Them Philologists: Philological Practices and Their Discontents from Nietzsche to Cerquiglini

Richard Utz, Georgia Institute of Technology - Main Campus
They Philologists

Philological Practices and Their Discontents from Nietzsche to Cercignani

Richard Uts, Western Michigan University

In 1954 Hollywood produced the blockbuster *Them*, which presented a scenario in which an uncontrolled atomic explosion in the American southwest had led to the growth of gigantic mutant ants who threatened to destroy humanity. As in other Cold War monster movies, the ants, insects often associated with the anti-individualistic societies of Japan, China, or Nazi Germany, were depicted as *Them*, the evil, inhuman, and completely "other," whereas civilization and its champions were warm-blooded U.S. citizens and their children, who would in the end manage to defend all of Western civilization against a threatening Asia that, like an ever-reproducing colony of soulless worker ants, was hell-bent on machine-like recreation and violent colonization and extermination.1

Fascinatingly, the othering of one's enemy in Cold War cinema as diligent, but unnaturally overwhelming, mechanistic, and inhuman is also a central feature of the widespread opposition to philological practices and practitioners from the second half of the nineteenth century through the present. Consider, if you will, Henry Sweet's exasperated complaint in 1885 about how "the historical study of English" had been "rapidly annexed" by "swarms of young program-mongers" turned out every year by the German universities, "so thoroughly trained in all the mechanical details of what may be called 'parasite philology' that no English dilettante can hope to compete with them—except by Germanizing

1. One of the best-known comparisons of Nazi Germany and the social life of ants is T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (London: Collins, 1958) and *The Book of Marilyn* (written 1941; published Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1977).

Themselves and losing all hope of his nationality," all the consequence "of our own neglect, and of the unhealthy over-production of the German universities."2 Twenty-nine years later, at the eve of World War I, British anti-Semitism to an allegedly German philology had become even more virulent. Declaring their solidarity with their government's goals for the war against Germany, fifty-two nationally-known writers and critics, including H. G. Wells, V. S. Pritchett, Lewis, J. M. Barrie, G. K. Chesterton, Arthur Conan Doyle, H. Rider Haggard, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, Henry Newbolt, Arthur Quiller-Couch, and G. M. Trevelyan, defined the military conflict as the ineluctable continuation of an existing intellectual altercation that would render, in the words of Basil Willey, English studies "an autonomous discipline" free from "the alien yoke of Teutonic philology."3 For Ezra Pound, an English philology was "evil, a perversion," and ultimately linked with the militaristic mentality of the German "Junker:" The educational method behind philology, Pound stated,

holds up an ideal of "scholarship," not an ideal of humanity. It ups in effect: you are to acquire knowledge in order that knowledge may be acquired. Metaphorically, you are to build up a dam and useless pyramid which will be no use to you or anyone else, but which will serve as a "monument": To this end you are to sacrifice your mind and vitality. [ ... ] This is [...] the symptom of the disease; it is all one with the idea that the man is the slave of the State, the "unit," the piece of the machine.4

Sweet's and Pound's statements share an overwhelming anti-German sentiment, and German philologists had in fact done what they could in the forty years leading up to World War I to propagate philological practices as a national virtue at which they outshone the scholars in any other country. Thus, and despite the opposition of J.R.R. Tolkien, who proclaimed that philology was neither "a purely German invention" nor

A Year's Work in Medieialism

something "that the late war was fought to end," but rather an "essential piece of apparatus [. . .] as universal as is the use of language," the 1922 Newbolt Report on The Position of English in the Educational System of England publicly denounced philology as an alien practice that besied itself with "hypothetical sound-shiftings in the primeval German forests" instead of enabling students "to read our early literature with understand- ing and enjoyment" and to appreciate "the humane and aesthetic significance of language as the expression of thought."

In order to extricate ourselves from the drudgery of mist of late nine- teenth- and early twentieth-century nationalism, let me move forward in time to what should count as a post-national critique of philology, Bernard Cerqueglini's 1989 Éloge de la variante: Histoire Critique de la philologie, which helped inspire the North American movement known as the "New Philology" and/or the "New Medievalism." In the introduction to his essay, Cerqueglini states, here in Betsy Wing's translation: "At the dawn of the nineteenth century, extremely diverse phenomena of order, nature, and evolution all seemed to converge, forming a coherent semantics connected with the practice and study of texts. Philology is the most significant expression of this coherence."

Cerqueglini then continues to point out the various elements that contributed to what he summarizes as "textuality modernity," the foundation of philology:

1) Historical positivism, which displays a semi-religious trust in the


A Year's Work in Medievism

life, preferring to see himself as "a good European" rather than a citizen of any one country, shares with Cerquiglini a kind of post-nationalist stance. In his 1869 inaugural address as Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Basel, he produced one of his first programmatic definitions of philology:

We have to admit that, in all honesty, Philology is scrounged together from several sciences, concocted like a magic potion out of the strangest liqueurs, areas, and bones. It even contains an artistic and aesthetically and ethically grounded imperative element, one that stands in opposition to purely scientific practice. It is just as much a piece of History as it is a Natural Science or Aesthetics: Part of History because it wants to comprehend the manifestations of specific national features in ever new images, to understand the guiding principles within the quickly changing fugue of events; part of the Natural Sciences because it wants to investigate the deepest human instinct, the instinct of language and part of Aesthetics, finally, because it wants to construct out of a series of antiquities the so-called "Classical" Antiquity and intends to excavate an obscured ideal world and to hold up the mirror of a Classical and Eternally Perfect world to the contemporary world. The reason why these thoroughly diverse scientific and aesthetic/ethical instincts united under a common umbrella term can [. . .] be explained by the fact that philology has always also been a form of pedagogical practice. This pedagogical practice demanded that a pedagogically and educationally valuable element be created. Thus, under the pressure of this necessity, has evolved the academic temper we call Philology. 9

Nietzsche continues his description of philology by creating a composite picture of the area's two groups of "omnipresent enemies," those who deride philologists as "innocuous "molders" who "practice inhaling dust from professors" and those who fear the strength of the noble Hellenistic ideal and its criticism of contemporary "barbarity." Beyond these groups, he sees philologists as their own worst enemies, jealousely fighting against each other ("gegenseitige Eifersuchtskrämpfe") about priority and authority in their fields ("unwützter Rangstreit"). 11

The proverbial defense of the idealized simple and noble Greek aside, Nietzsche's definition of philology shows him cognizant of his own area of specialty as an "inorganic" and "multifaceted" signifier or "magic potion" that consists of strange "liquors, ores, and bones," i.e., historicism, ethics, and aesthetics. He sees the exact mix of this alchemical potion as decided by the pedagogical application each historical period or, by extension, national tradition, making philology a discipline that exists in its various nineteenth-century forms because of the very exigencies a century or nation imposes upon it. In its disarming simplicity, Nietzsche's inaugural speech helps us understand why philology would, in Germany, transform into a weapon the unified nation state would wield in its desire to build up the most streamlined and effective educational system and why, in the Anglo-Saxon world, philology would be tempered or resisted by those who thought that the study of historical texts should, in the words of Arthur Quiller-Couch, be more than "an abstract Science, to which exact definitions can be applied. It is an Art rather, the success of which depends on personal persuasiveness, on the author's skill to give us on ours to receive." 12 Nietzsche is not worried about the "pedantic tendencies" of philology that persuaded H. M. Chadwick, in the 1930s, to attack Anglo-Saxon Studies to the School of Anthropology and Anthropology so as to remove the "dead weight" philological practices presented for "students of post-Claudian English literature." 13 Rather, I can see Nietzsche take sides with the lexicographer Henry Cecil Wyld who was convinced that "philology was not a dull subject unless taught in a dull way by dull people," or with Tolkien, who held that even a "bespectacled philologist," "fed on Lautverschreibung and sour Umlaut" would not necassarily lose his "literary soul." 14 Counting on the support of "artists and artistically-minded persons," Nietzsche believes that the

9. His appointment in Switzerland, a country relatively uninolved in the storm clouds that would lead to the Franco-Prussian War and the World War I, may be the reason for his pre-War national stance in this speech.
10. "Homert und die klassische Philologie," in Friedrich Nietzsche, Nachgelassene Werke, Aus dem Jahre 1869-1872 (Leipzig: C. G. Neumann, 1903), 1-24, here 1-2. This translation of Nietzsche's speech is my own. I retain the caps for the various disciplines and subdisciplines in Nietzsche's original because they suggest their quality as personalized abstractions (pretty much what Nietzsche calls "Aggregatentstünden").
14. Wyld (1870-1945), the eminent lexicographer, is another voice cited by the Newbolt Report, 22. Tolkien's statement is from "Philology" 37.
"magic potion" of historicism, ethics, and aesthetics, which contains an 'artistic [. . .] imperative,' would not cease to be remixes in order to adapt to new historico-political moments, as it had ever since the founding of the archives in the famed library of Alexandria. "Nietzsche would change his mind later, when he fought vicious battles with some of philology's more narrowly scientific representatives, who chastised him for the idiosyncratic mytho-philological "potion" he concocted in The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music (1872). After 1872 he still appreciated the critical potential of comparative philology which had disempowered the Bible by revealing it as mere man-made literature similar to other ancient literatures: "As a matter of fact," he writes in section 47 of the Antichrist, "no man can be a philologist or a physician without being also Antistheist. That is to say, as a philologist a man sees behind the "holy books," and as a physician he sees behind the physiological degeneration of the typical Christian. The physician says 'incurable'; the philologist says 'fraud.'" However, while capable of deconstructing the past from a safe distance, he saw philology as inherently incapable of constructing a new future. To renew the mythopoetic language comparative philologists had revealed as merely poetic and past, Nietzsche resigned his position as Professor of Classical Philology and concomitantly abandoned his belief in philology as a method for changing the world. Tellingly, Tolkien and C.S. Lewis would also devote at least part of their activities away from philology and toward mythopoeia. The playful manner in which they did so should not detract from the serious psychological outlet their literary work provided them.

Does philology still serve? Is it more than a remnant of the glory days of the second half of the nineteenth century, although even then, according to Nietzsche, philology may never have presided over more than a "sham monarchy"? Is the term philology only residual in the titles of journals, organizations, and institutions that hail from the founding days of various academic humanities disciplines or the Library of Congress?

A Year’s Work in Medievalism

companionable conversation. They have just ceased being at the helm of hostilities between two forgotten and formerly peaceful colonial outposts in West Central Africa. At war for no other reason than that their parent countries had engaged in World War I thousands of miles away, they reflect back on their roles during recent events. Before falling silent in mutual appreciation of their respective roles as nationalistic leaders against their own professional convictions, Hubert Fresnay, a young geographer from the École Normale Supérieure, confesses to his German counterpart that he is really a socialist and thus a pacifist at heart. In turn, the German Hauptmann Kraf, admits to being a disinterested philologist by training. The typological truth of this scene is striking since both characters represent political and academic practices that are today officially extinct in the United States, but whose premises have trickled down into the fabric of the country so that they well up as delightfully inhuman, soulless, and eternally frightening scapegoats. They, for too much government, taxes, and ObsessCare on the one hand and for the isolation of medieval studies from its more theoretically inclined (hence: “hip”) colleagues in postmedieval studies on the other. My conclusion is that the philologists may have failed at interpreting the world, eternally disinterested and doggedly busy with “slog,” to use Tom Shippey’s fitting term; but just like the socialists, they have certainly changed it. The continued dedicated dissonant with both their positions leaves no doubt.

21. A new journal, postmedieval, published by Palegrave Publishers since 2010, aims directly at bridging the chasm between the philological and the postmodern study of the Middle Ages. The 1990s movement of the “New Medievalism” (or “New Philology”) had similar, but less far-reaching and interdisciplinary goals.


Really Ancient Druids
in British Medievalist Drama

Clare A. Simmons, The Ohio State University

According to her introductory note the setting of Joanna Baillie’s two-part drama Ethwald, first published in 1802, is “Britain, in the kingdom of Mercia, and the time towards the end of the Heptarchy.” Ethwald helps Osval, King of Mercia, defeat the invading Britons and rises to a position of power in the kingdom. Yet he is still consumed by “One ever-present thought,” the prophetic words, “Shall I shall be great” (2:181). He asks, “What deep ended seer will draw this veil/ Of dark futurity?” His servant-boy tells him how to find “the female high arch Druid” (2:183), and he enters a cavern filled with “Mystics and Mystic Sisters” to hear the chief Druidess foretell his future greatness.

In the “Address to the Reader” that prefaces the second series of her Plays of the Passions, Joanna Baillie, who according to Harriet Martineau some of her contemporaries believed to be “second only to Shakespeare,” explains that since her focus is on universal human emotions, “a time about which comparatively little is well-known” suits her purpose: “I have, therefore, thought, that I might here, without offence, fix my story; here give it a habitation and a name; and model it to my own fancy” (2:9). She then adds, “although I have not adhered to history, the incidents and events of the play will be found, I hope, consistent with the character of the times” (2:9). That may be the case, but a number of historical problems present themselves here. No kings of Mercia were named Osval or Ethwald, although Penda, named in the drama as a king in the distant
