of thinking was disrupted already in the early Renaissance. Angelo Poliziano’s philology, like Hugh’s, was multilevel, combining *lexis* with *dianoia*, or grammar/text-criticism and interpretation. But the professors of “philosophy” in Florence who were his contemporaries had come to think of philology as narrow textual study, with little or nothing to do with interpreting the world. Poliziano’s satire, *Lamia* (The Witch, 1492), was

12. Baisch (2006: 4-5) (who refers to *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. M. Frank 1977: 250).

13. “We both can and must edit without interpreting,” Lachmann, preface to his edition of the New Testament, cited in Timpanaro (2006: 88).

14. McGann’s “new key” is of a piece with this past, reducing philology to bibliography (2013). For a random sampling of the assumed dichotomy philology vs. interpretation (often formulated as philology vs. philosophy), see Fehér (2001) (“philology and philosophy, or philology and hermeneutics”); Gjesdal (2006) (while rightly emphasizing the unphilological dimensions of *ontological* hermeneutics), Dostal (2010) (philology as science, interpretation as discipline), Myojo (2011), Barolini (2015) (“the insufficient critical vigilance ... with which we monitor the porous boundaries between philology and interpretation”).

15. A succinct citation and exegesis of the *Didascalicon* are given in Robertson (2014: 66).