

# Commentary on de Pee

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The field of medieval studies is marked by the strained complexity of its disciplinary variety. Within literary studies, at least, this variety, which could well be called fragmentation, might be explained by the different rates at which its sub-fields have evolved and grown over the last four decades. Whereas studies of medieval English and French literature have kept pace with their post-medieval peers in their responses to the intellectual changes brought by poststructural ideas, other fields such as art history, Near Eastern and Jewish studies, and especially historiography have been slower to evolve, and only now are beginning to champion the work that their literary colleagues embraced two decades ago. Scholars from different departments might approach the same material from widely divergent methodological perspectives.

In fact, it is only recently that American medievalists, at least those focusing on Europe, have begun to recover a common theoretical ground, finding a nominal, albeit superficial, unity under the banner of interdisciplinarity and comparative studies. This has provided a unity that medievalists have not enjoyed since the first half of the twentieth century when, as Gabrielle Spiegel and Paul Friedman noted, there was a “confident foundationalism in vogue” that saw the Middle Ages as “the very seed bed and parent civilization of the modern West” (Spiegel and Freedman 1998: 677). Brought together by this new common cause, the various fields of Western medievalism, from art history to philology to historiography to historical anthropology, are, each in their own way, in a shared moment of transition. If one imagines that such intellectual changes happen in cycles, one might say that medieval studies is somewhere between one cycle and another, somewhere after New Philology reached its most productive moment but still before its replacement, somewhere after the Linguistic and Cultural Turns, but still very postmodern. Medieval studies is, in a way, enjoying its own dynamic and unpredictable Middle Ages.

Christian de Pee’s critical assessment of the deep structures of Western sinology offers a revealing compliment to this narrative. In comparing the origins of medieval studies with cultural studies of China’s imperial past, de Pee notes how historians of premodern China have taken up philology as a critique of the methodological hegemony of the social sciences, a legacy of the Cold War (de Pee 2012: 36). He notes that historians of Chinese studies focus only on the effects of area studies around and after

World War II but neglect the departure that this represented from European sinology. Modern cultural historians of China have returned to the work of colonial, European sinologists in order to critique the origins of their own field in area studies and Cold War social science. At the same time, taking up traditional philology against the grain of social science has also led modern cultural historians to criticize the biases of the European sinological scholarship that posited a continuous Chinese tradition, a factitious historiographical notion inherited by sinologists from scholars of the Qing dynasty. At once offering a coherent survey of the field and a cogent critique of it, de Pee advocates for taking a long view of the history of Chinese studies, one that begins with the methods and biases of colonial sinology and not only with the rise the social science methods of American area studies. Such an approach, he argues, “allows the recovery of neglected connections and divergences between sinology and area studies” (37).

Although de Pee’s main focus is on a reappraisal of the origins of sinological studies of premodern China, his argument offers some important insights for the Western medievalist tradition. He compares the long view of sinological studies that looks before the mid-century rise of the social sciences to Western medievalism’s recent “return” to philology—a term we can quickly define according to Sheldon Pollock’s heuristic explanation as “the discipline of making sense of texts . . . the theory of textuality as well as the history of textualized meaning” (Pollock 2009: 934)—with the New Philology of the 1980s and 1990s. I would suggest that just as, in his assessment, the work of modern cultural historians of China should aim to take account of a deeper methodological divide, one that can be traced back to the origins of the discipline in Europe, so the historiography of Western medievalism needs to take a longer view than even the emergence of New Philology (or New Historicism) has endorsed so far. If New Philology, which is now not so new nor so philological as it first saw itself, hopes to endure as more than a passing moment in scholarship, it must try to redefine itself by reaching back not only to the positivist, material methodology of the second half of the nineteenth century. It must go even farther back, to the emergence of medievalism as the work of an inherently hybrid and paradoxical Romantic ideal.

The current moment of transition in the disciplines of medieval studies offers an ideal opportunity for New Philology to take stock of its own origins in order to redefine its trajectory. What can a long view of the history of philology provide? Perhaps most importantly, I would argue, it can make sense of its disparate methodological goals by seeing them as a legacy of its formation and not as a corruption of its mission. In untangling the Romantic roots of modern medievalism, which go far deeper than the discarded proto-nationalism with which philology is negatively associated, scholars of varied stripes may find a way to see their work

not as an exclusive choice between a methodology based on either on empirically minded scholarship or on hermeneutical critique—that is, either between editing and describing manuscripts or “reading” and critiquing them—but as a simultaneous calling toward two distant but mutually necessary methodological poles.

This assessment might begin by looking at the paradoxical goals of early philological and historiographical work. Although the valuing of empirical exactness in Western historiography has its origins in Germany in the nineteenth-century Romantic reconception of Enlightenment models of scientific history, it must be stressed that in its Romantic beginning, this “empiricism” did not exclude interpretive narrative. Following Gianbattista Vico’s first proposal for a “New Science” centered on human action, a new holistic, organic representation of the past emerged in Romantic historicism, represented by the oft-misconstrued recommendation of Leopold von Ranke to write history “wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist],” “as it essentially” was (Ranke 1885: 7). History is, in Ranke’s words, not an object to be described but rather a code to be deciphered, a “holy hieroglyph,” (Ranke 1981: 241–42), the interpretation of which required not the objectivity of a scientific method but the Romantic hermeneutic of empathy and identification with one’s object of study. This Romantic notion of “sympathy” — which implies an inner identification with the world of the past through what Wilhelm Dilthey, the transmitter of the Romantic tradition, later called an inner experience of empathy (*Einfühlung*)<sup>1</sup>—was based on a dialectical rapprochement between self and other. This harmonization derived from the Hegelian effort to reconcile the idealism of Kant and Fichte with the realism of Spinoza through an organic and holistic notion of the animated universe (Beiser 2003: 131).<sup>2</sup>

The quintessential expression of the Romantic reconciliation of idealism and realism within a holistic organicism is the cultural ideal of *Bildung*, the notion of self-realization of the individual through education and aesthetic cultivation. *Bildung*, as the highest ideal of German Romanticism, was the form given to a belief in harmony between inner consciousness and outer manifestation, between idealism and realism, and in this sense the cultivation of the individual towards self-realization was, for better or worse, a consciously social act. In practical terms, the ideals of early Romanticism (*Frühromantik*) were manifest most significantly in the

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1. In his unpublished text *We Philologists*, Nietzsche observes that “Experience [Erlebnis] is certainly an essential prerequisite for a philologist” (Nietzsche 1911: 113). Nietzsche’s use of the word “Erlebnis” instantly evokes the contemporary thought of Dilthey on the essential role of *Erlebnis* within interpretation in the human sciences. On the history of the word “Erlebnis” in hermeneutics, see Gadamer (1994: 60–70, 346–62).

2. For an exploration of the concept of alterity in early Romanticism, see Gossman (1990: 259, 283) and Gumbrecht (1986–1987: 4–10).

realization of a new ideal of university learning, marking a new constellation of areas of academic work, especially in Prussian universities like University of Berlin, founded under the neo-humanist guiding hand of Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1810.

In this new context the Romantic notion of *Bildung*—of personal cultivation and aesthetic judgment—intersected with neoclassical *Wissenschaft*—research and science, but science understood in a pre-positivist, humanist sense.<sup>3</sup> Humboldt's concept of cultivation of the self through research, *Bildung durch Wissenschaft*, found its most fitting application in classical philology. The development of classical philology with its epicenter at the University of Berlin, which was a labor pioneered by figures such as Friedrich August Wolf and his pupils, came to embody the ideal of *Bildung* and the holistic vision of academic work. If, as Hans Gumbrecht proposes, "all philological practices generate desires for presence" (Gumbrecht 2003: 6), the dilemma of philology bequeathed to us by this model is how we choose to characterize this presence—are the text, the artifact, the manuscript, the image, or the cultures they are taken to reflect, objects of study or partners in dialogue, or both? Many of the academic disciplines established and professionalized according to the model of Wolf and his influential pupil August Böckh—historiography with Ranke, German philology with the Grimm brothers, Indo-European linguistics and Comparative Grammar with Friedrich Schlegel and Franz Bopp, and later in the century Romance Philology with Friedrich Diez—not coincidentally shared a Romantic understanding of language as simultaneously the stuff of both Romantic *Bildung* and neo-humanist *Wissenschaft*, a meeting point of interiority and exteriority. Such a view, later elaborated and expanded in the hermeneutical thought of the twentieth century, can be epitomized by Friedrich Schlegel's oft-quoted dictum, "It is equally deadly to the spirit [gleich tödlich für den Geist] to have a system and not to have one. One must . . . combine the two" (Schlegel 1967: 2:173).

This paradoxical Romantic synthesis was, in practice, short lived. There was, especially among the Neogrammarian philologists later in the century, both a pointed criticism of *Bildung* as overly subjective and a general appreciation of the new positivistic *Wissenschaft*.<sup>4</sup> Likewise in historiography, poetic and teleological narratives of the past—of history understood as a *Geisteswissenschaft*, a "science" of the human spirit—quickly became, when stripped of Christian or Romantic bias, a renewed

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3. On the question of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*, see the discussion by Beiser (2003: 88–105) and Ringer (1969: 83–90, 102–13).

4. Lionel Gossman observes, "where the neohumanists saw [classical philology] as a total inner education or formation of the individual ('*Bildung*'), the [Neogrammarian] philologists saw it as an exercise in critical method and an accumulation of reliable information ('*Wissenschaft*')" (Gossman 2000: 161).

devotion to historical and linguistic study as a *Naturwissenschaft*: a natural science, although different from the Enlightenment mechanical view that early Romantic thinkers sought to transform and to transcend.

The bifurcation of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft* in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought formed part of a schism of methodology between the empirical and the hermeneutical that is still present at the core of all of the human sciences. It was the same division that prompted Nietzsche, himself a philologist of sorts unhappily divided across philology's split purposes, to lambaste the philological tradition from which he emerged and to define himself in opposition to it.<sup>5</sup> It was the same division that relegated *Bildung* either to cultural historians such as Jakob Burckhardt and Johan Huizinga or to narrative histories designed as nationalist and racist propaganda.<sup>6</sup> One can follow the transmission of this rift in the early twentieth century through European efforts at educational reform such as those by philosopher Karl Jaspers, who in 1923 (and again in 1946) lamented that, "the university is impoverished when there is only philology and no more philosophy, only technical practice and no more theory, endless facts and no ideas" (Jaspers 1923: 48; translation in Ringer 1969: 257).

The schism produced by the implosion of philology's early Romantic ideals is still very much with medievalists today in their disciplinary and methodological feuds, even though the modern university has evolved in many ways from its Humboldtian blueprints. We can easily see the traces of this clash not only in the modern divisions between academic units of linguistics and literature. We can also see these traces within medieval studies in the truculent debate between those who approach philology as synchronic—i.e., as textual, manuscript scholarship—and those who see philology as diachronic, i.e., as the study of the evolution of culture within language. Nichols calls the debate between literature and linguistics "the issue at the heart of philology's discontent" (Nichols 1994: 123), a conflict of identity built on the clash of subjective, interpretive criticism, and objective, empirical science, or as Jan Ziolkowski puts it (with tongue in cheek), between "*thinking* about what we are doing and *knowing* what we are doing" (Ziolkowski 1990: 9, italics in original).<sup>7</sup> Philology survives in

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5. On Nietzsche's relationship to philology, see Whitman (1986).

6. Burckhardt, who was fiercely opposed to dry, punctilious scholarship and was instead committed to an early Romantic concept of *Bildung* which he believed had been lost, deliberately stated, in the introduction to his *Cultural History of Greece*, "We are 'unscholarly' [unwissenschaftlich] and have no method; at least we do not follow that of others." He even states he, like his reader, is a *Nichtphilologe*, a non-philologist, who is *jeder humanistisch Gebildete*, ["any humanistically educated layperson" (both quoted in Gossman, 2000: 308)].

7. On the history of philology, see Cerquiglini (1999) and Gumbrecht (1986–1987). On the rise of linguistics, see Amsterdamska (1987).

its erstwhile hybrid state of exact measurement blended with hermeneutic sensibility in both classical and medieval studies; but in the latter there is a more troubled divide among those who edit manuscripts and those who read them, between “real” scholarship and “mere” criticism. It is this divide that New Philology, with its focus on the manuscript matrix and the material history of the text and its context, has aimed to close, or at least to bridge. To what degree it has succeeded is not yet clear.

De Pee’s characterization of North American area studies—taking it as a radical departure from the social scientific methodology that predominated during the Cold War, but one that has found a certain affinity with the colonial-era sinology of European philologists—offers a fruitful example of reflection that could serve a similar reevaluation of the origins and goals of New Philology. Just as he advocates for a history of modern area studies that reaches farther back than the Cold War–era rise of social sciences and allows “the recovery of neglected connections” between colonial European sinology and present day methodologies (de Pee 2012: 37), so medieval studies would benefit by seeing its own past in broader methodological terms. Scholars of the medieval West should conceive of the mission of New Philology not only as an alternative to or correction of the positivist, author-centered methodology of nineteenth-century text editing. It should see it also—and this is especially so now, in what Michael Holquist has called our current “postphilological” phase—as a recovery of its own neglected connections with early Romanticism, an archeology of its own conflicted intentions. As Holquist reminds us, “Philology is, at its heart, both a history and a task” (Holquist 2000: 1976). Yet as a single name that refers to many disciplines, “philology” can see the writing of its own history as part of its task, a task of recovering not only the past of its object but of itself as well. As Sean Gurd has recently proposed, “every definition of philology remains part of its history: to be a philologist means to appropriate a term and to revive or recover a practice.” De Pee’s call for return as both an assessment and a critique of the origins of his discipline does not simply follow the model of New Philology. It also offers, in a felicitous turn of its own, a model for New Philology, or its new and imminent heirs, to follow.

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