
TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE PHILOLOGY

Ein Interview mit Glenn W. Most

Glenn W. Most

Pisa, Chicago

eisodos Among your numerous projects there is one that caught our eye in connection with our current eisodos interview series on new concepts of philology: the „Comparative Historical Lexicon“, co-edited with Martin Kern and Anne Eusterschulte. Can you tell us a little bit about this project?

Glenn W. Most I continue to be actively involved in research and teaching on ancient Greek literature and philosophy, and I expect to do this in the future. But over the past years I have also begun to become more actively engaged in the kind of comparative study of various Classical traditions which I envisioned many years ago but which only in the last several decades has become more practicable. There have after all been a certain number of Classical traditions throughout the world and throughout history, from China, Japan, and Korea through Nepal, India, Persia, and Mesopotamia, in Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Latin – to name only these (there are of course more) – and I am convinced that we can understand any one of them best in comparison with the others. The Greco-Roman Classical tradition is a particularly rich, interesting, and influential one; and it happens to be the one that many Westerners know best. But how did it come about, how did it survive and flourish for so long, what were the scholarly procedures and the social institutions and the economic interests and the political ideologies that made it possible? Our own Classical tradition has not been the only one: understanding the others in their similarities and differences with it should help us to understand better not only the rest of the world, but also our own cultural heritage.

With this in mind, I have initiated and organized a number of comparative research projects over the past years. For example, I co-edited with Tony Grafton a volume of essays on scholarly procedures in a number of canonical traditions that appeared some years ago,¹ and I have co-edited forthcoming volumes on mathematical commentaries in Chinese, Sanskrit, Babylonian, and Greek,² on wisdom literature in Greece and China,³

¹ With Anthony Grafton, ed., *Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices: A Global Comparative Approach*, Cambridge 2016.

² With Karine Chemla, ed., *Mathematical Commentaries in the Ancient World: A Global Perspective*, Cambridge 2020.

³ With Michael Puett, ed., *After Wisdom: Sapiential Traditions and Ancient Scholarship in Comparative Perspective* (forthcoming 2020).

and on modes of textual impagination in East and West.⁴ Given that my own knowledge of some of the languages involved is rudimentary at best, these projects have required the collaboration of a number of experts in different fields who were willing, indeed eager, to share their knowledge and their questions with one another. I expect to continue in the future to organize and publish this kind of collaborative volume investigating specific aspects of what one might call comparative Classical studies.

But next to these more specific studies I am also in the course of organizing, together with Professors Anne Eusterschulte (Philosophy, FU Berlin) and Martin Kern (Sinology, Princeton), a large one-volume lexicon of indigenous terms for philological practices, agents, institutions, genres, and materials, as these have been used in more than 25 Classical traditions throughout the world, from Japan to the Mayan culture. Each section will contain an introduction on the history of philology in that tradition, articles explaining the history, usage, source, and influence of about 20 of the most important native (emic, not etic) philological terms or circumlocutions, and illustrations and bibliography. Our hope is that readers from one tradition will not only be able to learn from this book how members of other scholarly traditions have worked to preserve, understand, explain, transmit, and subvert their own classical texts but will also attain a deeper understanding of the historicity and limitations of the methods in their own local disciplines. We expect the volume to be ready within 5 years; Princeton University Press has given us a contract for the print version, and we will then publish an electronic version that we hope will communicate our results to many students, scholars, and interested non-experts throughout the world.

The time seems right for such an undertaking. In the past few decades, the processes described by the term ‘globalization’ have become vastly accelerated throughout the world and have touched upon many cultural sectors beyond the economy. Despite the continuing resistance to these developments, which is expressed in various forms of localism, nationalism, and xenophobia, it has become possible in recent years to see far more deeply and broadly into the similarities and differences among widely separated cultures than it ever was before. I write these lines on the high-speed train from Xi’an, where I was profoundly moved by its extraordinary archaeological discoveries but also by this vibrant modern city, to Beijing, where I am lecturing on ancient Greek poetics and rhetoric to a lively and very well informed group of younger and older Chinese students and scholars. I hope that such exchanges will become ever more frequent, and will bind the world together, despite all our differences, in mutual respect for the shared humanity that unites us.

But if that is to happen, it is crucial that we understand one another’s languages and conceptions and do not simply project onto one another our own local ideas. Some of the work that has been appearing under rubrics like ‘global philology,’ despite its considerable

⁴ With Kevin Chang and Tony Grafton, ed., *Impagination: Layout and Materiality of Writing and Media in East and West* (forthcoming 2020).

value, has been hampered by a failure to understand that what we call an ‘edition’ or a ‘commentary’ may be very different in history, usage, and connotations, from what people of other cultures mean when they use the terms in their own languages that are translated in dictionaries as ‘edition’ or ‘commentary.’ To take a simple instance, *ekdosis* in Greek is translated as ‘edition’ and is the source of that word and of related ones in Latin and in modern European languages – but an *ekdosis* is not at all the same thing as an edition. Understanding such differences, we hope, should make it easier for scholars from different languages and cultures to understand more easily and more fully the differences and the similarities between their conceptions, and thereby make the increasing globalization of philology in the coming years – which, we can easily foresee, is going to happen anyway – work more smoothly and function more successfully.

eisodos So, what exactly is philology?

Glenn W. Most After a long period in which the word ‘philology’ seems largely to have been used derogatorily and to have connoted a dry and futile pedantry, the last several decades have seen a remarkable turnaround, and the term has temporarily become fashionable. As with any passing fashion, people with different agendas try to legitimate themselves by appropriating the word in their own meanings and for their own purposes. There is no one correct definition for ‘philology,’ but there are more and less useful, robust, productive ones.

My own carefully considered preference, based upon my study of Western and other philologies and upon my research in the history of science, is to understand ‘philology’ as the professionalized and institutionalized study of and care for authoritative texts.

This definition can be unpacked as follows:

1. In any culture, an extremely large number of oral and written texts of all sorts are produced, but most of them are ephemeral or of only local interest. But in every culture that has a classical tradition, a certain much smaller number of texts are privileged that are regarded as intrinsic and essential to its identity. These texts can be of very different kinds, e.g. religious, literary, legal, historical, scientific, etc. – whereby we must be careful not to impose incautiously such modern Western categories upon earlier and other traditions. Many of them are oral, and even when they are written down the written texts are often accompanied by oral practices of many kinds. These authoritative texts can sometimes be specified further by being called ‘canonical,’ as long as we remain aware that there is very often no fixed canon and that any canon is the inherently unstable result of negotiation and compromise among competing interests and views. Canonical texts and classical traditions are interdependent: canonical texts are privileged synchronically over other texts that are excluded or marginalized by the mechanisms and practices of a classical tradition; and a classical tradition defines itself diachronically by the canonical texts to

which it looks back and from whose values it derives meaning in the present and hopes for the future. No text is canonical in and of itself: a specific text can be established as canonical for a specific classical tradition by specifiable philological practices.

2. Because authoritative texts are fundamental to what members of a culture regard as its identity, they tend to be reproduced frequently, to exist in many copies, and to be used over a long time. If they are oral, mechanisms are often created to ensure that their reproduction is controlled and their variance is limited. Insofar as they are written down, their material bearers are to varying degrees fragile and subject to various kinds of damage; hence authoritative written texts tend to require reproduction, probably more frequently than most other kinds of texts. Because the reproduction takes place by manual processes, it inevitably leads to variants, whether due to unintended mistakes or misreadings or intended as improvements of one sort or another. The more often a text is copied, the more its variants proliferate.
3. Because of the importance of authoritative texts to the identity of a culture, its institutions of authority tend not to leave the care of them to uncontrolled amateurs but also to entrust that care to professionals. These experts, whom we may call ‘philologists,’ engage in a variety of activities that differ in their details from one culture to another because of the differences in textual and social circumstances, but also offer many striking similarities because of the comparability of the problems they are designed to deal with. The philologists collect, choose, check, copy, comment, supplement, translate, and even create and fabricate texts (this is not an exhaustive list). An institution of authority can use various means to control these experts: it can select them, train them, offer them various kinds of emoluments and other privileges, or, exceptionally, punish them. It also usually establishes various kinds of subsidiary institutions to further and to control their activity: schools, libraries, archives, etc.

In terms of this definition, ‘philology’ is applied not just to any and all oral and written texts, but especially to authoritative oral and written texts; the people who perform philology are not just anyone who does any sort of things with texts, but professional experts working within established institutions; and the activities performed by philologists are not just any kind of occupation involving texts, but specific practices. Comparative philology, then, is the historical and systematic comparison of these different kinds of philological practices, agents, and institutions, and the culturally specific use of techniques, genres, and materiality, as they are attested throughout the world and throughout history.

eisodos Would you say that the time has come for a new definition or reorientation of philology? If so, in what way?

Glenn W. Most Yes indeed, I think the time is right for reconceiving what we mean by philology. Until recently, questions of the methodology and history of philological practices were of interest to very few people besides the small number of scholars who were actively engaged in these practices themselves. But in the past decades three developments have radically changed this situation:

1. Digitalization: The digital revolution has begun to transform profoundly the ways in which texts are conceived, prepared, and presented. Not only does this open up new perspectives for possible methods of scholarship which would have been inconceivable until recently; it also provides a vantage point outside of the traditional book form from which the advantages, constraints, and disadvantages of the media current hitherto and of the procedures based upon them can be recognized more clearly. What will be the effects upon future textual editions and commentaries of the (possibly) infinite storage possibilities of digital data, the ease of cancellation of texts (but the difficulty of recuperation of what has been cancelled), or the emancipation from the medium of the page and the necessity of the choice and spatial discrimination of variants? And by contrast, how much influence did traditional writing materials and instruments have upon the methods scholars developed in order to deal with their texts?
2. Cross-cultural comparison: As the world has grown more interconnected in the process of internationalization and globalization especially in the last half century, scholars belonging to different cultural and linguistic traditions have begun to engage with one another more systematically than ever before. The result is that the possibility has begun to open up for even those who work in the philologies of individual countries or languages – traditionally among the most nationally focused of humanistic scholars – to compare and discuss procedures and goals in the hope of arriving at a genuinely global concept of the practices of philology. Although this inter-cultural dialogue is still in its infancy, it can be expected to develop strongly in the coming decades.
3. Practices in the history of science: As long as the history of science tended to focus especially upon the discovery of concepts and the invention of devices in the natural sciences, the humanities seemed to offer little of interest to many historians of science. But in the past several decades, the history of science has turned ever more to the study of practices such as observation, description, classification, and organization, and in doing so has discovered deep and unexpected affinities between branches of scholarship that used to be complexly intertwined but in the past several centuries have been split apart into what we have learned to call the humanities and the natural sciences. The techniques of philologists offer an exciting new field

of study for the historian of science who wishes to understand the development of rational procedures in various cultures over thousands of years.

These three recent developments make the time seem right for the kind of comparative philology and comparative Classical studies that I am hoping to advance in the coming years.

eisodos Will philology survive as a practice? What about the individual philologies? Which changes are needed?

Glenn W. Most There will always be philology as long as people care and argue about the cultural documents that matter to them. But philology will survive, as it always has survived, by adapting itself to the changes in the circumstances and modalities of human communication. Language, then writing, then printing, then the computer; clay tablets and papyrus and parchment and ostraca and bamboo slips and palm leaves and paper and computer screens; the tribe and the city and the nation and the internet – philology has always known how to transform itself as the world was transformed around it. I do not doubt that philology will remain. But I also do not doubt that it will be radically transformed in the coming years.

eisodos You've traveled the world presenting and discussing your project – what kind of response did you encounter?

Glenn W. Most I have discussed this project with people in a number of disciplines and in a number of countries; and all have been enthusiastic. One measure of the positive reactions has been the large number of immediate offers of help and participation on the part of scholars who already had little time and too much to do but could not resist the temptation to join in our project. Perhaps, indeed, the time is right.

eisodos Do you have any literature recommendations?

Glenn W. Most

Paul de Man, "The Return to Philology," in: *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis-London 1986.

Sheldon Pollock, "Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World," in: *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009) 931–61.

Sheldon Pollock et al., *World Philology*, Cambridge, MA 2015.

Edward W. Said, "The Return to Philology," in: *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York 2004).