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# Philology and Performing Arts

A Challenge

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Mattia Cavagna & Costantino Maeder (eds)

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# **Agents of the Empire or Defenders of Dissent? The Ethnophilologist as Performer of the Tradition**

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I would like to open with a very simple question: if the public is not interested in what philologists do, then what are philologists doing? Some still claim that scientific knowledge is an end in itself, thus ignoring the fact that the world has changed somewhat in recent decades. What disturbs me, frankly, is the philologists' tacit and underhand claim to ownership of the traditions studied by them (for example, the common opinion that ancient manuscripts are artefacts which can only be studied by those initiated into textual criticism), and the apparent general disinterest in highlighting the hegemony of this colonial and disreputable way of perceiving science.

## **1 Outdated Philology**

In previous publications I have insistently highlighted the obsolescence of philological techniques, which draw predominantly on 19th-century conceptions (and misconceptions), and are manifestly incapable of keeping pace with other disciplines. Two simple, uncomplicated experiments most clearly illustrate this fact.

- (1) Were we first to open a book such as Changeux (2001) – conceived more than ten years ago and already surpassed by recent contributions in the field of interactions between genetics, cognitive sciences, history and linguistics – and then one on philological methods published in the same year, or even today (one can choose his/her favorite at random), the experiment would generate in us a sense of dizziness and discouragement. It is in fact almost impossible to believe that scientists, who should continuously dialogue and debate about their acquisitions, can speak such different languages and adopt such different approaches.
- (2) Let us consider the way scientists present the results of their research to their colleagues: the majority of journals to which physicians, sociologists and archaeologists contribute are published online. Online journals in the field of philological studies represent, instead, insignificant exceptions and are regarded with suspicion and a sense of superiority by philologists (see the indictment by Rico, 2010).

Are philologists and other scientists living in the same era? To consider James Joyce as a contemporary of Aristotle would be less problematic.

## **2 Causal interpretation and the obsession of restoring**

In my opinion, the two main problems with textual philology are (1) the tendency to explain cultural phenomena by identifying particular causal factors, and (2) the philological obsession with textual reconstruction. Moreover, its practitioners repeatedly demonstrate their ignorance of problems of large-scale theories, giving the impression that they simply do not consider these problems to be crucial, or believe them to be unsolvable. The truth is that many philologists find it complicated to even imagine the meaning of questions central to the neurosciences, evolutionary biology, or non-philological theories in general; haughty and arrogant, they still consider anthropology and cultural studies to be simply fashionable and irrelevant disciplines, unworthy of dealing with the “glorious and authoritative” philological tradition. This attitude is confirmed by the Alfredo Stussi’s worrying observation regarding the relationship that philology might entertain with other disciplines: “lontana dalle inquietudini epistemologiche di alcune sedicenti scienze umane, la critica del testo resta, per buona ventura, una forma di alto artigianato culturale, la cui validità si misura tutta e soltanto nelle opere” (Stussi, 1985, p. 30). It is also confirmed by Paolo Maninchedda’s statements in the following passage: “qualcuno sposta oggi la filologia verso la comparatistica e l’attualità, la intreccia con l’antropologia e i cultural studies e studia il racconto breve dagli altipiani iraniani alle praterie degli indiani d’America. In altre parole, sostituisce uno statuto disciplinare incerto e confuso, ma alla moda, a una splendida e ordinata tradizione disciplinare” (Maninchedda, 2011, pp. 223).

Philologists have become too accustomed to a kind of research which is only able to associate cause and effect, and which is not interested in the nature of the causal connection itself. A manuscript is a manuscript, a philologist must edit it, and the method of editing is more or less the same as that used 150 years ago. Here a series of unendurable clichés are continuously generated: philology as a discrete and humble art, its operators as restorers who prefer to remain invisible behind the texts they study, their activity as ancillary working hypotheses generously offered to other scholars such as critics, historians, etc. As we know, many philologists are precisely the opposite kind of scholar: arrogant and presumptuous intellectuals claiming to possess the scientific (and proven) truths about tradition, and who consider their critical edition as untouchable final stages of a hermeneutical capability which is impenetrable for the non-initiates. As Gianfranco Contini stated, “vantarsi di ignorare il metodo o l’arte del filologo e di non comprenderne i manufatti equivale ad ammettere, in via preliminare, un’ignoranza della letteratura in quanto arte della parola”.

Methods employed in this field are governed by the obsession with reconstructing the supposed original form of a text; in my last book I discussed this attitude in terms of a real pathology, absent from other disciplines and a true trademark of philology. In that book I

attempted to explain that this approach can be considered to be an “idiot proof” method, apparently primarily designed to keep texts and tradition at a distance and to avoid any kind of affective implications or risk of mistake (Benozzo, 2010a, pp. 20-28).

### **3 Ethnophilological questions**

A possible up-to-date approach is represented by what I propose to call ethnophilology. I have illustrated the main principles of this approach in a number of articles and a four-hundred-page book (Benozzo, 2007; 2009a; 2009b; 2010a; 2010b; 2010c), and will therefore refrain from repeating concepts and thoughts already presented elsewhere. My question here is: what kind of relationship do scholars, who mainly study texts, enjoy with the tradition emerging from these documents? In other words: what are our specific functions in studying texts? Or, better: as philologists, what are our specific functions in the society in which we live? And, again: how do we perceive the old traditions that we study, and how do we perceive ourselves within these traditions?

### **4 Being part of the perpetuating tradition**

There is no doubt that many who are attracted to philology as a profession prefer to maintain a clear distance between themselves and the documents they study. This is probably the first distinctive quality of a philologist when his work is compared, for example, to that of a historian of literature. An ethnophilologist, instead, is a scholar who observes and appreciates ancient documents for the information contained in them, who considers and uses his/her own emotions as a quality for penetrating the meaning of written or oral texts, and who likes learning from and laughing with others, particularly if they are persons who do not belong to the social group (or caste) of academics. This because ethnophilologists perceive themselves as being creative parts and creators of the tradition they study.

Philologists and ethnophilologists are thus probably faced with inverse observational problems: philological data manifest, or should manifest, the existence of cultural processes in the past, while ethnophilologists always work, even when not overtly specified, in the “ethnographical present”. In fact, if we consider the tradition in its perpetual traditioning, and the ethnophilological work as an important part of this perpetuation, we must conclude that, after all, when we study a document belonging to the past, we are always studying ourselves. In this sense, ethnophilology does not primarily deal with texts and the interaction between texts, but rather with the richness of the relationships between humans and their artefacts (including texts).

### **5 Absence of institutionalization as increasing maturity**

The second main difference between philology and ethnophilology consists in the absence of institutionalization of the latter. I think that lack of institutionalization is not incompatible

with increasing epistemological maturity: on the contrary, I believe that this apparent deficiency creates a fertile ground where it is possible to realize that – paraphrasing a famous statement by Henrietta Moore about the future of anthropology (Moore, 1996) – philology is no longer a single discipline, if it ever was, but rather a plurality of practices engaged in a wide variety of contexts.

Any absence of institutionalization is, in my view, comparable to the absence of institutionalization of the future, and I suggest that, if philology is to have any kind of future, it will be more consistent with the approach offered by ethnophilology. The implication of ethnophilological studies for the future becomes suddenly manifest if we consider those parts of the world traditionally unrelated to philological studies, such as Africa or Southern America, which represent the only possible future for philology: it is hard to believe that their first necessity in studying their own traditions will be concerned with ecdotics, textual criticism, and critical editions. Their interpretation of the discipline will probably focus more on cultural change, oral documents and direct participation in the social life where living texts are transmitted than to sophisticated but useless techniques for better transcribing ancient manuscripts.

## **6 Humanities among the new generations: complexity, multimediality, multiculturalism**

I would add that ethnophilology could be interpreted as a way of introducing the new generations to this near future for humanities. My own experience of teaching ethnophilology leads me to believe that students come, by way of it, to look at ancient documents in the same way they look at the world around them; the possibility of perceiving old texts as traces of something that they are living now is a way of opening their eyes to a world that asks to be understood in its complexity, a world that seems suddenly wider but also vertiginously smaller, in which our one-sided perspective is faced on a multiple space of voices, contrasts, and resonances, constantly balanced between the reassuring centripetal forces of multimediality and those, inevitably disquieting and centrifugal, of multiculturalism. Being an attempt to consider and re-found philology as a social science (Benozzo, 2010e), ethnophilology frames itself within perceptions of this kind, and should also be used to consider the European tradition, in a constant dialogue with the new methods offered, for example, by cultural biology or the new phenotypic interpretation of cultures (in my opinion, the best example in this field is that represented by the works of Cullen, 2000).

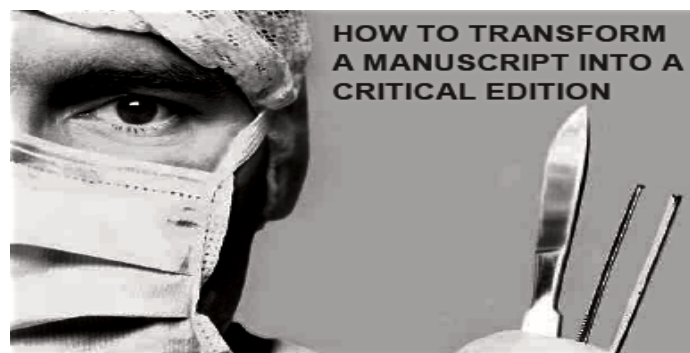
In its approach to multiculturalism, ethnophilology could highlight the positive messages and great possibilities connected with pluralism and diversity, but simultaneously stigmatize its cult and the deeply-rooted ideologies to this alpha and omega of contemporary thinking. Russel Jacoby wrote that “the rise of multiculturalism correlates with the decline of utopia” (Jacoby, 1999, p. 33), and ethnophilology should consider itself, in line with concepts of this kind, as a sort of guarantor of utopia (Benozzo, 2009b).



## 7 Heterogeneity: a landscape to be preserved

A first possible consequence of the multiculturalist approach could be the admission that the practice of preparing critical editions is a non-sensical activity that we lazily perpetuate without questioning its real meaning. Traditions – textual traditions included – represent multicultural and heterogeneous complexities: with their stability and variability, they are similar to growing landscapes. They are woods, they are oceans, they are mountains. The textual tradition of Dante's *Commedia* is a wonderful example of an intricate forest: but we should be able to identify in this intricateness its real nature, and avoid any enigmatic approach to this complexity. The compulsive attempt to rebuild an original text, founded on the belief that texts always represent invariants of a tradition which tend to damage it (Segre, 1985, pp. 29-30) resembles an effort to reconstruct the mitochondrial root of a wood. I admit that this may be a good pastime when compared to other human activities, but I also affirm that the potential result achieved is not, by any means, the wood.

The only “original form” of a text is its tradition. Why do we devastate traditions in the name of our philological toys? Why do organizations like Greenpeace not come with their boats and flags to prevent the disasters that we incessantly cause to the seas and the forests of our cultures? They should assault the publishing houses each time a critical edition is due to be published: we set fires and create petroleum leaks with impunity, and receive a round of applause from our conniving colleagues for doing so to literary and cultural traditions. Perhaps this happens because, as philologists, we consider ourselves the *magistrates, judges and surgeons* of the traditions we study: texts are in fact only reliable or unreliable witnesses, useful to reconstruct the truth; we ask unreliable witnesses to leave the courtroom (*eliminatio codicum descriptorum*) before surgically operating on the reliable witnesses, our only aim being to make them resemble the perfect and true texts that – with the support of our *stemma codicum* – we have imagined.



“Philologists at work” [© 2011/F. Benozzo]

Thank god it won't be that simple in the growing tide of the multicultural world!

## 8 Agent of the empire or defenders of dissent?

In the academy we acquire an in-depth understanding of methods that we should use, and a preventive knowledge of fields that we should explore, in order to legitimate our competence. However, we soon find out that the knowledge, skills and abilities for conducting philological works have nothing to do with philological theory. Texts are texts, not editions. They are traces of memory, artefacts of human thought. They are what they are, and what they are is not what we were taught they were.

Everyone has experienced this feeling at least once in his/her life as a philologist. I would suggest that a scholar becomes a philologist on the day that he/she decides to avoid similar perceptions, and to face the tradition only after donning the diving suit of scientific method.



"The diving suit of scientific method" [© 2011/F. Benozzo]

In my view, it is the responsibility of the ethnophilologist to deal with the realization that “in modern society the human sciences, through their claims to knowledge and expertise, have transformed unstable relations into general patterns of domination” (Foucault, 1971: 13). There are dominant ideologies, and many philologists play – often unconsciously – a crucial role in supporting the regime of truth promoted by leading cultural lobbies. I believe that an ethnophilologist, as an instrument and a possibility used by the tradition in order “to tradition itself”, should refuse to be co-opted by the establishment, and should claim the right to irreverence, which is at the very origins of the concept of science: as the emeritus linguist Mario Alinei has written in a recent groundbreaking editorial, “research is a form of rebellion. No respect whatsoever for authority. Learn from science that you must doubt the experts” (Alinei, 2010: 5), reject the role of agent of the empire and become, instead, a defender of dissent (Kintz, 2001).

Professional philologists, perceiving themselves as the owners of the past, and as its keepers, occasionally speak of themselves as worshippers of his majesty the text and of his sacred truth: according to Cesare Segre – one of the most influential sermonizers of this absurd religion of the text – , “Il testo è tutto il nostro bene; nessuna nostra escogitazione per quanto brillante o suggestiva può valere e significare di più del testo nella sua maestà. Questa maestà coincide con la verità, che è nostro dovere perseguire con impegno, nel testo e ovunque” (Segre, 2001: 99)

One of the best examples of perpetuation of a dominant ideology is represented by our understanding of medieval texts considered only in their written form. 100 years of oral theory have not been sufficient! We still speak of a medieval written tradition and confuse it with the true tradition. This affects, again, our way of editing texts, and generates the false idea that editing texts is a necessary procedure. As we know, instead, “conceptualization of the past is simply impossible without recognizing the pivotal presence and density of human voice and narrativity” and our philological work should try to consider, for example, “what could have happened in the early medieval past, when oral performances were the major system of memory sharing and ultimately understanding of history”. We cannot ignore that in the Middle Ages cognitive processes, including writing and reading, implied a stronger and direct involvement of long term memory, “that is to say a stronger activation of limbic system and bilateral right-left hemisphere connections” (Galloni, 2011, p. 126, 130). The human voice was the predominant medium in social and cultural knowledge transmission, and the voice was somehow perceived as a *material* expansion of the human body.

## 9 The conflict of interest of professional philologists

These kind of considerations, reinforced by the convincing critical analysis made by Domenico Fiormonte to the “concepción universalista y monolítica del texto” (Fiormonte, 2010, p. 79), persuades me that we should not only reflect on textual stability and textual instability: apart from generating the idea of a fluid or liquid canon, the fluidity of textual tradition should suggest that professional philologists are neither the owners of the past, nor

its custodians or cultural administrators. More simply, they confuse the handful of manuscripts that the academic community places in their hands with the past. But, then, who is the client? Who commissions this work? As Strickland (1993, p. 20) writes, “a professional is one who, in the exercise of his or her own skills, puts the client first”. This probably works well in disciplines such as archaeology or geology, where it is possible to identify a tri-partite situation with actors (the archaeologists, or the geologists), *developers* (the clients), and the *public* (the consumers, the community) (Cumberpatch-Blinkhorn, 2001). But, what about philologists? Isn’t it true that we are at once the actors, the developers, and the public of what we do? This is what I call a “conflict of interest”.

We need to reconcile with human communities. We need to leave our common destinations (libraries and the lugubrious and funereal manuscript rooms) and reach real places to meet real people. We need to admit that *traditions belong to people*. They must become our clients and we should work for a public other than ourselves (Benozzo, 2011). We should follow the example of archaeologists, who continuously debate about their vocation as a dangerous form of cultural colonialism (Cobb, Di Paolo Loren 2008), to arrive at the realization that we are, in a sense, creators of an intellectual knowledge which is different from the “indigenous knowledge” (in the sense of Odora Hoppers, 2002) represented by the tradition.

## 10 Field-notes

Ethnophilology is an “indiscipline” that aims to know texts but avoids seeking truth about them or within them.

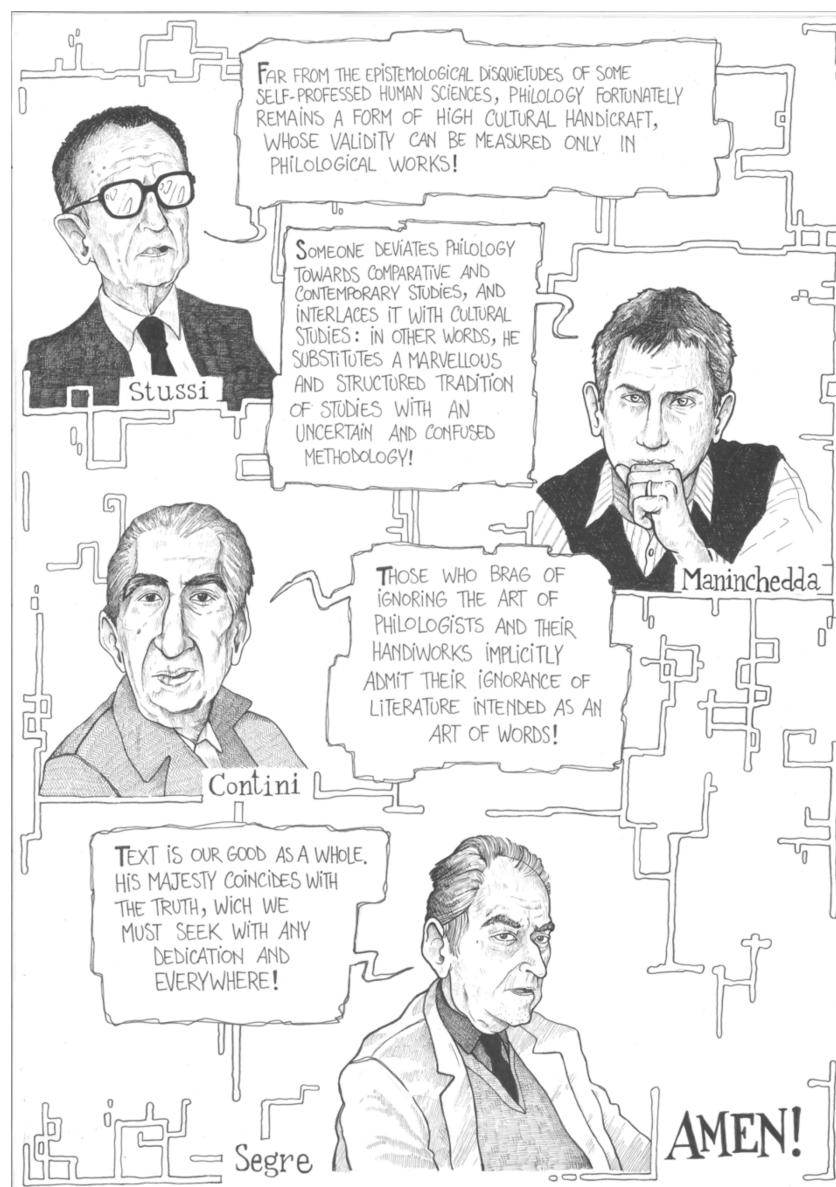
Ethnophilology aims to extend the opportunities of free thought to the future generations, in the hope that they will be able to reject any form of authoritarian method.

Ethnophilology speaks of sensations and visions more than of ideas: the latter, in fact, do not emanate from our gut, and will never be really ours.

Ethnophilology renounces any logical-formal arrangement when approaching complex traditions, and values, instead their acentric, heterogeneous and de-territorialized essence.

Ethnophilology is a consciously active part of the process of traditioning tradition.

Ethnophilology provides evidence of the salutary effect emerging from the innate human instinct to explore the unknown: it will plunge time and again into the waters of doubt.



"philological revelations" [© 2011/F. Benozzo]

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