

Areas, Disciplines, and the Goals of Inquiry

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From our present-day vantage point, the founding era of South Asian studies at Chicago looks like an age of unalloyed conceptual and political innocence. Area identities were given, disciplinary formations were unquestioned, the purposes of scholarship were self-evident, and the future was roseate. Half a century later, common sense on all these questions has vanished, and where we go from here is an entirely open question, requiring open and sustained discussion.

PRESIDENT ZIMMER, DEAN ROTH, distinguished guests, colleagues, and students.¹ I am deeply honored by the invitation to address you on this wonderful occasion, when we celebrate the history and achievements of the leading South Asia department in the country. I thank Dipesh for his generous introduction. I am pleased he made bold to mention one of my more notable achievements: recently becoming the target of a petition in India—the first ever against a Sanskritist domestic or foreign—demanding my removal from the general editorship of the Murty Classical Library of India (MCLI), in part because I evinced my “disrespect for the unity and integrity of India” by supporting “seditious” students protesting their government, in part because of my purported “antipathy towards many of the ideals and values cherished and practiced in our civilization,” as evinced especially in an article I wrote thirty years ago.² I return at the end of this address to reflect on this petition (which, given the work involved with MCLI, I was sorely tempted to sign myself), since however much criticism it has received for its very un-Sanskritic ignorance and incivility, it pertains to some of the key topics I want to discuss with you this evening, and to some of the remarkable transformations we Indianists have witnessed since 1966.

The petition is one small front of a major culture war now underway in India, and there is no need, in this room at least, to detail the attacks over the past decade on other Chicago faculty, Wendy Doniger and A. K. Ramanujan. Could the founders of the Chicago program ever have predicted the sea-change in Indian attitudes that these events testify to, or have imagined how innocent, by contrast, were the conceptual and political assumptions that marked the founding era? This change, combined with other

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²Sheldon Pollock, “The Theory of Practice and the Practice of Theory in Indian Intellectual History,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105, no. 3 (1985): 499–519.

developments of an institutional and even cognitive sort, forces us to take stock of where we have come in this half-century, to look closely at our academic configurations and sense of scholarly purpose, and to ask whether they stand in need of any rethinking. A new day seems to have dawned, and in its light all these things are starting to look different from what they once were.

Or at least they look different to me. I stress this personal dimension to make clear that everything I say this evening is more autobiography than theory. My remarks about areas, disciplines, and the goals of inquiry record my own experiences and aspirations; they are a model of my reality, not necessarily a model for yours. It is uncomfortable to speak in such a self-referential idiom for anyone who has absorbed the Sanskritic aversion to it (*ātmastutir na kartavyā*, “Don’t go on about yourself!”). Of course, if all theory is autobiography, as Nietzsche said somewhere, then I guess autobiography is in some sense theory. But I do mean to speak in an optative rather than declarative mood, and certainly not an imperative one. As you’ll see, my ideas are a bit too Quixotic for that.

THE TROUBLE WITH AREAS AND HOW TO DISCIPLINE THEM

The three topics of my title are intimately linked. Our current area-based organization of the humanities, as exemplified in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations (SALC), came about by displacing a disciplinary one. This was the inaugural moment of the anniversary we are commemorating, and its impact on the kind of knowledge we produce has been highly consequential. I want to suggest, however—this being the University of Chicago, I know I am expected to bite the hand that feeds me—that the displacement has not been entirely salutary, since while always necessary an “areal” organization of knowledge can never be sufficient. To complement the area, however, would require fashioning some new disciplinary formation. How would we do that? And to what degree might that new formation at the same time enable us to expand our goals of inquiry to better address the unprecedented exigencies of our times?

I restrict my remarks this evening to SALC, where I taught from 1989 to 2005 (I gave my inaugural lecture as the George V. Bobrinsky Professor of Sanskrit and Indic Studies in 1990 in this very room), rather than addressing South Asian studies at Chicago as a whole, for which I am hardly qualified. And happily I am not even required to provide an institutional history of SALC, given Richard Davis’s earlier presentation. I would only add that Walter Eugene Clark, the teacher of my teacher (Daniel H. H. Ingalls), was professor of Sanskrit at Chicago from 1915 to 1927, in a department, dating to the founding of the university in 1893, that with some permutations over the years was called “Comparative Philology.”³ If not this precise unit at least the disciplinary space this unit occupied is what was swept aside with the creation of a SALC in 1966.

³Michael Silverstein, “The History of Organization of a University of Chicago Unit Dealing with Linguistics,” ms. report, Office of the Dean of the Division of the Humanities, University of Chicago, 2006. The department in which I was trained at Harvard changed its name, from “Indic Philology” to “Sanskrit and Indian Studies,” in 1951.

That development was an expression of a broader reconfiguration in the academy that divided area-based and discipline-based knowledge.⁴ For me, the key aspect of this division can be characterized formulaically: the literary humanities as a whole were arealized and de-disciplined, whereas the social sciences were de-arealized and re-disciplined. The contrast, even contest, between areas and disciplines came to a head for the social sciences in the 1990s, when genuinely post-areal developments like globalization and globalized problems such as climate change began to manifest themselves. By 1996, the consensus had formed in the social science disciplines that area studies were over; they “failed to generate scientific knowledge,” as a prominent political scientist put it.⁵ The five-decade-old area committees of the Social Science Research Council were disbanded, while social science departments began their own purges, driving many area scholars out of the disciplines with the pitchforks of rational choice and quantitative modeling, and into humanities departments.

I won’t go further into the ongoing transformation of language and literature departments (European no less than Asian) into neo-area “studies” programs as a result of these migrations. What I want to underscore is something else: how the distinction between areas and disciplines came entirely to map against that between humanistic and non-humanistic knowledge. When area-based social scientists were charged with failing to generate scientific knowledge, they were also charged with having “defected from the social sciences to the camp of the humanists.” The implication was clear: the humanities not only produced nonscientific—i.e., non-disciplinary—knowledge, they were fundamentally areal, as indeed had been the case for European literary studies decades before the founding of SALC.⁶ In fact, the creation of SALC should be viewed as an extension to the non-West of a much older logic deriving from a pervasive and unquestioned methodological nationalism: the acquisition of knowledge about language and literature is possible only within the context of nations, and, concomitantly, within the context of those non-nations or super-nations called areas, regions, or—as at Chicago—civilizations.

The outcome of these various processes is the lunar landscape we language-and-literature people now inhabit in most American universities (except where amalgamation into “world literature” units has occurred, typically via “shared services” pressure rather than academic logic). This is a terrain riddled by the gopher holes of nationalized and arealized humanities departments: French, German, Italian, East Asian, Middle Eastern, Slavic, and so on, and of course those two great hegemons, (the national) English and (the quasi-areal) Classics. Among the conceptual consequences of this fragmentation I would highlight two: the crippling of disciplinary knowledge by the dismemberment of what, I want to argue, is a fundamentally unified field, and the intensification of the identitarian impulses harbored in the very parcelated structure of humanistic study.

⁴See, e.g., David L. Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁵Robert H. Bates, “Area Studies and the Discipline,” *American Political Science Association, Comparative Politics, Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section on Comparative Politics* (Winter 1996): 1–2.

⁶John Guillory, “Literary Study and the Modern System of the Disciplines,” in *Disciplinary at the Fin de Siècle*, eds. Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 19–43.

The disciplinary whole of which the nationalized and arealized units are fragments is called philology. Scholars in the West have long wrangled over the nature and definition of this ancient term, taking us from the sublime—Friedrich Schlegel's claim (and of others before him like Vico) that philology comprises “all erudition in language”—to the ridiculous—its current dwarf avatar as corpus linguistics. I think we can characterize philology far more simply as the discipline of making sense of texts. If for many the term reeks of the conceptual equivalent of Vicks VapoRub, Bengay, or whatever else contributes to old paradigm smell, I am most decidedly not speaking of the philology that SALC replaced half a century ago. I am instead pointing toward an entirely new formation, one that has in fact never been actualized in any university department as the unified trans-regional and transhistorical discipline it is.

Philology's failure to attain actualization is mainly due to the failure of us, its practitioners, who, as Jean Bollack put it, “have never produced a theory of meaning,”⁷ who have never argued out, in global-historical terms, what it means to make sense of a text. If philology is to attain institutional embodiment and provide the essential complement that will not only protect national and areal programs like SALC but enable them to contribute far more fully than they now do to the creation of new general knowledge, its disciplinary identity and autonomy need to be carefully argued out.

I am not unaware that the very condition of possibility of a discipline is its foundation in the society that created it.⁸ The specific nature of the Western state, market, and civil society are not only the objects of political science, economics, and sociology; they are the reason those forms of knowledge exist at all. Disciplines are, therefore, not context-less, any more than contexts—areas—lack their own disciplinary forms. (Classical India, for example, had well-defined *vidyāsthānas*, “knowledge-domains,” of its own.) But in the Western university disciplinarity is not going away anytime soon (and non-Western disciplines are not going to be introduced). It is the way knowledge is organized, and, as many have pointed out, all the inter-, trans-, multi-, cross-, and joint-disciplinary tendencies so loudly celebrated presuppose its existence. This does not however mean that the disciplines we currently have exhaust the domain of knowledge, or that others cannot be imagined.

A discipline is defined by at least three features. First, a distinctive object of study. Philology has such an object, namely language as concretized in texts—all texts, “everything made of language,” as one might say in a Sanskrit idiom (*vāṇmaya*), whether the texts are oral, written, printed, or electronic; prosaic or expressive (from weather reports to the most fateful scriptures, as Nietzsche put it); ancient or contemporary. Texts, their history, their mode of material existence, their very textuality, and above all, their content, are the primary objects of study of philology, along with, as *primum movens*, the language in which they are composed. All flows from the study of language itself, not as mere medium to some documentary end but as a thing in itself; it is the stuff of which the text is woven.

⁷Jean Bollack, *The Art of Reading: From Homer to Paul Celan*, trans. Catherine Porter and Susan Tarrow (Washington, D.C.: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2016), 15.

⁸Michael Burawoy, “Provincializing the Social Sciences,” in *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*, ed. George Steinmetz (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 508–26.

The second disciplinary requirement is a distinctive theory. Philology's theory is interpretation, of which it is in fact the *fons et origo* (the claim is not mine but Schlegel's, which Wilhelm Dilthey later elaborated). Such theory was developed not only in Europe but in the Ancient Near East, the Arab world, China, India, and elsewhere in order to make sense of texts. More than this, interpretation has a multidimensionality that, once adequately understood—and I will momentarily describe what I mean by “adequate” in this context—is critical to the discipline's regeneration.

Third, a discipline requires a set of distinctive research methods, a set of practices in handling its object. Philology has such methods, namely grammatical analysis, text-critical, rhetorical, historical, and other forms of analysis. Philology thus possesses precisely the “distinctive subject, distinctive theoretical concepts, [and] distinctive methods” of a discipline, as John Comaroff, our former Chicago colleague, recently argued for anthropology.⁹ (I would also include things like habit, craft, and, equally important, a sense of belonging to a tradition of study.) John adds fourth component, a distinctive place in the disciplinary division of labor, and this alone is what philology lacks. Like mathematics, philology's object, theory, and methods are used across the academy; unlike mathematics, philology has an academic home nowhere, and hence no place to fully realize its nature.¹⁰

As currently organized, the literary humanities are imprisoned on their own little national or areal islands, where literary knowledge is shared only with other inhabitants of that island. They have no way to extend, compare, complicate, or multiply their knowledge as a disciplinary formation would in principle enable, even require, them to do. (As for Comparative Literature, it has always been resolutely Western European and modern, and anyway long ago gave up any disciplinary ambitions.) Across any university you will find people who work on the interpretation of texts, whether literary, legal, or scriptural—that is, who do philology—and who have far more in common with each other than with many of the social-science areal scholars who increasingly are their departmental colleagues. At the inaugural meeting last fall of a fledgling “Program in World Philology” at Columbia, which aspires to contribute to the new disciplinary configuration described above, some thirty people turned up—many of them strangers to each other—who were specialists on everything from Sumerian commentaries to contemporary online annotation culture. However disparate their specialisms, they shared 95 percent of their intellectual DNA and were eager to venture beyond their archipelagos—not to create yet new areas (as, for example, the Ford Foundation's “Crossing Borders” initiative of the late 1990s invited us to do in order to save area studies), but to collaboratively produce new knowledge of common human practices cultivated across space and time.¹¹

“Venture beyond” does not mean to abandon. Departments of local context like SALC need to be preserved and carefully nurtured—the core of philology, language study, especially historical language study, depends on their survival. But in addition to the vertical containers of areal and national literary cultures we need the horizontal

⁹John Comaroff, “The End of Anthropology, Again: On the Future of an In/Discipline,” *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 4 (2010): 524–38.

¹⁰Sheldon Pollock, “Philology and Freedom,” *Philological Encounters* 1 (2016): 4–30.

¹¹Sheldon Pollock, “Philologia Rediviva?” *American Academy of Arts and Sciences Bulletin* 68, no. 4 (2015): 34–36.

connections of a disciplinary structure, where larger generalizations, hypotheses, and trends can be discovered in the study of how the texts that make up people's lives are constituted, classified, transmitted, translated, and above all made to make sense. Cultural products undoubtedly take on an important dimension of their signification only when positioned within a locality. But if the particular recovers its richest meaning in the web of connections that exist locally, that meaning can exert a far more powerful scholarly influence when embedded in a disciplinary matrix, if that matrix is historically reflexive, transregional and comparative, and conceptually pluralistic, as the discipline of philology shows itself to be. If we need to know a world from the point of view of those who made it, like those who made the world of classical India, we also need other vantage points: one that sees human culture projected on as large a screen as possible of patterns and divergences; one where our own particular identities and local commitments do not, indeed cannot, come into play, a vantage point where a culture becomes not an object of pride, pity, or piety, but a methodologically neutral—and blessedly neutral—datapoint.

Which brings me to the second conceptual consequence of fragmentation I mentioned earlier: the tendency toward identitarianism that thrives in the segregated conditions of nationalized and arealized humanities. Those conditions, unlike disciplinary structures, permit and even encourage students to study, not problems, but themselves. In my neo-area-studies department at Columbia, for example, more than three-quarters of the graduate students come from the regions they are studying. And this is in fact nothing out of the ordinary. Of the twenty-one ACLS Burkhardt Fellows for this year, to take just one random metric, ten have what I would call auto-projects: a Japanese scholar studying Japanese painting, a Mexican scholar studying the Mexican diaspora, Brazilian and Palestinian and Indian scholars studying Brazilian and Palestinian and Indian nationalism—as well as an African American studying Black internationalism and an LGBT scholar studying LGBT workers.

No doubt we all are keen to comprehend the sources of our selves, and to grasp and secure our place in the order of things. But this can come at the cost of understanding—as disciplinary and comparative and global or at least transregional work invites us to try to understand—larger phenomena beyond our selves: that, for example, what we think of as our “native” culture is never indigenous but always comes from elsewhere, emerging and transforming in a never-ending swirl of human exchange. To the degree you foreclose this larger view, you encourage what Edward Said once called “separatist knowledge” whose “fantastic explosion” has grown more fantastic in the two decades since he wrote.¹² In the culture at large, exclusionary and proprietary identitarianism has reached a point of unparalleled lunacy.¹³ In my smaller world of the literary humanities, the phenomenon is only abetted by the partition of the humanities into areas. It's “the sad dead end” of that development; and to see how far this sort of gate-keeping can go, to the point that “only a member of a given ethnic or religious group ‘gets to speak for’ it, ‘gets to

¹²Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 320.

¹³Consider the Rick Bayless Syndrome: Maria Godoy and Kat Chow, “When Chefs Become Famous Cooking Other Cultures’ Food,” *NPR*, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/03/22/471309991/when-chefs-become-famous-cooking-other-cultures-food> (accessed June 23, 2016).

decide' what is distinctive and special about that group,"¹⁴ you need only wait a few minutes until I get to my discussion of "Swadeshi Indology." But areal narcissism is even curiousest, since it's not just a matter of ethnicity. I have found myself caught up over the years in the pride and pity syndrome, feeling it my duty to rescue India from the supposed shame of premodernity, for example, by discovering an Indian enlightenment, or by searching for dynamism where others saw only stasis—in a word, to justify the specialism over the larger human project. In a disciplinary site, by contrast, scholars have no stake in policing entrance to non-indigenes, no scope for asserting the special powers of "native knowledge," no compulsion to cheerlead for a civilization, no purpose other than to gain knowledge about human behavior and its possibilities. If a fundamental condition for understanding the nature of our own vision of life is the very existence of alternatives, then the multiple levels of understanding represented by multiple identities, which a disciplined humanities encourages, are essential.¹⁵

The street running through this (I admit, slightly delusional) educational renovation of mine is of course two-way. Disciplines need to be arealized no less than areas need to be disciplined. Just as every social scientist wandering in the pure empyrean of abstract modeling should be required to have a joint appointment in an area studies program, where math meets matter, so every humanist wandering in the all-too-grounded realms of solipsism and self-identity should be required to have a joint appointment in a discipline, where the particular meets the general. This discipline does not, of course, have to be my philology, since not all faculty and students in area programs are concerned with making sense of texts. But the gap between nomothetic and ideographic, to use that inadequate binary, must be narrowed if programs like SALC are to make the major contributions to human knowledge that South Asian materials empower them—in some domains uniquely empower them—to make.

THE GOALS OF INQUIRY

So far my discussion of areas and disciplines has been entirely academic, by which I mean something at once positive and negative. Insofar as scholars must strive to preserve a space where purely conceptual considerations can be brought to bear upon the works of human culture, the sort of discussion I just offered is positive and necessary. It is negative (in the derogatory sense of "merely academic") because even as we strive, we know that no such space ultimately exists, because the philology of the word cannot be separated from the philology of the world (as Erich Auerbach might have put it).¹⁶ But like the positive and negative senses of "academic," word and world stand in a relation not of contradiction but of complementarity. And it is a complementarity that, if fully acknowledged,

¹⁴J. E. H. Smith, "A Forgotten Field Could Save the Humanities," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 13, 2016.

¹⁵Cf. Georgia Warnke, "Rorty's Democratic Hermeneutics," in *Richard Rorty*, eds. Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 105–23.

¹⁶James I. Porter, ed., *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*, trans. Jane O. Newman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), xlv.

might offer hope for a richer, more life-enhancing sense of the goals of inquiry, at least according to what I take those ends to be. This requires a little more autobiography.

After a classical undergraduate education that I tried to infuse, not wholly successfully I must confess, with dialectical-materialist Marxist critique (it was the late 1960s, after all), immersion in Indian studies in graduate school took me ever deeper into a self-enclosed world of Sanskrit texts, not something to be regretted if one hopes to get inside a very sophisticated intellectual tradition. Soon after leaving graduate school, however, I recovered my older sense of the inadequacy of the disembedded text. You might take Sanskrit out of India, but you could never take India—the real, living, breathing, beautiful, ugly, contentious, sometimes angry, and always political India—out of Sanskrit. And not just the India of the present but of the centuries of transmission that had kept “my” texts alive. That India, both as a contemporary reality and as the historical medium through which my materials had passed, would reassert itself to me with ever greater force over the next forty years.

Lately it occurs to me what a long strange trip it's been. I remember my befuddlement and then fascination on encountering in 1975 a pamphlet of Ashis Nandy's declaring astrology to be the “science of the poor” and a legitimate counterweight to normal Western science—the first faint breath for me (however much of a pure stance it was) of what would come to be known as postcolonialism. Three years later, Said's *Orientalism* arrived.¹⁷ While I welcomed the connection (or reconnection) of knowledge and power, I was wounded that Said was catching in his net even people like me, who thought of ourselves as critical, not comprador, classicists; and wounded more by the epistemological conclusion not a few postcolonial intellectuals drew from his work—wrongly no doubt, but in the end enhancing the narcissism that they alone were the true interpreters—that the precolonial past was effectively unknowable since all knowledge about it was entirely mediated by colonialism. Said's book helped ensure that a whole generation of scholars would focus their energies on colonialism, ignoring, even denouncing classical studies as not only epistemologically worthless but politically suspect. Such was the lay of the land when I arrived at Chicago in 1989—postcolonialists and classicists could hardly share tea together in Foster 102. Three years later came the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a powerful expression of the violent Hindutva that had reentered the scholarly agenda no less than the real world. The India you could not take out of Sanskrit even when you took Sanskrit out of India was now at once postcolonial, postorientalist, and Hindu nationalist, and ever since, these currents, for me at least, have marked that second, complementary space of the “academic” and the philology of the world.

But what does all this have to do with the goals of inquiry, with what it means to do classical or any other form of Indian scholarship today? Let me try, in the spirit of Friedrich Schlegel, who insisted that “*Der Philolog soll (als solcher) philosophiren*,” that philologists must argue out their propositions philologically rather than philosophically¹⁸—for contradictions between the two disciplinary standpoints are inevitable—let me try to make a *philological* case for reconceptualizing those goals.

¹⁷Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

¹⁸Robert S. Leventhal, *The Disciplines of Interpretation: Lessing, Herder, Schlegel and Hermeneutics in Germany, 1750–1800* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1994), 283.

In sketching out my auto-theory of philological practice, I am again following the storyline of my own life that I just recounted, and how I have come to reconcile, or at least believe I have reconciled, what I had for so long found to be conflictual or even mutually exclusive modes of making sense of texts. For I am someone who (1) was trained to a hard *historicism* by traditional classicists; but who (2), as a Sanskritist, is heir (in however mediated a way) to a brilliant history of understanding—I'll call it *traditionism*—with its own claims to knowledge, claims that postcolonialism taught me finally to take seriously; and who (3) over time has been tempered by a critical hermeneutics of understanding, or *presentism*, along with a neopragmatist vision of solidarity and the very forceful invitation that vision offers for rethinking the purposes of learning.¹⁹

In the West, the gradual consolidation of historical thinking in the early-modern period focused attention on the tension between historicist and presentist reading, and it remains a source of continuing dispute, in everything from theological literalism to constitutional originalism. What is often excluded by that binary—it was ignored completely by my own teachers, for example—are the ways of making sense offered by tradition, and the reasons for why we should take their sense-making seriously.

In the course of trying to reconcile the competing claims of these three ways of reading, I have become convinced that we cannot—either epistemologically or ethically—forgo any of them. Rather, we must try simultaneously to orient ourselves along all three planes of a text's existence: its moment of genesis, the traditions of its reception, and its presence to one's own subjectivity here and now. It is only in the sum-total of the varied meanings generated on these three planes, simultaneously co-existing in our mind, that the “real meaning” of a text, its one “correct interpretation,” can lie, which must always and inevitably therefore be plural. What a text means is nothing but what the text has been taken to mean by the people who have used it; its one true interpretation is the assemblage of all these others.

Learning this three-dimensional philology and cultivating these new goals of inquiry—to respect historicism and the scientific value of truth; traditionism and the value of plural understandings of the past; and presentism, the hermeneutical necessity of asking “What possibility does the text give me to understand my own being?”—is learning to practice a difficult balancing act. Some people are uneasy with a multiplicity of truths unranked and unreconciled, or worse, find it philosophically incoherent. But others, both those freeing themselves from the tradition of Platonic monism that is the source of that unease, and those outside it—like people in India, who happily once lived with a kind of pluralistic universalism—will rejoice in it. And in any case, such multiplicity is not *philologically* incoherent.

It was not incoherent to the rabbi I was told about as a boy (I think the story originates with Scholem Aleichem), who was once approached by two disputants. To one the rabbi said, “You are right!” and to the second, too, “You are right!” When an objector complained that both cannot be right the rabbi responded, “You are right!” Nor was it incoherent to the Persian poet Jalal al-Din Rumi. He is reported to have once said (as Muzaffar Alam reported to me) that he was “one with all seventy-three sects of Islam.” When abused for this statement by the follower of a particular school, Rumi smiled

¹⁹Sheldon Pollock, “Philology in Three Dimensions,” *postmedieval* 5, no. 4 (2014): 398–413.

and replied, “I also agree with what you say!” In the same spirit, the ninth-century Rashtrakuta king Nripatunga, when he asks in his “Garland of Questions of Answers” (*Praśnottararatnamālikā*) “What is truth?” (*kiṃ satyam*) replies, “Whatever benefits people” (*bhūtahitam*).

There are important political-ethical values at stake in this three-dimensional form of sense-making. Historicism teaches that you can’t just interpret any way you please, let alone take your own life experience as the standard of all other lives. Traditionism reminds us that other people have read before us and differently, and that meaning lies in use. Presentism dispels the illusion of historicists who believe historicism applies everywhere but to themselves and who believe you can somehow avoid measuring the text by your own experience. Put more positively, historicism reveals the vast variety of ways of being human that have existed in the past. Traditionism helps us develop patience for the views of others, and thereby expands the possibilities of human solidarity. Presentism sharpens our sense of own historicity and our relationship to earlier interpretations, and promotes humility for the limits of our capacity to know and a new respect for the importance to keep trying.²⁰

Ultimately this *philological* way of making sense is meant to encourage us to think of knowledge *both* as “a mental state that enjoys a closer relation to reality than does opinion” *and* as the achievement of consensus, whereby the goal of inquiry becomes finding, not just the truth, but also “agreement among human beings about what to do.”²¹ And philology itself thereby becomes not just a way of being an academic, but a way of being a human. It offers a reorientation toward life.

With this conceptual scaffolding in place I want now to turn to a philological analysis of the “Petition to Remove Sheldon Pollock as General Editor of the Murty Classical Library of India” (organized on change.org) and the demand raised there for “Swadeshi Indology” (Indology of “our own place”). While the document is rife with ironies—it refuses the right to Sanskrit culture to those who have found reason to critique its long-term attempts at refusal; it denounces a supposed politicization of that culture by fundamentally politicizing it—there are important questions it puts on the table: Who gets to speak for the Indian classics, to determine the canon of Indian literature, to authorize a translation? What are the role and responsibility of the country of origin with respect to curating “its” classics? By what theories and methods do we come to understand a text? The salience of these questions should not be overlooked simply because of the abusive, and sometimes patently ignorant, idiom in which the petition raised them.

A philological analysis of my sort requires, first, that we measure the historical accuracy of the petition’s interpretation of the culture it purports to defend. But it also requires that we try to grasp the petition’s interpretation itself as a form of human consciousness, that is, by way of a kind of “traditionist” reading. This betokens an openness toward understanding how others have understood, without feeling compelled to assess the accuracy of their understanding according to the criteria of historical truth.

Who, first of all, is permitted to speak about classical Indian culture? The new intolerance, even animosity, in contemporary India for non-Indian scholarship on India is

²⁰Pollock, “Philology and Freedom,” *op. cit.* note 10.

²¹Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Philosophical Papers IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 77; *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xxv.

another of the developments that would have dumbfounded the founders of SALC. Classical Indian studies, the petition declares, requires “representation of the lineages and traditional groups that teach and practice the traditions described in the texts.” The petition accordingly targets not just me as general editor of a dual-language series but the founders of SALC and everyone on the faculty of SALC today—indeed, every Indology program that includes no “scholar-practitioners” (that is, “academic scholars who have been trying to imbibe the spirit of Hindu Ethos in their personal lives, as well as, in their teaching,” according to the Hindu nationalist group that thus identified its favored appointees when offering to donate a chair to the University of California at Irvine).²² How are non-“traditional” scholars to react in the face of this direct repudiation of the very conditions of possibility of their scholarship?

A historical reading would first of all challenge the interpretation of Sanskrit culture the petitioners offer in their very practices no less than in their claims. Traditional India developed multiple ways of respecting diversity; it cultivated the highest standards of rational debate across communities; it knew how to read. What we find in the petition is close-mindedness, ad hominem invective, and most alarming, a very untraditional inability to follow an argument.

A historical reading would go on to counterpose to the call for thinking with *svadeśa*—thinking that is assumed to somehow embody pure autochthony—the remarkable intellectual freedom that had been enshrined in the *deśa* itself for centuries on end, and perhaps uniquely so there. Only contrast the Indian case with Greece, China, or Europe. No one in India was ever put to death (as occurred in the Athenian democracy) on the grounds that his thinking was a source of corruption to the youth. No historian in India was ever executed (as occurred under the Kangxi emperor) because his views threatened the ruling dynasty. No thinker in India was ever exiled or excommunicated (as occurred across the history of Christendom) on doctrinal grounds. Suppression of thinking, however hostile to the established order, and most certainly not because it was not “of the *deśa*,” is not a traditional Indian value. “Traditionalists” of the petition’s sort tirelessly cite the line from a ninth-century Sanskrit poem, *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*, “the whole world is one family.” But they forget the three preceding lines: *ayaṃ nijaḥ paro veti / gaṇanā laghucetasām / udāracaritānām tu...* “Only the small-minded ask whether a person is ‘one of us’ or foreign. For people of goodwill the whole world is one family.”

A historical reading would also always acknowledge that every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism. This thesis of Walter Benjamin’s is not a mere slogan for me. While institutions of power in India may never have sought to control thinking as others have done, forms of exclusion, oppression, and inequality based on birth or gender—and sometimes, without doubt, enforced by deadly violence—deeply shaped Indian culture, like many other cultures past and present. Elites did sometimes seek to ensure that certain texts remained the exclusive property of “the lineages and traditional groups that teach and practice the traditions described” in them. But such exclusions were the object of fierce critique from within, as those of the Vedic tradition by early

²²Dharma Civilization Foundation, “Some Preliminary Thoughts on the Academic Dimension of the Dharma Civilization Foundation: The Current Status of Hindu Studies in North American Universities,” ms., n.d.

Buddhism. If I have sometimes been concerned with reading classical Indian culture through the way it structured relations of power,²³ it is because relations of power structured it—as indeed, the real social and political objectives of the petitioners themselves thoroughly demonstrate. Others besides me for centuries have evinced similar concerns, up to and including B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit leader and framer of the Indian constitution. The history of humanity comprises a history of inequality and the slow growth of humanity's awareness of inequality's scourge, a history we all have a stake in charting precisely to the degree we have a stake in overcoming it. India offers data essential to this project. To address it is not to show “antipathy” toward Indian culture—any more than addressing slavery or patriarchy in classical antiquity shows antipathy toward Greek culture—but to seek to understand it. More important still, as far as MCLI in particular is concerned, there is a substantial body of Indian literature you cannot understand if you do not understand social and gender inequality and its internal critique. A great civilization should not need doorkeepers to restrict those who wish to enter, because it should not fear what may be found inside.

To whom does a classical tradition belong? If we think historically about this question, its very origin lies in modernity. It is then that (and I know I don't need to attribute this quote) “the intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.” From this perspective, it is clear that modernity may not yet have reached our petitioners, but regardless, by its sheer force, they no longer own the canon of Sanskrit or any other Indian literature. Indian culture has ceased to belong exclusively to “Indians,” whatever that term might mean. No one needs to show a passport before being allowed to read Abu Nuwas or Du Fu—these poets do not belong only to the Arabs or the Chinese but to me and anyone else who cares about and learns to read their poetry (and happily the “Library of Arabic Literature,” edited by Philip Kennedy, and the “Library of Chinese Humanities,” edited by Steven Owen, are proceeding with the full approbation of their Arab and Chinese readers). So, Bharavi and Magha, Tulsi Das and Surdas, and all the other authors MCLI will publish, belong to whoever wishes to read them. No one's permission is required.

The philological search for historical truth, then, leaves nothing of the petition intact. But when we read it along the traditionist plane in our search to make sense of the sense the petitioners made, we gain a rather different view of a number of things.

Significant, for me, is trying to make sense of the call for a “Swadeshi Indology.” It is not hard to take this as an acknowledgment, welcome despite its mean-spirited expression, of the catastrophic decline in India of classical studies and the literary humanities more generally. Many Indians besides the petitioners are deeply worried about their alienation from the classics, and wonder how to ensure that those works recover some honest and useful and hopeful place in intellectual and public life. But why in fact have they not? The “Make in India” Indology called for in the petition—parroting the advertising slogan of the current prime minister, Narendra Modi—has in fact been a

²³E.g., Sheldon Pollock, “*Rāmāyaṇa* and Political Imagination in India,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 2 (1993): 261–97, another essay that Hindu nationalists seem to find unwelcome.

decades-long project of the state. Billions of rupees have been spent on the Rashtriya Sanskrit Samsthan (National Sanskrit Institute) over this period, but without a single major project of significance to show for it. Some fifty million school children study Sanskrit every year, but how many ever attain the ability to actually read a text let alone become classical scholars? The petition's call for some new Indology is an expression of shame at all this failure, and especially at the fact that India itself is at present incapable of producing an MCLI of its own. (Perhaps the new library proposed by some petitioners, to be called Vande Mataram, "Hail to the Motherland," if it ever comes into existence, will prove me wrong.) I am concerned about that too—indeed, the whole reason I started MCLI is to provide young people with examples of strong scholarship on great literature to encourage active learning—and if it is troubling to find its honest efforts scorned, it is heartening to see that at least some in India are recognizing, finally, that ensuring India's access to its cultural past, as true inquiry and not political gesturing, is vital.

For this effort to be successful, however, that true inquiry, serious academic engagement—where reading and research are actually undertaken, evidence weighed, objectivity as far as possible honored—is required. As early as 1952, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, forerunner of the BJP, the current Indian ruling party, demanded in its "resolution on Indianisation" that "the people and Government must act" to ensure that "Sanskrit language should be revived and its knowledge made compulsory for all votaries of higher learning."²⁴ But the Sangh Parivar, the "family" of affiliates of the ultranationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), has never produced scholarship, and neither will Swadeshi Indology so long as the emphasis is on the *deshi* rather than the *sva*: on an Indology that is spuriously native rather than on an Indology that is India's own.

The petitioners and their allies also worry about what it means to try to make sense of the Indian past. What are the appropriate theories and methods, what warrants their appropriateness, how do we discover them? A traditionist reading acknowledges that these are serious questions, even if the responses in the petition are disappointing. Its obsession with disproving "the foreign Aryan theory," for example—Sanskrit must somehow be made an autochthonous language of India—and with demonstrating the immemorial presence of Aryans in India are old components of Hindu nationalist doctrine.²⁵ Indeed, the "*Urheimat* issue," as I suggested more than two decades ago, has always been a question driven by ideological demands but debated with a breathtaking pretense of political detachment.²⁶ The mechanical thinking about theories and methods evidenced by the petitioners and their allies has inhibited creative reconceptualization of many other important theoretical questions in the history of classical culture. I have never felt—no scholar ever feels—that one's answers are meant to be final. But the Swadeshi Indologists do not even want to think of new answers, they want to deny the very right to ask the questions. They will not ask, for example, what new evidence we can find

²⁴Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 167.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 18, 36, *et passim*.

²⁶Sheldon Pollock, "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, eds. Carol Appadurai Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 76–133.

about how theory (*śāstra*) actually understood its relationship to practice (*prayoga*); what the conceptual building blocks of social domination were in traditional India, and how we are to make sense of texts like the *apaśūdrādhikaraṇa* (the discourse in Vedic hermeneutics that denies Shudras and all lower orders any right to participate); how the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the Sanskrit epic poem, relates to political discourse—a discourse that cannot be ignored without doing violence to the work—both at the period of its original composition and over the following centuries; whether later Sanskrit literature, in the four or five centuries before colonialism, has any sort of history, and if so, what exactly it is; what role critique of tradition can have today, especially the tradition of a postcolony where critique once served colonial ends, in our efforts toward enhancing human well-being. Instead of searching systematically and dispassionately for answers to such questions—which I tried to ask in my early work that now, three or four decades later, has become such a burr to their minds—the petitioners and their allies simply deny their legitimacy, and smear the questioners as “Hinduphobes.”

Although concerns such as the “Aryan invasion theory” are in fact misapplications of Western historical-philological reading of a sort that was never part of any Indian tradition, a larger and reasonable argument does lie buried in them, namely, that a conceptual orientation more adequate to Indian historical realities has to be developed in everything from text-criticism to social analysis. It is yet another irony that the Hindutva critique of Western theory is based on precisely the critique Western theory itself developed, “like weapons smuggled through a fuzzy border to the wrong party,” which “are our weapons nonetheless.”²⁷ It is indeed the Kaliyuga, and “the world is upside down.”²⁸ The question of appropriate theory has been on the minds of many Westerners for decades, especially at Chicago and as early as McKim Marriott’s ethnosociology project beginning in the 1970s.²⁹ The “search for a method” has preoccupied me too; I have long wondered to what degree Indian conceptions of culture and power require us to supplement, or even supplant, theory that derives from and is meant to explain the capitalist West. So there are actually areas of convergence here. But again, they will never converge if Indians are enjoined, as the current Union Minister for Culture, a longtime RSS member, enjoins them, to “cleanse every area of public discourse that has been westernised.”³⁰

The petition in fact vividly exemplifies the crisis in the classics I have written about elsewhere.³¹ The origins of the crisis are complex. It is partly the result of the deep wounds left by an arrogant colonialism that found so much of precolonial culture mindless and decadent. But at the same time it needs to be said that the far more devastating

²⁷Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48, 230.

²⁸*Mahābhārata* 3.188.17.

²⁹McKim Marriott, “Constructing an Indian Ethnosociology,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s., 23, no. 1 (1989): 1–40. Nanda however shows how easily such ideas can be appropriated as Hindutva *topoi*. Meera Nanda, “Intellectual Treason,” *New Humanist*, [2005] May 31, 2007.

³⁰Sumi Sukanya, “Centre Targets ‘Cultural Pollution,’” *Telegraph* (Calcutta), September 8, 2015. The minister continued, “and where Indian culture and civilisation need to be restored – be it the history we read or our cultural heritage or our institutes that have been polluted over years.”

³¹Sheldon Pollock, “Crisis in the Classics,” in “India’s World,” special issue, *Social Research* 78, no. 1 (2011): 21–48.

loss in classical learning occurred after independence in 1947, at least if measured by the decrease in the preeminent classical scholarship that once abounded in India. (One of my own teachers, the late Pattabhirama Shastri of Varanasi, often spoke to me of the British Raj as a golden age of Sanskrit studies.) To be sure, the enormous condescension of modernity toward the past, which always realizes too late the devastation its condescension has occasioned, has also substantially contributed to this loss and is obviously not restricted to India. Indians are just more conscious of the threat—and more afraid of, threatened by, and ashamed of it—because they have so much more to lose. More specific to India has been the marginalization of *authentic* scholar-practitioners, the people from whom I myself was fortunate to learn and with whose disappearance one of the grandest traditions of scholarship the world has ever known is disappearing. These pandits represent an important alternative paradigm for humanistic learning—there is no single ordained way to go about the cultivation of such knowledge—for which space needs to be made in India, if it is not already not too late.

There are additional areas of potential agreement between the ideas in the petition and my own. Whatever else it means, the call for a Swadeshi Indology is a sign that knowledge of the past is crucial to the present and the future. Western scholarship on India often seems to exist in an echo chamber, where we scholars only hear ourselves talking. A wider conversation is essential. That is not possible with the mob of today, whose members are aflame with an angry nationalism, indifferent to deep reading and evidence, pitifully if happily constrained by the idiocies of Twitter, hyperdefensive about their ignorance, embarrassed at how much they have lost and how much they do not know, more often in fact unaware of what they have lost and do not know. But I feel certain it is possible to find partners for a real scholarly conversation, where we actually explore where we could unite and advance. For example, a just-released Indian government document, while in part proposing a completely unhinged cultural-nationalist project of turning Sanskrit into “a vibrant living language” to be used “as a medium of instruction and education, entertainment, administration, etc.,” in part also and more soberly acknowledges the need to protect and encourage real traditional learning.³²

In short, it is high time, almost past time, that solidarity no less than truth become one of our goals of inquiry. When I say “no less than truth” you will see (as I’ve already hinted) that I am forced to part ways with Richard Rorty, one of my favorite philosophers, because I know that no modern philologist can give up historicist truth—once read, historicism cannot be unread. But I also have to part ways with his ethics. “No philosophical thesis, either about contingency or about truth does anything *decisive* for democratic politics,” says Rorty. “I cannot take [the Nazi’s argument] seriously, but I do not think that there is anything self-contradictory in the Nazi’s refusal to take me seriously. We may both have to reach for our guns.”³³ A pragmatism that cannot in principle find ways to avoid shooting is not very pragmatic. It may be that no philosophical thesis can be decisive, but perhaps a philological thesis can be, not because it reveals to us the one right reading, but because it shows us there are many right readings.

³²[Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development], “Vision and Road Map for the Development of Sanskrit,” ms. report, n.d.

³³Robert B. Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 13–14.

You are how you read, and if philology can help us learn better ways of reading, it might help us learn better ways of being.

If we begin to acknowledge the pain and humiliation other people feel—from the great slights of history and the small slights of everyday cultural snobbery, racism, and religious insults, especially in the Indian diaspora, where so much of the current nationalist anxiety and enmity originate—and that have led to their interpretations of the world, we might begin to cultivate the solidarity required by the planet-wide community we so desperately need to create. Such acknowledgement could begin in, or at least be strengthened by, a different, multidimensional way of making sense of the texts that make up our lives. If academics start to practice it, others will follow suit. Such at least is what is demonstrated by the four-hundred-year history in the West of monodimensional historical reading—not unconnected in its origins with capitalism and colonialism—which warrants one true method and one true meaning.³⁴ We are never going to shout or sue or shoot our way out of the current mess, whether the one I have described or many others like it; none of those approaches, shouting and the rest, has a very encouraging track record. But we might learn to read our way out. For that we need, on the one hand, the careful study of located cultural practices, like that which SALC has superbly promoted for half a century, but institutionally combined with a new disciplinary formation like global philology; and, on the other, a readiness to expand our notion of scholarly truth and combine it with social hope.

My own autobiography, for what it's worth, tells me that neither area nor discipline, neither truth nor hope, can go it alone any longer.

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³⁴Pollock, "Philology in Three Dimensions," *op. cit.* note 19.