

Philology

authors' songs were first written down; or when stage actors first emerged from the Greek chorus; or in the libraries of Alexandria or Baghdad; or in Renaissance humanism, or Napoleonic imperialism, or Prussian *Wissenschaft*, or even in the late twentieth-century philosophical mode once called "deconstruction." Globally eastern and southern genealogies of philology are every bit as contested. Love of learning (philology in the etymological sense) often exceeds the collation of words (philology in the practical sense), which may explain the incompatible claims on philology made by the stuffiest scholars and radical intellectuals alike. They may not be incompatible at all, if we recognize that the transfixure of words in dictionaries, concordances, and other incubula embraces the passage of time while resisting it: that is, if we recognize that the labor of scholarship entails irony, rather than naïveté, in knowing its own futility. Less commendably, philology has lent its hand to ethnonationalist campaigns against linguistic impurity and linguistic obfuscations or normalizations of dominion and plunder, in the suppression of Welsh, Scots, Irish, aboriginal North American, Australian, and Hawaiian languages, Basque, Catalan, Galician, Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian, Belarusian, Korean, Ryukyuan languages, and Kurdish, to name a very few. Revisionist conceptions of philology have more often complained of complicity (often the most liberal complicity) with empire than of traditionalism as such: the "return to philology" performed by a figure like Edward W. Said is neither an endorsement nor a rejection of paleography, codicology, diplomatics, *Wortphilologie*, or textual criticism more generally, but a critique of such practices' historical Orientalism, understood not as a conspiracy but as an inflection or episteme. It is not a matter of resignation to history, but of insisting

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Western philology was born when Akkadian-speaking scholars preserved the dying Sumerian language; or when the Homeric

that the best of philology (its humaneness and worldliness, its synthetic ambition) be actively separated from its worst (its technocratic inclinations, its analytic positivism, its racism). The apparent dilemma of philology is shadowed by the apparent dilemma of the state and the law, other assemblages of disciplinary practices that in ordering life in indispensable ways, the most fundamental of which no sane person could repudiate, nevertheless also narrow life and damage it, in ways it would be insane to deny. Literary scholars, the principal heirs of what was once called philology, may endure this contradiction with special intensity, given their role as custodians of state culture whose assistance in propping up empire is no longer needed. Some have proposed a new role for philology in the culturalization of the techno-sciences whose authority decisively displaced those of religion and nation in the era of decolonization—and which are no less susceptible to authoritarian canalization. It remains to be seen if this is a mission that matters.

(See also Chapter 1, Early Theory; Chapter 27, Antitheory; Hermeneutics; and Nietzsche, Friedrich)

Brian Lennon, *Penn State University*
(United States)

Further Reading

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