

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Return to Philology

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What is the relationship between philology and aesthetic education, the process of learning how to judge and how to make pleasing objects? If the question strikes us as a nonstarter, it may be because recent considerations of philology as a “failed discipline,” as John Guillory characterizes it, have aligned the manual and intellectual work of philologists with historicist and hermeneutic approaches to criticism (*Professing Criticism* 168). This view conspicuously underwrites Frances Ferguson’s description of philology, in which philology’s task is to authenticate fragmentary or distressed texts by detailing the chronology of their creation. Philology, Ferguson explains,

audited texts to see if they were who they said they were. In that sense its approach was not at all that remote from that of Bethany McLean, the contemporary financial journalist who reviewed the accounts of Enron. As soon as she realized that those books spoke different languages, she produced an analysis that verged on philological work. As with accounting, philology insisted that interpretation could only proceed on the basis of reliable texts. It sought to square up textual columns. (325)

One would be hard-pressed to imagine a professional service less invested in judging or making pleasing things than accounting, whose guiding principle might be expressed, quite simply, and without risking the displeasure of my accountant, as, “Does the number in Column A match the number in Column B?” If not, where are my receipts, and how long do I have to file them?

The analogy is useful for setting up Ferguson’s claim about the dueling conceptual stakes of the “return to philology,” as encouraged by such disparate figures as Paul de Man, Edward Said, Hans Ulrich

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Gumbrecht, Sheldon Pollock, Stephen Nichols, and Michael Holquist. As a disciplinary formation that came into existence “at much the same time that the notion of literature did,” Ferguson contends (324), philology drew on its practitioners’ historical and linguistic expertise to attend to how words were used in biblical and Homeric texts that originated in oral performance, and to how the same words may have been used at different moments in the histories of these texts’ transmission. Its operations—commentaries, etymologies, indexes, lexicons, scholia—put into permanent relation the particular and the idealized dimensions of textual production. Its practitioners’ task was to make audible “the historical circumstances to which texts refer and to which they silently attest,” Ferguson remarks (328).

The invocation of speech and silence functions as the rhetorical mechanism by which philology’s defunct operations are abstracted by Ferguson as the origin point for a critical genealogy that extends from Aristotelian genre criticism to the modern hermeneutics of suspicion. The labor of composite authorship was treated as “an exercise in reinspiration” by individual genius, whereby the words believed to have been sung by a single, ghostly bard were transmitted through the efforts of many, establishing “a regular relay between a single emblem and its multiple aspects,” Ferguson writes (327). The correspondence between an ideal and an example in the creation of texts found a parallel in the criticism of the eighteenth century, which took as its point of departure the hierarchy of the classical genre system—first tragedy, then epic, then lyric, then comedy—and limited the role of the critic to “judging how effectively a particular work exemplified its generic type” (330). The same logic could be seen, Ferguson claimed, in the methods of a contemporary scholarly elite who seemed uniquely capable of managing the tensions between “local, historical, particularizing evidence and an ideal construct” (327). “[P]hilology, in putting the two conceptions into permanent relationship, inaugurated the tendencies that frequently have been bundled under the rubric of a hermeneutics of suspicion,” Ferguson writes, naming Said and Fredric

Jameson as the exemplars of this genealogy. “When a text was said to be individually *and* culturally produced, it contained a principle for its own self-expansion and self-transcendence. It said what it said, and it said what it remained silent about” (328).

The mechanism of abstraction makes it possible for Ferguson to rotate the concept of philology away from its association with one genealogy to another. Drawing on Jacques Rancière’s account of the age of literature in *Mute Speech*, Ferguson now turns to the rise of written literature in the eighteenth century, and, more specifically, the emergence of the modern novel. The modern novel insisted on the supreme self-referentiality of style, where style was comprehended (after Flaubert) as an “absolute manner of seeing things” that stressed, at one and the same time, the free will of the author and the freedom of the author’s subjects—that is, their freedom from the “genres of representations,” the “system of decorum and verisimilitude,” determined to be “appropriate to them,” Rancière writes (116). Style’s capacity to corral and to comment on various registers of language made it the arbiter of both the aesthetic and the social position of the utterances and thoughts internal to the novel’s characters and external to its author. Novelists rendered their own stylish and unstated judgments, establishing themselves as “monitors of style and usage,” Ferguson claims (339), and produced artifacts uniquely situated in history “both particularly and ideally” (340). In the epoch of written literature, style transformed writers into “their own best philologists” (340), presenting critics with texts that appeared “as if already established” (337), “with all future labor removed from them” (331).

In contrast to the garrulous and suspicious historicism that characterizes the oral epoch, the written epoch could quiet the philological practices of exegesis, judgment, paraphrase, and glossing. The novel’s aggressive leveling of genres forced critics away from the technical vivisection of method and character, away from pronouncements of fit and appropriateness, and toward a more congenial practice of interpretation. Encountering the novel, the critic’s task was “less to pronounce it good or bad

than continually to mark its altered state” from adjacent genres of discourse, Ferguson contends. By implicitly embedding these discursive distinctions in style, the novel turned criticism toward interpretation: “Criticism imagines a need to speak *for* the literature, to be protective of the work, to say that it can’t talk now, that its silence needs to be respected—and that it would, even if absolutely required, refuse to give up that silence” (332).

The two critical genealogies—a historical empiricism that speaks over or around the work and an interpretive criticism that speaks or refuses to speak for it—continue to pressurize our notion of both literature and criticism today, long after philology as a discipline has dwindled into virtual non-existence. Yet I want to insist that there is something a little bit misguided, or a little bit disguised, about the premises from which Ferguson’s philological binaries gain their force. Her conceptual apparatus leans heavily on analogy and abstraction, rather than evidence, to secure the genealogical lines that usher philology (or a highly modified version of it) into criticism’s present. In the rest of this section, I argue that aesthetic education, in the form of making pleasing objects and judging them to be so through editorial labor, puts these binaries into a distinctly dialectical relation whose terms continue to inform literary production and reception. The next section turns to an example of a modern novel, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, that requires the application of philological labor’s aesthetic education to make its novelistic style cohere, or, in Ferguson’s terms, speak for itself.

Coming at the history of the discipline from a very different angle in *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Humanities*, James Turner chronicles two thousand years of Western philological practice to show that both the production of authoritative texts and their critical reception were more alloyed affairs than Ferguson’s account suggests. Turner’s remarkable survey of how classical philology leafed out into the various branches of the modern humanities reveals that there existed within the discipline a discourse of style that mingled local, heterogenous acts of aesthetic judgment with considerations of the historical and linguistic record. Editorial

proclamations of elegance and precision, of crudity and wordiness, as well as commentaries measuring and setting the distance between the characters’ utterances and the author’s tone, regularly exceeded appraisals of generic fit. More precisely, Turner’s study reveals how the discourse of genre in philology was never a one-way relation, by which a contemporary example was crafted and measured against a static, historically inaccessible ideal, thereby confirming “writers’ inability to continue to speak the language of the literary past,” as Ferguson contends (330). Rather, it was a dialectic, whereby the ideal was updated and defined through the judgments that went into creating the examples.

It is this dialectic of judgment that establishes the relation between philology and aesthetic education, however scandalous this relation seemed. Nowhere is this more evident for Turner than in the career of the brilliant, impish, and occasionally crackbrained Richard Bentley, the late-seventeenth-century editor of Horace and Milton.¹ Declaring all printings of *Paradise Lost* to be badly corrupted, and the sightless Milton incapable of making the corrections he surely would have wanted made, Bentley marked and emended hundreds of violations of consistency, meter, and taste. Milton, he proclaimed, “would never have uttered a pun” if he could have helped it (Turner 69). Although later scholars would declare Bentley’s *Paradise Lost* a disaster, Turner shows how the idea of Milton that Bentley created emerged from the sum of his criteria for what poetry ought to be, and how the judgments of much of the poetry of the period were measured against Bentley’s idea of Milton. The rationales that were articulated to censure Bentley as a historian double for Turner as the rationales that explain Bentley’s appeal from the perspective of the nascent profession of literary criticism. “Language and literary form clutched his curiosity,” Turner reports, while the chronological exercises that fascinated others proved uninteresting to him (70). What A. E. Housman would describe as Bentley’s “intrepid candour,” “the savage nobility [of] his firm reliance on his own bad taste” (28), betrayed a “feel for language” and a “grasp of textual difficulties,” according to Turner (69). The editor’s judgments thus yoked philology’s operations to the

unconventional proposition that criticism's remit was to create textual artifacts designed not only to please readers, but also to teach them to articulate why these artifacts pleased them.

Turner goes on to show how the absence of general principles authorizing aesthetic judgments in philology was rectified by the mid-eighteenth century, when judgment was both explicitly and implicitly incorporated into prominent descriptions of what editorial practice entailed. By 1726, Lewis Theobald, the editor of a seven-volume edition of Shakespeare's plays and the critic infamously memorialized by his rival editor, Alexander Pope, as the spirit of "Dullness" in the *Dunciad*, could claim that the philologist's "Science of Criticism" consisted of three intertwined duties: "Emendation of corrupt Passages," "explanation of obscure and difficult ones," and "Inquiry into the Beauties and Defects of Composition peculiar to this immortal poet" (81). "Inquiry into the Beauties and Defects of Composition" obviously invoked the possibility of the aesthetic evaluation, of the style "peculiar to this Immortal Poet." Less obvious, perhaps, was the fact that the identification of passages as "corrupt," "obscure," or "difficult" also presupposed a combination of historical, hermeneutic, and aesthetic evaluation to be objectified as problems that needed "emendation" or "explanation" in the first place. How could one determine if a passage was difficult without comparing the pleasure it afforded, or failed to afford, to the passages surrounding it? How better to understand the concept of textual corruption or obscurity than as an impediment to the "universal communicability" stressed in Kantian theories of aesthetic judgment? These questions are hardly limited to the eighteenth century or to the plays of Shakespeare. Although they remain relatively undertheorized in contemporary literary scholarship, they resonate in daily classroom practices where claims of difficulty not only function as one of the most common forms of covert judgment (albeit one often mistaken for, or tainted by, the sounds of complaint). They also offer instructors an entry point to inquiry that binds the empirical to the interpretive in interrogating the very ambiguity or historicity of the category itself. As Guillory reminds us, "The

question before us is not whether difficulty should be a positive or negative criterion of value—one assumes that difficulty justifies itself, like anything else, in the specificity of its circumstances—but what difficult *means* in a given context of its deployment as a concept" (*Cultural Capital* 170).

Instead of differentiating historical approaches from a later, friendlier discourse of interpretive criticism dependent on the rise of the modern novel, philological labor's aesthetic education presented the origin point of both. This brief reframing of philology's conceptual stakes echoes Guillory's observation that, "in the practice of editing we can discern the emergence of a recognizably interpretive practice; there, a foundation was laid for literary study as a future discipline" (*Professing Criticism* 384). If this history has been obscured from view, it is not only (or primarily) because the rise of the novel, with its emphasis on style, has ushered in a new epoch. Rather, it is because the intellectual labor involved in editing, producing, circulating, evaluating, and commenting on texts became increasingly specialized at roughly the same time. We see the early stirrings of specialization in Theobald's observation that, while the first two tasks of the philologist, "Emendation" and "Explanation," demanded linguistic and historical expertise, criticism offered a more far-reaching and accessible activity for literate peoples—although, undoubtedly, some were more masterful at producing it than others, especially if they had the more specialized knowledge of the philologist at hand. "The third lies open for every willing Undertaker: and I shall be pleas'd to see it the employment of a masterly Pen," proclaimed Theobald (82). For Theobald's contemporary Samuel Johnson, whose criticism Ferguson presents as little more than an extended Aristotelian exercise in judging the strength of allegory and the properness of grammar, the canonization of the monuments of literature, both ancient and early modern, presented a burgeoning reading public with older texts whose aesthetic merits were not self-evident in the present (see Johnson 68). The historical criteria by which they would have been judged demanded explication. This was the employment to which the "masterly Pen" of the critic was set, alongside, and not in

opposition to, the operations of the philologist. We might think of this division of labor as persisting today in the separation of the editor and the critic, even if these two roles are often played by the same person.

[II]

What is the fate of philological work and its relation to aesthetic education today? Certainly, it no longer exists as a unified disciplinary apparatus within the nineteenth-century *Seminar*, whose material and immaterial aspects Paul Michael Kurtz has reconstructed very elegantly within the context of German and British higher education. Nor, as Geoffrey Galt Harpham has argued, should the apparently salutary call for “the return to philology” obscure the discipline’s suspect ideologies of a unified national culture and individual genius. But it would be wrong to think of philological work and the education it models, aesthetic or otherwise, as limited to the national classroom. In literary studies today, philological work primarily takes the form of critical editions of texts produced outside the classroom but assigned within it, and regularly read beyond it. Scholars are often tasked with the labor of collating, transcribing, translating, annotating, and introducing works ranging from *The Odyssey* to *Ulysses*, as well as curating or designing the necessary paratexts, ranging from newspaper and magazine reviews to archival drafts, scholarly articles, illustrations, and maps—a complex, multigeneric process of transmission that aims to please and to educate. There are important issues to address concerning how this work is valued; first, the economic capital it can accrue within a publishing industry whose copyright laws and royalty structures protect authors, but rarely editors or translators; and second, the cultural capital it accrues within a university system that largely rewards original, single-authored monographs and articles. There are further questions to ask about how the possible devaluation of philological work is connected to the fact of gender and the feminization of work—that is, the disciplinary marginalization and institutional casualization that attends to jobs involving textual preservation and

its amalgamation of manual and intellectual labor. Having raised those questions, I must sidestep them.²

I offer instead one small example of how the conceptual interaction between philology and criticism continues to play out across the terrain of aesthetic education. My example concerns a single sentence—“He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun”—sometimes present and sometimes absent in Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, which poses a fascinating series of challenges for scholars tasked with creating new editions of the novel, several of which were in progress after its copyright lapsed in 2021. I chose this sentence as my example because, despite its small scale, it mounts a serious challenge to Ferguson’s claim about the self-referentiality of style. Specifically, it puts pressure on the assumption that novelistic style is contained in a hermetically sealed literary system, one that exists prior to, and independent of, the editorial work necessary to transmit the novel to its readers as an apparently autonomous textual artifact. And the sentence’s thematic invocation of aesthetic education—of being made to feel the beauty—makes palpable how this editorial work can turn on judgments that are inseparable from, if not reducible to, historic and hermeneutic knowledge claims.

Why the fuss over a sentence? *Mrs. Dalloway* was printed in 1925 in two separate editions: a British edition published by Hogarth Press and an American edition published by Harcourt, Brace, and Company. Setting aside the three-hundred or so variations in spelling, grammar, and, in two important instances, word choice between the British and the American texts, there are two major decisions about structure and, by extension, style that an editor must make. The first involves the division of the text into what Woolf in her notes called “interludes”: the British text contains twelve interludes, imposing onto the novel the same number of divisions as the hours on a clock; the American text contains eight, because of the failure to register page breaks at the bottom of a page as the close of one interlude and the beginning of the next. The second involves whether to include or to remove the sentence that Woolf cut from the British edition but added to the American edition—the

sentence that explicates Clarissa Dalloway's feelings of ecstasy upon learning at her party of the suicide of the war veteran Septimus Smith: "He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun."³ As Paul Saint-Amour argues in an illuminating essay on the ontological duality of a novel that does not come to us already established, the decision to include the sentence "is no trivial difference. It implies that Septimus has not only won Clarissa's admiration but also reacquainted her with the sweetness of her life. It may also, or alternatively, portray Clarissa as a privileged narcissist capable of aestheticizing the suicide of a stranger who lacked her advantages" (91).

How does the editor choose when neither choice is, historically speaking, "error or accident" (Saint-Amour 91)? And why does it matter that this sentence, of all the sentences in the novel, is the one that compels the editor to make a choice? It is a momentous line for several reasons: its grammatical structure, the effacement after the semicolon of the "he" who has effaced himself; its repeated use of the definite article, which, when anchored to two vague concepts, "the beauty" and "the fun," gives them a sense of solidity and objectivity they otherwise lack; but above all, because the choice of whether to include it foregrounds the ambivalent status of the very sentiment it embraces, which is the role of feeling beauty in educational or editorial practices. If the editor feels the beauty of the sentence, if it proves pleasing, the editor may reach for any number of explanations to justify including it: its ragged rhythm and its asymmetrical arrangement of pronouns; the echoes it holds of Septimius's earlier and grander appeals to beauty; the demand it makes that the reader situate the affirming beauty experienced by a member of the English ruling class alongside the annihilating despair experienced by a lower middle class war veteran; how tidily it accounts for life and death in a world of vast inequality. Gradually, the style of the sentence becomes legible as the tension between what it expresses and how it expresses it. Its style forcefully connects both an idea and a practice of aesthetic education—how one person may make another feel the beauty of one life, or of one

sentence—to arguments about history, politics, ethics, and morality. Its style also connects the idea of aesthetic education to the discourses of critique that Ferguson identifies as the contemporary extension of the first philological epoch, "the tendencies . . . of a hermeneutics of suspicion" (328).

What of the editor who does not feel the beauty of the sentence? Who feels instead displeasure at its heavy-handedness, its cheesiness? That editor may very well invoke Ferguson's argument that the editor, who understands how to play the double role of philologist and critic, should know when to let the text speak and when to insist it stay silent. After all, not including the sentence would be a form of silence conducive to ambiguity, which many have asserted as the modernist novel's defining property; learning to live with the slipperiness of meaning, as well as the ultimate irresolution of ethical or political judgments, remains the mark of the most sophisticated novel readers. The precise relationship between the characters would remain harder to square up, as would their individual relations to their class positions. Tonally, as Saint-Amour implies, the landing point of the novel would be something more akin to satire, a form of "indirect aggression" (to echo James W. Nichols), and thus less amenable to political critique (see Nichols 35). The editor who refused the sentence thus would confirm and conform to the long-standing critical alliance brokered between a period, a genre, and a tone.

Whatever the editor's final decision may be, tracing the logic that yields these different decision paths reveals how criticism—or more precisely, various ideas of what criticism should let us do with texts—is embedded in philological work from the outset. (I kept the sentence in my edition of the novel despite its cheesiness precisely so the novel might suggest to its future readers the argument about aesthetic education articulated two paragraphs earlier, and because I find the persistent equivalence of modernist aesthetics with ambiguity to be a rather tiresome interpretive move at this point.) Its presence becomes clearer when we see philology not as a system of accounting but as a process of aesthetic education, whereby learning how to make pleasing things becomes inseparable from

judging what pleases us about them and striving to articulate why. An inquiry into the beauty of a single line, comprising only eleven words, branches into historicizing considerations of genre and period, the politics of style and the stylization of politics. Through this inquiry, we discover the continued presence of scholarly practices that point us to earlier moments in our disciplinary history—moments when our critical practices were less divided and more integrated, and when one could feel the beauty in squaring textual columns.

NOTES

1. For a longer consideration of Bentley's career as a philologist and the controversial dimensions of his work, see Haugen.
2. I discuss the consequences of philological labor's devaluation at greater length in my forthcoming book *Post-discipline: Literature, Professionalism, and the Crisis of the Humanities*.
3. I assume that there is no great scandal in producing a synthetic edition of a modernist text, as scholars have produced, for instance, synthetic editions of Shakespeare. I am sure there are scholars on the hard side of bibliographic studies that may disagree with me.

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