

Book Review

Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities

James Turner

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While reading James Turner's tome titled *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities*, I pictured a weathered and weary man roaming the streets of Greece, Italy, Germany, Britain, the United States, and so forth, frequenting every public and university library and bookstore he possibly could to accrue as much information to ensure that we, his readers, get the full story before it dissipates into the ether. I could imagine him in my mind's eye running from place to place to place to place, in the hopes that he could find all of the scrolls, all of the books, all of the parchments, and all of the texts that provide us with a firm and exhaustingly comprehensive understanding of how the humanities have progressed and regressed throughout the years. In my imagination, Turner is nervous, scared, and frightened by the future; he sees a consideration of historical context slowly ebbing away, and must make sure to feverishly research and write this discourse down before it is too late. In *Philology*, we follow alongside him on his arduous and fictional journey, and his noble venture is certainly worth the risks and sacrifices, as we see; but, by the end of it, we are very much like the weathered and weary man, ready for a nap.

Turner, the Cavanaugh Professor of Humanities at the University of Notre Dame in Notre Dame, Indiana, in truth, provides a mind-blowing and thoroughly written examination of the now underappreciated discipline called philology, or "the multifaceted study of texts, languages, and the phenomenon of language itself" (p. ix). It is this form of research that, unbeknown to most, is the foundation of our current and contemporary understanding of the humanities, which essentially comprises of historicism, comparison, and genealogy, at least according to Turner. The issue, however, is that this most imperative form of study is no longer recognized by most of the college-educated American population. He writes:

Indeed, for most of the twentieth century, philology was put down, kicked around, abused, and snickered at, as the archetype of crabbed, dry-as-dust, barren, and by and large pointless academic knowledge. Did I mention mind-numbingly boring? Whenever philology shows its face these days in North America or the British Isles—not often, outside of classics departments or linguistics faculties—it comes coated with the dust of the library and totters along with arthritic creakiness. One would not be startled to see its gaunt torso clad in a frock coat. (p.ix)

Essentially, it is because of this discarding of philology that the humanities, and one could go as far as to say the university system, is in such crisis. Turner states:

Higher education needs reconstruction—from the general education component, to the structure of specialized programs, to the layout of graduate training, to the configuring of knowledge itself beyond the present disciplinary setup. But rebuilding can only proceed intelligently if we understand how knowledge has evolved over time. (p. xv)

Philology is meant to provide readers with that historical knowledge in the humanities, and it does so by going into the professional and academic backgrounds of antiquarianism, linguistics, history, anthropology, ethnography, literary studies, biblical and religious studies, political science, philosophy, and art history, or, what Turner calls “fields of academic knowledge” (p. xvi). He does stress that he is not trying to discuss and repair the problems associated with higher education, but he is trying to say that those issues of higher education stem from a deeper problem of context that needs to be recognized. Historical context is the key for our current understanding, and with this knowledge, institutions may be less apt to sweep all of the humanities under the figurative rug.

There is no doubt that Turner accomplishes this goal of showing how imperative historical context is. Through his book he is very successful in his presentation that philology is important as the foundational discipline that started contemporary humanities. Philology, especially in the 19th century:

covered three distinct modes of research: (1) textual philology (including classical and biblical studies, ‘oriental’ literatures such as Sanskrit and Arabic, and medieval and modern European writings); (2) theories of the origin and nature of language; and (3) comparative study of the structures and historical evolution of languages and of language families [and, that all] philologists believed *history* to be the key to unlocking the different mysteries they sought to solve. (p. x, emphasis in original)

He uses that key and opens that door for us; and we, as his open-minded readers, are exposed to and overwhelmed by the treasure trove of information that is piled high behind it. In fact, one would go as far as to say that any reader would be in awe of how much information is given. Turner’s works cited section is 54 pages long and, as he states, it does not include such things as online sources, dictionaries, or encyclopedias. He provides us with a barrage of names, dates, places, and texts throughout, which is both immensely educational and frightfully dizzying. And this is where *Philology* becomes problematic; Turner’s work, because of the abundance of source material, it ends up not being very persuasive. He provides a significant argument, but the argument becomes ambiguously embedded and lost in the bewildering prose. As a result, the work ends up becoming more of an extensive and pedantic index, rather than a sincere case for the humanities to re-consider what he considers to be a dying and unrecognizable discipline.

Turner is truly a brilliant man; this work is painstakingly written. One does not deny his research ability, his tenacity, and his prowess as a writer. But, quite honestly, and, for some reason, I think Turner, based on his writing style, would appreciate this, he tends to ramble. He reminds me of the guest at a dinner party who has something very important to say, but will take up three hours of your time saying it. Yes, we are more than willing to listen. Yes, we recognize that what he is saying is relevant and much needed. Yes, he knows what he is talking about. And, yes, on many occasions, we pay attention to the diatribe. But, at the same time, we would like to eventually get back to the party, have a couple of drinks, and sit back and relax for a little while.

Turner does not provide that to his reader, and in turn, it becomes hard to absorb what he is telling us. We stand in front of the door that Turner opens for us, and we appreciate the treasure behind it; that is until it cannot withstand the pressure of being packed inside such a small room, and it topples over and smothers us to the point of suffocation.

Philology is a difficult book to read and review because of this. The work is academically impressive, extremely well-organized, beautifully written, and at times witty. However, it is also dense and quite frantic. Once again, I am drawn back to the image of that weathered and weary man roaming the streets trying desperately to make sure to provide a complete history of all of the humanities. He successfully does it, but he does it in such a way that we, in turn, may still not fully understand or appreciate it. The history of the humanities, unfortunately, may then fall on deaf ears. If that happens, what is the outcome for the humanities? This is a question that may not get answered until it is too late; and, don't say that Turner did not try and warn you within his tome.

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