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IS THERE ROOM FOR “GENERAL PHILOLOGY”?
BY YAKOV MALKIEL *

Ladies and gentlemen: If my area of academic specialization were a writer as attractive as Vergil, Shakespeare, Goethe, or Dostoevski, I could bank on the perennial charm of his œuvre and might expect to entertain you all while remaining within the purview of my specialty. For better or worse, however, the innermost sanctum of the citadel or tower which I happen to inhabit, namely Romance historical linguistics, has about it a certain austerity which may prove quite uninviting, not to say forbidding, especially in the context of a causerie delivered after an opulent banquet, when every participant may be secretly craving a spell of relaxation. So I decided to curb the temptation of examining here, before and among you, a topic germane to my private taste and personal scholarly curiosity and to discover instead that common denominator which, either ostensibly or in fact, holds us together and brackets our activities.

There are two such ingredients in the name of our organization, but of these two only one qualifies for the rôle I intended to carve out for it. If we were predominantly students of botany, or of paleontology, or of pre-Columbian ethnography, or else of regional American history, then the Pacific Coast could, intellectually speaking, be the unifying bond between us. But a glance at this year’s, or any year’s, program shows that — with rare exceptions — the Pacific Coast, for all the beauty of its seascape and landscape, for all the enviable cosmopolitanism of its academic communities, is not the magnet which most influences our daily work. The logical alternative element to the sequence “Pacific Coast” is, of course, “Philology”, and, under normal circumstances, members of a self-styled philological association should rejoice at being known as philologists, enjoy the company of their fellows and take pride in the initial choice and the subsequent cultivation of their discipline, in much the same way as historians beam with happiness when they are addressed or referred to as historians, or as astrophysicists exude self-satisfaction when they assemble, deliberate, and act as a group.

Paradoxically, experience proves that this normal and wholesome situation does not ordinarily obtain where philology is at issue. Experts prefer to be known as humanists, classicists, medievalists, literary scholars, critics, modern language teachers, linguistic analysts or, if need be, language historians; very few would gracefully wear the tag “philologist”. That this state of affairs is not entirely a figment of my imagination follows from a number of observations which almost point in the direction of a recoil or revulsion bordering, in sheer emotional intensity, on a neurosis. In one of the most influential books of learning of the last quarter-century, René Wellek and Austin Warren’s Theory of Literature (1949), you will even find, at the outset of Chapter 4, a remark, apropos of the unexceptionably excellent Chicago quarterly Modern Philology, and of its counterparts Philological Quarterly and Studies in Philology, to the effect that the titles of the journals, obviously crass misnomers, involve residual usage — to which condemnation the critics join a general suggestion: “Since the term

has so many and such divergent meanings, it is best to abandon it". This situation actually poses two separate problems. One is strictly academic: What, if anything, is wrong with philology? The other is socio-academic: What, if anything, is right with the widespread prejudice against philology? Underlying these two questions is a third and discernibly deeper one, which, if left long unanswered or if answered obliquely and evasively in our age of razor-sharp definitions, may, to begin with, have caused most of the observable malaise: What is philology, or what should it be?

The purpose of tonight's talk, let me assure you, is entirely constructive, but for a few more agonizing minutes I must subject you to joining me on this journey into the uncharted zone of frustrations. How could it happen, I have frequently asked myself, that, within my generation, such a high proportion of a distinguished group of intellectuals known for its liberalism should become so acutely unhappy about a label which has traditionally served to mark off their group, vis-à-vis society at large and other nuclei of academicians, and which to this day figures, the world over, in countless names of clubs and associations, journals, bulletins, institutes, and major divisions of leading universities? I venture to think that, in the course of these discreet inquiries, I have laid my fingers on some of the reasons — a few weighty, others quite banal — for this restlessness, reasons which I shall now briefly enumerate, and from whose ranks I then plan to select a few for more detailed consideration. Let me remark, from the outset, that the disenchantment seems, for the time being, global, though its degree of virulence varies sharply from one country to another, no less, as will appear immediately, than from one university department or chair to another.

First: in some milieus, the very word philologist has come to connote ‘pedagogue’, ‘educator’, ‘language teacher on the secondary or collegiate level’. I personally witnessed this inflationary use in Germany throughout the late 'twenties and the early 'thirties. For reasons which need not be labored, the more productive and imaginative among advanced scholars have not particularly relished this association.

Second: a serious trouble has arisen along the temporal axis. After the advent of Humanism, "philology", for a long stretch of time, exclusively or primarily denoted scholarly attention showered on texts of classical Antiquity. When, with the rise of Romanticism, research in the vernacular, post-classical languages came to the fore, no clearly differentiating label was devised. In Germany, the cradle of this movement a century and a half ago, its spokesmen grappled with such tentative tickets as "neuere Sprachen" beside "Neuphilologie". Neuere, involving as it did a comparative, was the more scrupulously exact of these two labels, since what remained — after the cut-off point favored by the classicists — included a period of approximately fifteen centuries, parts of which historians would reserve for declining Antiquity while apportioning the remainder to the Middle Ages and to modern times. Yet it is not this cautious tag Neuere, but the more reckless Neu- that, in the end, won out on the discipline's homeground and, even more important, has prevailed in the English-speaking world under the disguise of "modern philology". Who would deny that
the quality "modern", in the world surrounding us, is richly suggestive of 
expressionism and cubism in visual arts, of symbolism and hermetism in 
poetic discourse, of musical primitivism and antiromanticism achieved 
through dissonance and asymmetrical meters, of relativism in physical 
science, of experimentation in social and economic ventures, and, every-
where, with a yearning for a violent break with tradition? If we now grant 
that philology, through its roots, evokes either Antiquity itself or scholarly 
concern with that period, it becomes plain that there was bound to develop 
on the all-important level of connotation and association a damaging con-
tradictio in adiecto. It further becomes patent that the student of patristic 
literature, of charters couched in Merovingian Latin, of the Gothic Bible 
translation, of the Old Low German 9th-century Heliand, the Old English 
8th-century Beowulf, or, for that matter, the Mozarabic love poems written 
in a peculiarly archaic variety of southernmost Spanish traceable to the 
10th-century and observable through the prism of Arabic and Hebrew trans-
literations, finds himself uncomfortably squeezed into a no-man's land, as 
regards meaningful departmental affiliations. Since such students as, 
from the start, elect modern languages and literature as their intellectual 
focus are, as a rule, motivated in their choice by an earlier almost hypnotic 
exposure to, shall we say, Proust, Eliot, Mann, or Pasternak rather than 
by any curiosity about the remote twilight zone between dying Antiquity 
and the nascent Middle Ages, there ensues an additional, richly nourished 
source of intense unhappiness.

For considerations of taste I deem it inadvisable to devote more than 
one fleeting moment to the third objection, which is of a spatial or terri-
torial rather than temporal nature. One frequently hears the argument 
(though one might be hard put to trace it to a written pronouncement) that 
the very excellence and copiousness of German philological research in 
the past century tends to make the philological approach both inapprop-
rate and undesirable in departments slanted in the direction of, say, Romance 
culture. The argument is palpably wrong — above all, it is grossly unfair 
to the numerous fine specimens of native French, Italian, and Luso-
Hispanic erudition. But being untenable has not, I am afraid, made the 
allegation wholly ineffective in our cynical world.

The fourth source of resistance, one which I have endeavored to piece 
together from stray demurrers, deprecations, and other tokens of wounded 
pride and Unlustgefühl, stems from that hankering after immediacy, fresh-
ness, and spontaneity so eminently characteristic of modern man's approach 
to art. Whereas the past century, in accord with its rationalistic bias, 
 clamored for a maximum of information, producing a demand for reference 
works such as glossaries, indexes, and concordances, for paleographic, 
critical, and variorum editions, for footnotes, marginal comments, and 
interlinear word-by-word translations, today's hypersensitive layman and 
the professional esthete recruited from the ranks of such laymen find posi-
tively abhorrent any kind of scholarship that smacks of a technical appa-
ratus. Mountains of arid learning, of dry-as-dust, sterile erudition must 
not be interposed, so the argument runs, between the immanent excellence 
of a work of art and the sharply honed sensitivity of the modern art-lover;
and if there remain residual obscurities in an ancient or medieval text for a less than thoroughly trained reader unaided by trustworthy tools of research, so much the better - the penumbra surrounding the object of veneration adds to its charm. Is it not a fair guess that Rilke, even though he misunderstood certain abstruse passages in the chosen model texts by Michelangelo and Louise Labé which he was translating, nonetheless produced renderings far more vibrant and inspired than any narrow specialist could possibly have manufactured? Does not excessive competence, in fact, tend to eradicate creativity and to blunt receptiveness? Did not a man of unerring judgement, Goethe, in cruelly ridiculing in his Faust the inept apprentice Wagner, immersed in the idle study of parchments and skeletons, portray the very prototype of the dull, unenlightened, over-specialized philologist?

It is philology’s fifth vulnerable spot, however, which will, along with its hidden and overt consequences, and its possible cure through the application of special therapy, henceforth claim the major share of our attention.

The exegetic, explicative character of narrow-gauged philology, rooted in its beginnings as a modest venture in textual criticism, has favored the gradual fragmentation, not to say atomization, of research. The temptation is very great indeed for the scrupulous philologist to confine his attention to increasingly small units of material. A rebellious line in Horace, a shrewdly encoded hint in a poem by a Provençal troubadour, a suspected allegory in Dante, a slangy, etymologically opaque phrase in Villon, an intriguing pun in Quevedo or allusion in Gracián pricking his commentator’s curiosity, a teasing puzzle in a single poem of Hölderlin’s, an enigmatic stanza in Stefan George, or some very mystifying metaphor — long recalcitrant to the analyst’s scalpel — in Marina Cvetaeva, these are quite natural, self-contained units for meticulous philological investigation. As a result, stiletto-sharp probings of this severely limited size have become a kind of staple for many prestigious learned journals on both sides of the Atlantic. To be sure, the inducements of publishing business, the pressure of class-room conditions, and the moral incentive of winning a wider circle of readers have in many instances successfully counterbalanced and occasionally even overcorrected this tendency toward self-confinement and exaggerated specificness. Let us further grant — and let us do so in a mood of cheerfulness — that numerous philologists, being deft stylists and practicing on the side genres diametrically opposed to their principal métier, such as the light-winged essay, have developed a zest — and the necessary strength — for engaging in powerful syntheses. Nevertheless, the trend toward steady crumbling through unavoidable and legitimate attention to minute details remains some kind of ever-present occupational hazard. The situation is aggravated by the fact that these microscopic clarifications, for all their helpfulness in the given contexts, seldom lend themselves to any transfer and cannot be easily subsumed under a common denominator. In a thorough piece of textual criticism one discerns, typically, a kaleidoscopic profusion of comments on problems pertaining to linguistics proper, to metrics, to literary sources, to anecdotal bric-à-brac of a biographic nature, to isolated features of the historical background and
of the chosen author's immediate environment. Amid such a pile of heterogeneous material, generalization through uplifting to higher levels of abstraction becomes an almost unattainable goal.

Pathetically enough, this growing inability to aim at generalization, this dispersal of the writer's and the reader's time and energy through diffraction of attention among a motley array of atoms of knowledge, occurs at a time when, for better or worse, major portions of old-style philology are being, step by step, removed from the domain of humanities and shifted to the adjacent realm of social sciences. The point at issue is, of course, that the humanists, by definition as it were, have stressed the unique, individual, nonrecurring, idiosyncratic, and unusual, while spokesmen for social sciences, with equal justification, have become immersed preeminently in averages, typical occurrences, and characteristic traits. Dispersal and atomization of knowledge, then, which may be inherent and even tolerable in certain phases of traditional philological research, are bound to be more conspicuous and eyebrow-raising in a social-science laboratory than they are in the gentler humanistic surrounding; and the resultant disappointment has become, I repeat, the fifth irritant in the relations between philology and some of its assumed practitioners who also act and feel as members of modern society.

It is at this point only, shortly before turning to the positive facet of tonight's communication, that I invite you to pause for a while and give some thought to the definition of philology and, specifically, to its workable delimitations— with a minimum of irksome ambiguity or overlap—as against linguistics.

The difficulty of arriving at valid and weighty generalizations in conventional philology is dramatically brought home by the exceedingly rare use of the unorthodox term "general philology" and by the almost pathetic absence, over the last half century, of any major tone-setting publication—comparable in impact to the books of Darwin and Toynbee—that might have vindicated for general philology some kind of reconfirmed status in the rapidly changing social order of the academic élite. Ph. A. Boeckh's Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften (1877) has not been brought up to date after an 1886 revision; neither has it been replaced. Philology, by tacit consensus, has thus become the repository of a precise and honestly acquired, but highly particularized, command of data and, at best, of techniques useful enough in certain narrowly circumscribed contexts—how to deal with a palimpsest, how to prepare a glossary most economically as a companion piece to a medieval text, etc.—but seldom, if ever, permitting the extrapolation of any broad governing principle, an unexciting discipline par excellence. This deliberate or subconscious escape from generalization, if carried to extremes, can certainly stamp the philologist in his immediate environment as a retrograde, and may become a stigma in a world in which the pendulum—for better or worse—is swinging in the opposite direction, from the crowning piece in the edifice of Einstein's physics appropriately enough entitled "General theory of relativity" (Allgemeine Relativitätstheorie) to general linguistics, where the trend was first consecrated by Ferdinand de Saussure's posthumous—
not to say apocryphal — Cours de linguistique générale. Outside the pale of recognized academic disciplines, in the penumbra of semi-scholarly endeavors titillating the alert minds of our “intelligentsia”, we encounter the widely publicized school of general semantics. Most of the work done under the aegis of “comparative literature” — its hard inalienable core of theory, its very raison d’être in fact — could far more appropriately be labeled “general literature”. If, in a sudden flight of unfettered imagination, we agree to equate the general with the abstract, we may even go so far as to claim that the craving for abstractness in the visual arts — in painting, sculpture, and architecture alike — chimes in with the spirit of the times pervading the sciences — a plural which is characteristically yielding to a singular, witness the ever growing number of “Colleges of Letters and Science”. The question, then, of our ability to devise some framework worthy of the name of general philology — a felicitous term launched by the talented anthropologist Dell Hymes — and thus to contribute a modest but respectable share to the gradually emerging macrostructure of unified knowledge becomes a critically important issue. The only real alternative left to us would be to accept, in a fit of pessimism, the prospect of possible degradation or, worse, to elect the bizarre rôle of reluctant, apologetic philologists or perhaps emphatic non-philologists subscribing to journals or supporting societies which emblazon the name of a discipline no longer dear to us.

It may be countered, I realize, that this entire argument lacks cogency, because the humanists’ age-old preoccupation with the individual and unique excepts them — fortunately, some will add in a defiant tone — from the necessity of keeping in step with the sciences. At this juncture it is fit to remind ourselves that within the alliance of sub-disciplines which have traditionally constituted philology at least one, namely historical linguistics, is shifting allegiance from the humanities to the social sciences before our eyes. In fact, within the spectrum of social sciences, as Leonard Bloomfield observed a generation ago, linguistics, by virtue of its quasi-mathematical symbolic representation and its ties, through articulatory, acoustic, and auditory phonetics, with the physical world, is conceivably the one province of knowledge concerned with man farthest removed from the center of humanities.

Many of us have been asked, by generations of students, just wherein lies the difference between linguistics and philology; and some of us, after brushing aside the aberrant and, I believe, indefensible British usage, which simply substitutes “philology” for “linguistics”, have offered an answer something like the following. In philology, the starting point is a text — ideally, a text prepared, within a literate society, by the author, reviser, or copyist; less so a corpus of folk-tales, riddles, or proverbs elicited by an anthropologically trained field worker from the lips of a “noble savage” (though the word text has, of late, been used in that sense also); and least of all a finite set of utterances, along the lines of glossematic thinking which we associate with Copenhagen. The kind of language material which cannot be traced back to authentic texts (interpreted as self-prepared records) must be excluded from the philologist’s
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purview; this restriction applies to child’s language, to clinically relevant varieties of speech (e.g. those illustrative of aphasia), to all manner of reconstructed and artificial languages, to many exotic languages and to certain social and regional dialects of prestige languages which have not served as media for deliberate transmission.

While in all provinces of knowledge thus set aside the linguist hardly needs the philologist’s guiding hand, historically slanted dissections in linguistics must be philologically underpinned. We have here an area of significant and by no means unwelcome overlap, and I have yet to discover a first-rate piece of research in historical grammar or etymology that does not palpably show or at least imply the author’s independent ability to grapple with philological intricacies. In this particular respect, the philologist’s and the linguist’s separate cameras may each legitimately be trained on the same object, producing pictures as different — yet, in other ways, also as similar — as would be the painting and the drawing of, say, the same still-life arrangement.

General — i.e. cross-cultural or, of you wish, comparative — philology can meaningfully revolve, I venture to think, only around the transmission of texts. Such equally worth-while analyses as those bearing on the structure of texts, on the esthetic appraisal of texts, on the relation at the given juncture of fine literature to advanced thinking, and the like, must be reserved for other disciplines, with which the philologist will, of course, do well to familiarize himself. But it is the varying trajectories of textual transmission that must ceaselessly remain at the very center of his active concern, and if he succeeds in carving out from a myriad individual case histories a kind of cogent typology of such trajectories, he will have laid the cornerstone for a future edifice of general philology.

The text is a tissue of statements, sentences, phrases, words, and even smaller units that carry a message and are technically known as morphemes. All of these units of varying size fall within the legitimate district of the philologist’s prime interest. The smallest units, however, which of themselves convey no isolable meaning — the sounds, which have been compared to atoms, and their distinctive features, which have been likened to subatomic constituents — pertain to the realm of pure linguistics and thus cease to be the philologist’s main responsibility.

The original recording of the text is a matter of major importance. Do we observe a single author at work or some kind of group — say, a college of priests — or a team of two, like modern Russia’s Ilf and Petrov, or an initiator and a continuator, such as, in medieval France, the two authors of the allegorical masterpiece, Le roman de la rose (or in Spain, at the threshold of Humanism and Renaissance, Fernando de Rojas and the unknown dramatist who supposedly wrote Act I of Calisto y Melibea), or else a single author plus a group of revisers, an assumption doing better justice than any other to the very problematic transformation of La Celestina from a comedia into an enlarged, but only partially improved, tragicomedio? In other words, we need a typology of authorship.

Even more closely concerned with the innermost chamber of philology would be a typology of patterns of transmission, as regards both the text
and the themes; liberally interpreted, transmission should also include expansions, epitomes, imitations, mock-imitations, and translations. The variety of possibilities is truly staggering, and solid lines, symbolizing demonstrable links, alternate again and again with dotted lines, suggestive of tentative reconstructions. There exists the case of the lost original (Urfassung) — obliquely visible through, say, imperfect rhymes, distorted topical allusions, etc. — and of extant elaborations; the separate case of the preserved original and the available secondary derivative, while the intermediate stage — authenticated or merely conjectural — is no longer amenable to direct observation (thus, to cite just one instance among hundreds, John Gower’s Confessio amantis is preserved in an Old Spanish translation avowedly based on an Old Portuguese version, later destroyed or misplaced, a version which an English merchant, upon his own admission, prepared in his spare time after settling in Lisbon); etc. A special family of trajectories would include texts or themes where one oral link may or must be plausibly interposed between a chain of written links. This consideration possibly applies to the Divine Comedy if we elect to follow M. Asín Palacios and other Orientalists in positing, as one source of its inspiration, some influential writings of Islamic — specifically, Hispano-Arabic — mystics; and may be extended to certain characteristic analogues between, on the one hand, Arabic narratives and, on the other, the hard shell of Baltasar Gracián’s mid-17th-century allegorical novel El Criticón, in the absence of any mediating written tradition.

Lest I bore you with excessively pedantic blueprints, I shall confine myself to just one more typological inventory potentially benefiting philology and, in turn, benefited by it. For the purely artistic interpretation of the wording of a piece of literature, the esthetic yardstick alone is essential, and historico-philological sifting, embodied in a commentary, is acceptable, at best, as a preliminary operation. To quote the shrewd German-Swiss critic Emil Staiger:

“Der Kommentar enthält demnach den historischen Teil der Auslegung. Die eigentliche Interpretation, die von der Wirkung, der Kraft und Intensität, der Einstimmigkeit der Teile, der Einheit im Mannigfaltigen handelt, betrachtet, was der Zeit entrückt ist .... Erst Kommentar und Interpretation zusammen genügen der Kunst, dem Schönen, das Dauer im Wechsel ist ....”

Granted the general validity of this two-step approach; granted, in particular, the possibility of studying the lexicon, the syntactic constructions, the tropes of Vergil as a single, tightly organized, self-sufficient, and autonomous system, to be viewed and enjoyed for its own sake, with — at most — occasional furtive side-glances at Ennius or at Homer — is it not likely, to say the least, that Vergil’s magic language bewitched the Romans not only through its inner radiance, but also through the ever-present electrifying contrast it afforded to colloquial Latin, including the deft sublimation of many metaphors and similes which the inspired poet must have lifted from folk speech, transposing it into his verse? We are touching here upon the neglected problem of the distance separating the controlled language of a work of art from the casual language of the writer’s environment; on this score the cold solemnity of Deržavin and the
late Puškin contrasts with the warmth and spontaneity of Krylov and Griboedov, the rigorously chiseled pontifical stanza of Stefan George disagrees with Rilke's deliberately, studiedly intimate lines in Neue Gedichte. But while we may know, from introspection or from direct exposure, a good deal about modern conversational German or Russian, the literary expert cannot, with the means ordinarily placed at his disposal by his own specialty, piece together the speech heard in the streets of Imperial Rome, the sermo plebeius. Only the linguist, judiciously interweaving the fragmentary evidence of epigraphy and the pronouncements of ancient grammarians and orthoepists, and projecting onto the plane of Latin the distillate of Romance dialects, can undertake the reconstruction of spoken Latin. And the communication between the mutually almost irreconcilable climates of the linguistic laboratory and the ivory tower of esthetic analysts can be maintained only by experts straddling the two disciplines, namely by philologists. In sum, we need a scale—cross-cultural, cross-temporal, cross-spatial—of all identifiable writers' varying estrangement from the normal language of their environment, whichever the cause of this divorce or the incentive for it and whether the authors are known by name or remain clouded in anonymity. Only broad-minded and versatile philologists (not critics or linguists taken in isolation) can safely be placed in charge of such an ambitious typological venture.

The four particular inquiries here experimentally outlined may fail to meet with your wholehearted approval, either because they fall short of your expectations of originality, or because their slant seems unappealing, or else because their very sweep stamps them as unrealistic; what was attainable in the age of Herder or the age of Humboldt, you may argue, what a few 20th-century folklorists of the stature and stamina of Archer Taylor and Stith Thompson have attempted to achieve in sheer breadth of overview may seem to most of us excessively ambitious and, to be candid, overwhelming. But even in case these specific recommendations are rejected, I venture to think that the sores of our discipline have been accurately diagnosed and that the search for a general philology must go on at a brisk pace, with increasing attention to methodology and typology. Without this quest for a potent remedy, we are doomed; with our hopes aroused and our minds alerted, we may yet live to see the era when philologists, as in the days of Boccaccio and Petrarch, can walk with their heads erect.