Philology, the Italian Renaissance, and Authorship

The flow of information. Is there a greater problem than this one today? Buffeted by information coming at us on screens and through earbuds, how do we take it all in effectively? How can we “read” all this material to determine what is true or false? As we consume ever more information online, algorithms sort our potential choices for us, and we wind up being fed what we “like.” In practical terms, this sorting effect means that we consume information that confirms our own world view. The negative implications for participatory citizenship in diverse, purportedly democratic societies, the rise of tribalism, the inability to find common ground: these problems are painfully evident in our current world.

And it all comes down to reading or, better, to “reading”: that is, making sense of texts in all their current and exploding multiplicity. That phrase, “making sense of texts,” emerged recently in an anthology of scholarly studies entitled World Philology. Its editors brought together specialists on literature and language from different countries and traditions. Seeing studies of work on Chinese texts next to those on Homer made a powerful case that the humanities are a global phenomenon and that overreliance on any one tradition can lead to blind spots. It was in his introduction to that volume that Sheldon Pollock defined “philology” as “making sense of texts.”

What comes to mind when you hear the word “philology”? Perhaps you think of a dry-as-dust endeavor: detail-oriented scholars comparing texts

closely, wrangling over niceties meaningless to anyone else, losing the forest for the trees. Perhaps it seems like another word for antiquarianism, in the commonly understood meaning of that term: examining antiquities of all sorts from within a hermetic, blind-to-the-current-world bubble. If you are a scholarly specialist, someone who edits texts for a living, you will have other, more specific associations. We’ll get to those later. But for now, let’s admit that the word “philology” is not common, not particularly valued, and even has a bit of a negative, past-its-sell-by-date set of resonances. All of which is why “making sense of texts” is so important. It represents a way to leap over other associations and discuss the humanities at large and to do so, moreover, in a self-consciously global way.

Here is why this “global” move is important. Just as discounting the many different non-Western philological traditions can lead to blind spots, so too can relying overmuch on current definitions of a field at the expense of broader meanings that field may have encompassed in the past. Philology represents one such case. The word “philology,” much like the word “philosophy,” has changed meanings over time. Its two Greek roots, philia and logos, mean “love” and “word,” respectively, with logos embracing many other meanings as well, such as “language,” “argumentation,” and “conversation,” among others. In common Anglophone academic parlance, “philology” came to refer to an academic discipline. Philologists edit texts. They compare different versions of the same text, they attempt to figure out the original author’s final intention, and they then produce critical editions of those texts. The notion of “origin” is most meaningful here.

Let’s say, for example, that you are living in the third century BCE somewhere in the Greek-speaking Mediterranean region. Furnished with no internet and no printing with moveable type, you and the culture in which you live revere the Iliad and the Odyssey, the two great poetic Greek epics.

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5 In no humanities field has the word “philology” traditionally had more purchase than in Classics, the field whose members study ancient Greece and Rome. And yet, the word’s connotations were deemed so negative that the field’s U.S. professional association chose to change its name a few years ago, from the “American Philological Association” to the “Society for Classical Studies.”
authored almost a half a millennium previously by Homer. The *Iliad* tells the story of the Trojan War, wherein the Greeks eventually defeated powerful Troy. The *Odyssey* recounts the long journey home of the wily Greek hero Odysseus after that war had ended. By the third century BCE, the texts were classics in ways hard to imagine today: the source of common myths, a storehouse of exemplars of how to behave and not to behave, and a repository of religious rituals and ways of thinking about the divine.

But there is a heavily oral component involved. People called “rhapsodes” wander around Greece, reciting these poems from memory. Indeed, they have been doing so for centuries. Homer himself left no other reliable records, and there are no archives preserving facts about his birth, only latterly written biographies, as much myth as fact. Most importantly, there aren’t really any standard editions of the two texts. Any available written version was handwritten, of course, and one copy will inevitably be different – if sometimes only slightly – from another. Faced with different readings of the “same” text of the two great poems, how did one figure out what the right text was?

The key here lies in the meaning of the word “right.” I am writing this book. Imagine an author had written this sentence long ago, well before printing, the internet, and everything else we take for granted. Now imagine that the author is long dead and that this book has become a classic. Somewhere along the line, instead of writing the sentence “I am writing this book,” a scribe copying the text wrote “I am riding this bark.” Maybe someone was dictating the text to him, and he heard it wrongly, or maybe the person dictating had an unfamiliar accent. Or maybe the scribe was simply copying it from another written version where the handwriting was unclear. However it may have occurred, the “wrong” reading was inscribed. Then imagine that the person who commissioned the copying of the newly altered text took it with him or her, traveling elsewhere. Others are interested in it, so the text is loaned to be copied. That line – different from what the author wrote, to be sure – has now become part of the way in which this text circulates. Classic that the book has become, people read it over and over, they puzzle over what it was that the author meant in the book as a whole, and they love the book so much that they write lengthy commentaries that explain it, commentaries sometimes so detailed that they get down to treating specific lines. The author is considered great and important, so the line – “I am riding this bark” – must mean something significant. Perhaps it is an allegory for the journey our lives represent, or a subtextual exhortation to travel, or a moral maxim, suggesting that we are all on a vast ocean and that we should treat each other
accordingly. Or maybe it is just literal: the author was on a boat as she was writing. As the centuries go by, the commentaries and opinions mentioning this line multiply. Though the author never wrote it, it took on a life of its own. More than this, there were some handwritten versions that preserved the original line. There are different “families” of manuscripts, some of which have that line, others of which do not. Scholars of the text emerge, debating among themselves which is the “right” reading. There is no master text, no WorldCat, no Library of Congress to which they can appeal. They start comparing different handwritten versions of the text, and they come to realize that a significant majority of the copies in question “descend” from – meaning, they are copies of copies of – the manuscript in which that original, easily understandable but now highly significant mistake of copying occurred. They discover that the line as written must have been, “I am writing this book.”

Let’s ask the question again: what is the “right” reading of that line? “I am writing this book”? Or, “I am riding this bark”? Most of us would say the first reading: “I am writing this book.” The author would, in fact, since she was the one who wrote it, and we know what she wanted to say (in this fictional example). But remember: in the confines of the story, this author is long dead, so she is not around to argue for her work. Faced with this reality – no author at hand – how do we really know what to do, as we think about the “right” reading? What matters more, the original authorial reading, or the way that different readers have interpreted this text over time?

We know that an author makes choices, and the closer we can get to them, the better. And if there were a traditional way to define the goal of specifically academic philology in current, Western academia, it would be more or less that: all the techniques that allow editors of texts to do two things. One, to get back to the original reading of the texts they are editing and, two, to present to the reading public a version of the text that the author would agree is correct. There will be more to say about this type of endeavor later. But even from the small, fanciful example I gave above, we can see that there is more to a work than the author’s intention.

You don’t have to go full Foucault to see the problem, either. The famous and disruptive French philosopher offered a lecture in 1969 with the title, “What is an Author?” In it, he was responding to a paper entitled “The Death of the Author” penned a few years earlier by another French thinker, Roland Barthes. Both of them stressed themes that became part and parcel of French critical thought in the second half of the twentieth century, thinking that was highly influential in North American literary studies. The basic idea? Texts are unstable, words have varied meanings, and each reader will bring to their
reading diverse backgrounds and thus possess different internal tools for interpreting any text. It is hard to disagree with that idea, one that in any case had a long pedigree, as the Latin proverb “books have their own fates” (habent sua fata libelli) makes clear. But there was more for Foucault. The very idea of the “author” as an almost heroic individual had to be banished, and the emphasis needed instead to shift to readers, to interpreters, to the ways, almost infinite, in which the “discourse” of the text existed. If we left the author by the side, new questions would emerge: “what are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself?” These questions appeared toward the end of Foucault’s lecture, which concluded in this fashion: “Behind all these questions we would hear little more than the murmur of indifference: ‘What matter who’s speaking’?”

There are two things to note about the conclusion. First, this move – diminishing authorship to such an extent that the author ceased to matter – was one species of a larger genus of criticism that Foucault exemplified: a midcentury-modern self-hatred that, in truth, just went too far. The idea was that you should destroy a broken or imperfect system, rather than trying to fix it. If the liberal Western order, buttressed as it was by Enlightenment-era theories of individual human rights, had failed to prevent the catastrophes that, for Foucault and his generation were living memories still, why keep defending it? Why endorse the idea that a text – so multiplicitous in its possibilities – was written by one “author” when, in truth, every reader was really the author of a new version? The very concept of the author, after all, was tied to this old Enlightenment idea of the individual, each one “equal” and bearing certain “rights”: life, liberty, private property, the pursuit of individual flourishing – the whole thing. And yet, it was an idea that, though it had pretensions to universality, had so spectacularly and consistently failed to include all people that it seemed difficult to defend, even in part. Women in general had been largely left out, and then, of course, so too had the many men and women whom Westerners had enslaved, all the while espousing “universal” ideas of rights. Wasn’t it time to burn down the whole, individual-validating structure, the idea of the “author” included?

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6 Terentianus Maurus, De litteris, De syllabis, De metris, 2 vols., ed. Chiara Cignolo (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2002), l. 1286, vol. 1, p. 93: “pro captu lectoris, habent sua fata libelli” – “books have their own fates, according to the reader’s capacity,” or, “according to what the reader understands.”


8 Ibid.
Around the same time as his author-negating lecture, Foucault published Les mots et les choses, whose title in its English version was The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences. He ended that book by stating that, once people realized how arbitrarily constructed most of the “human sciences” were – social sciences and humanities and even some natural sciences – the very idea of the “human” as something distinctive would disappear, “erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.” The panache of it all was admirable, as phrases like that caught people’s imaginations, inspired debate, and made him and a number of other French thinkers into celebrities in American literary academia. There was a kind of 1968-era utopianism in play: if we destroyed it all, something else would emerge in its place, something better, something – perhaps – almost magically egalitarian, a place where all those imbalances of power that those Enlightenment ideas had masked under the superficial pretense of equal rights would go away.

And that, to be brief, represents the second reason it was important to highlight Foucault for just a moment. Over-the-top language or no, he both caught and helped to create a mood in which many, from social protestors to academics, were interested in power: Who had it? How was it used? Where would power lie in the future, and – here is the crux – what role could humanities scholarship play? Fifty years or so later, it is a little easier to see the levels of efficacy this sort of critique has had, at least in the United States. The simple answer? Not much, at least when it comes to power imbalances in liberal democracies and to the role the humanities can and should play in public life, and even in academia. The humanities are in worse shape than ever in the modern American research university, with too many studies to count pointing to declining student enrollments and a diminution in public interest. Majors and concentrations are down, and there have been many signs that – to put it simply – the humanities have not been advocating well for themselves. It is time to focus on how we should be thinking about the humanities now.

All of which brings us back to philology and to “making sense of texts.” If there has been one thing that has become ever clearer in recent years, it is this: close and careful reading is more important than ever in the age of new

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10 Foucault, Les Mots, 398; The Order, 387.
12 For one approach, see the website, “Humanities Watch,” at https://humanitieswatch.org/ (accessed August 16, 2019).
and proliferating forms of texts. We have arrived at a critical juncture, a crisis of reading, if you will. A highly evolved and still accelerating technology has changed reading habits in ways still undetermined. And the rapid flow of information at speeds and across media that humanity has never before witnessed raises the important question of how to make sense of these new and different types of texts.

The past never has all the answers, needless to say. But there are moments in the history of reading and writing, moments drawn from the Italian Renaissance and the early modern European periods, that are worth highlighting. Many are little- or unknown and have something to say to the humanities-in-crisis moment in which we currently sit. If this book offers a set of examples over time, it also presents a thread in the rich texture of the narrative of European cultural history, a thread that has not yet been woven into standard accounts. To see how a culture reads is to trace how its members think: what they value, what they overlook.

This book begins in the Italian Renaissance. For most, this term will call to mind works of art and names like Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo. But there was another Italian Renaissance, one much less known but no less important. It had to do with the writing and scholarship of a series of intellectuals whose names are known, for the most part, only to specialists.

Let us look at it from the vantage point of the early years of the eighteenth century, when an aristocratic French Benedictine, Dom Bernard de Montfaucon, penned these lines, as he looked back over three centuries of scholarship:

We give undying thanks to those who, faced with literature, and especially Greek literature, that had long lain low, gradually and with great effort brought it out of the darkness. For it was with the attention and resources of princes that there stood out, in Italy first of all, Francesco Filelfo, Lorenzo Valla, Theodore Gaza, Angelo Poliziano, and others.13

It was 1708, actually, when the work in question appeared. Its title, as was typical of the time, was quite long: *Greek Paleography, or, On the Birth and Progress of Greek Letters, and on the Various Genres of Greek Handwriting over Time, and also, On the Abbreviations and Notations of Various Arts and Disciplines.*

The word “Paleography” means, most basically, “old writing,” and it has come to stand for a field of academic endeavor. Obscure to many, this field has an important function: how to decipher, date, and localize texts that are written by hand. Montfaucon’s book was field-defining. He set forth, authoritatively, how Greek was written over its long history, focusing on the Middle Ages (from which most surviving documentation came). He covered everything from writing implements to the sorts of materials on which people wrote texts, from papyri, to linen, to parchment (treated animal skins) to, later, paper. He set forth a chronology and typology of writing, giving a history of different types of handwriting.

He also did something meaningful: he showed examples. He offered exact reproductions, done by engraving, of specifically identified manuscripts, to show how they looked in general and how the handwriting within them appeared. In this latter respect, he was the beneficiary of a mature, practically perfected technology: early modern printing, which had reached a high point in his day and was poised to bring text and image together harmoniously. Beyond the aesthetic coherence, the combination of text and image also served as a means of persuasion to possibly skeptical readers. One was able to show evidence visually that was being described verbally. The book was a vehicle of truth. At least for a while.

There will be more to say about Montfaucon and his cultural environment later in this book. For now, it is worth focusing on that casually expressed bit of social memory contained in the quotation above, when Montfaucon wished to give “undying thanks.” The names of those he thanked are known today only to specialists. But for Montfaucon, they, and Italy, were important, so much so that he did not need any significant reflection to articulate the seeming truth of what he said. The scholars he mentioned were protagonists, and Italy was a place, at a moment of commencement.

In this case, the beginning in question was a revival of the study of Greek. Yet, for Montfaucon and those like him in that age of erudition – who paid close attention to the study and history of the humanities, who wrote, as did Montfaucon, in Latin, and who took as self-evident the importance of the classical world – it was, really, philology that marked out Renaissance Italy, its denizens and its heirs, as worthy of note. It was the way these little-known Italian thinkers made sense of texts that gave them their place in history, even if that place faded a bit in the nineteenth century.

14 In current academic parlance, “paleography” refers to the decipherment, dating, and localization of literary texts, whereas “diplomats” refers to the same enterprise for documentary texts (things like contracts, wills, treaties, and so on).
Lorenzo Valla and Angelo Poliziano (two of these little-known figures), among other Italian Renaissance thinkers, appear in this book. But if later thinkers like Montfaucon (not to mention Descartes, Mabillon, D’Alembert, Diderot, and even Thomas Jefferson) also have a seat at the table, this is why: in their work and thought they recapitulate practices and mentalities that Italian Renaissance humanists pioneered. Echoes are never exact, but they are nonetheless worth noting. As you will see, the echoes outlived them. We can hear them today.

We’ve talked a bit about the word “philology,” making sense of texts, as we are using it here. In no enterprise did philology play a greater role than in that commonly termed Italian Renaissance humanism, a transformative moment in intellectual history that sits at the core of the story this book intends to tell. Hearing the word “humanism,” one might think of a focus on humanity, shorn of religion, and of the notion that politics should be practiced with that sensibility foregrounded – in other words, in a secular fashion. One might even think of conceiving of citizenship and community with universal human rights in mind. The Italian Renaissance saw glimmerings of these ideas here and there, but then again so did other epochs before it (among them classical Athens, the Roman republic, and any number of moments in European medieval life, from the issuance of the Magna Carta to speculation and theory in the medieval Italian legal tradition). Besides, it was only well after the Renaissance that those conceptions emerged in anything like the forms we assume today (however imperfectly those universalizing projections about humanity have been realized over time).

For scholars, however, the word “humanism” and the expression “Italian Renaissance humanism” have had associations at once narrower and more expansive than those meanings imply. They have been narrower, in the sense that humanism has been associated with an increased focus on humanities scholarship and classicism in the Renaissance. For an era decidedly fascinated with Greco-Roman antiquity, humanism in this specific key was wide-ranging. They have been more expansive, in that there is a tradition (long, durable, and in some respects, still meaningful) to mark the Italian Renaissance as the beginning of a kind of modernity and to tag “humanism”
as the main mechanism by which that epochal transformation took place.17 If there is anything left to this last trajectory, it is tied to philology in its broadest sense. Scholars (the present writer included) have written a lot about Italian humanism in both of those guises, so there is no need to dilate on the historiography here.18 But the one thing that stands out about this approach is accepting that our current disciplinary distinctions don’t always map well onto those of the past. What we now call “philology” in its narrow sense (editing texts) does not reflect the sometimes-astonishing breadth of what (some, not all) Renaissance thinkers understood themselves to be doing when they were “making sense of texts.” What was that breadth really about? In the end, it was about bringing the humanities to bear on finding a better way of life.19

Take the example of Petrarch (1304–74), who was the first humanist to give this new movement a Europe-wide reach, owing to his travels and his epistolary network.20 He wrote brilliant poetry in the Tuscan vernacular, work on which his literary reputation rests today. Like all humanists, he wrote much in Latin – works of scholarship, philosophical dialogues and meditations, and lots of letters. And he did philology, in both the narrow and the broad sense. Narrow: one reason that we have as much of the text of the ancient Roman historian Livy as we do is owed to Petrarch’s careful comparative work. He sifted through the different manuscript versions then available, compared them, filled in missing passages when he found them in other manuscripts, made emendations, and basically put together a text

19 See Timothy Kircher, Living Well in Renaissance Italy: The Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2012).