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Has Philology Become Linguistics?: A Post-Deconstructionist View of Language and Literature

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I was shocked when I recently read W. R. Parker's, "Where do English Departments Come From?" and found this statement: "Philology, or what we now call linguistics ..." (College English, 28:340).

My grammar school taught me already from the age of eleven onwards to read Shakespeare with great attention to detail—in those famous Verity editions which are, alas, no longer used, even in Britain. Then in Cambridge, under Leavis and Richards, there was concentration on detail. Richards's idea for a term's course was six lyric poems of medium length. I spent a semester doing syntax in Marburg and another semester doing history of literature in Bonn. Then I went to one of the high seats of philology in Sweden, in Lund, worked under Ekwall for my Licentiate and Doctoral degrees, and learned what philology was. So I have spent my life since the age of eleven believing that what counted in a text was detail, and the more detail the better, and the closer the detail the better. But I gradually realized that in studying the detail of a text, what one was doing was interpreting tokens in terms of what was going on inside oneself. So, concentrating on detail means, from my point of view, two things. One, it means intensively looking at your responses of whatever kind; the other, intensively looking at the means by which those responses may be disciplined. And those disciplines—and I use the word advisedly, not subjects but disciplines—have been developed for the last three thousand years, at least.

Having been through the mill in Sweden, I met J. R. Firth, professor of general linguistics in the University of London, and knew him for a number of years: we had many discussions. It is largely because of him that I say firmly that linguistics and philology are not the same thing and will never become the same thing. Firth was, you might say, a philological linguist, in the sense that for him the text was everything. You began from the text, you went back to the text, you put the text into such context as was needed to explain the text; but you always began with the context of the text itself.

There is an urge in the human mind to theorize. And J. A. Richards, my teacher at Cambridge, had a number of different phrases for the preconditioning of the mind by theorization; the principal two were 'technical presuppositions' and 'doctrinal adhesions'. The willing suspension of disbelief that Coleridge spoke of can be interpreted as 'the willing suspension of any other belief than what may occur to you when you read the text.' How much suspension is undertaken I'm not prepared to tell you. But it does seem to me that something happens in the artistic process which enables this kind of suspension to occur. And that means, although Coleridge didn't express it in that way, that you do not suspend belief in what you are experiencing immediately, you suspend belief in everything else. And that is why art works, because it has that kind of hypnotic effect. It is not my business to talk about that today.

You can see from what I've been saying that I think it is important for a philologist to be extremely suspicious of any generalization or formulation. I see the prime aim of the philologist as explaining details in a text. Now you may say,
"He goes to that text preconditioned." Of course he does. But he can go to the text either preconditioned from a specific point of view, or he may go to the text with a willing suspension of expectation. He goes with a multitude of things; he accepts multiple definitions; he does not expect a text to have one final sense. A text exists in terms of tokens which are reinterpretable from age to age—to eternity, for all intents and purposes. And consequently that text is never completed. I strongly object to those persons who speak of a work of art as in some sense being complete. It is never complete. Because to that token, whether it is painting or music or literature, there will always be further responses and there will be no end to those responses as long as that work exists; and those responses will not be the same. They may be remarkably similar, but they may well be remarkably dissimilar. So what we do in the humanities is study a text in its tradition. In fact, I would go further and say, a text is its tradition and its potential for further tradition; for I know no other way of defining it. And that tradition is open-ended; as long as the text exists, the meaning of that text is still open.

Now, if we are primarily interested in the text, we are not interested in using the text to demonstrate something else. And that's the fundamental difference that I see between philology and linguistics, especially as linguistics is still in the nursery. And I suppose philology is—well, philologists have traditionally lived to great age—quite old by now.

How can some kind of reconciliation be effected? By making the traditional approach to tradition. Philology is a branch of the traditional thing; so is linguistics. The traditional thing is rhetoric, the age-old word. It was the prime subject of discussion and study in the middle ages to which grammar and logic were subordinate: grammar, as a handmaid to rhetoric, and logic, as being one of the ways in which rhetoric operates. For logics themselves vary from age to age. And there is a tradition of logics just as there is a tradition of anything else. What did Collingwood say? A subject is in the end the history of that subject. And when we come down to the history of the subject, we have to bear in mind that there is no objective history. There can be honest history, but not objective history. There can be honest study of all kinds of things in the humanities, but not objective study. The two preclude one another. In the humanities, to make up our mind to be objective is a kind of self-emasculation. It means that we are leaving something out which is extremely important. First comes the response; second comes the discipline of the response. But it is no use for the discipline of the response to bombinate in the inane. The response does not exist in order that it may be studied. The response exists as part of our life; we may choose to study it. We see, therefore, that if we look at these three disciplines—Rhetoric, Philology, Linguistics—we see a situation governed by the enthusiasm of youth: Linguistics is the youngest, and linguists are not in the first place students of and for the text, but persons who wish to make use of the text to demonstrate something or to bring texts together to demonstrate something. And what is wrong with that is precisely the demonstration. An illustration of this: we see a performance of King Lear. We go out of the theatre and we may start to discuss that performance with a friend. We may each have a theory to ventilate but the discussion that we have with a friend about King Lear is not the experience we have just had, but yet another experience of a different kind. I am anxious to make clear that this does not lead to solipsism; because, in terms of the tradition, we have (a) our colleagues, others who have similar experiences, and (b) the past. And it seems to me that those are two aspects of the same thing. We have, that
is to say, at our disposal what the past has said about its own reaction, and we have what our colleagues can say about their reactions.

Now all I've said about this is extremely crude. It is intended perhaps to be stimulative. But I've not stood up here to announce a thesis--merely to say some things which may have the result of your wanting to say or think some other things. And more than that there is nothing to it. As T. E. Hulme once observed, before being blown up on the western front in the First World War, "the ultimate reality is a circle communicating." And when he used the term 'ultimate reality', he really meant, of course, in terms of ourselves the ultimate reality is a circle communicating, because we can't think of anything else except in terms of ourselves. I suggest to you, therefore, to consider together the following three things: Rhetoric, Philology, Linguistics (particularly sociolinguistics), and ask you to bear in mind their relationships in terms of a fourth thing that has once again come to be an important study and will become an increasingly important study because it does not want to define, it wishes to collect and organize definitions. It does not want to make final pronouncements, because it knows that final pronouncements are impossible, I mean the hermeneutic approach. That is why I called this thing "Has Philology Become Linguistics?: A Post-deconstructionist View of Language and Literature." The only way out of deconstructionism is the hermeneutic way.

Question: Could you draw some kind of a relationship between logic and how rational or objective we can be in studying literature?

AHK: Rationality comes into the situation that I spoke of just now about objectivity and honesty. Reason can be used as the servant of honesty or dishonesty. But, we cannot speak of something other than honesty which can dishonestly serve honesty. The point about honesty is that we know that we are not objective, because nobody is. But we know also that we are making the utmost effort to be what the objectivist would call objective. That is to say, we are doing our best to ériger en loi ses impressions personnelles (Remy de Gourmont's formulation): "to erect into law one's personal impressions." He meant that we went through life from moment to moment, and every moment was an effort to erect into law, and every moment was a recognition that we had not succeeded in erecting into law and we had to make another effort the next moment, and so on. It is like the relationship (for Mormons) between the Mosaic law and the gospel, because once we stop to consider the gospel it becomes Mosaic law. It is only when we don't consider it but are completely spontaneous with it that it remains itself. So you see that to go back to rationality, the answer is all the time that reason is to be practised to the maximum to which it is reasonable to practice it. And that, in terms of faith, is as the servant of faith. Because where reason is not, there is faith. And there is nothing else except faith and what faith can do with reason. Everything else comes under those two things.

Question: Has the sociolinguistic always been so wedded to the rhetorical and the philological or is that found more in the kind of work you do than in other kinds of philology?

AHK: Well, when I was a young man I wrote on Ben Jonson (I did a treatise, which I think was the first treatise ever on historical sociostylistics; had I lived ten years longer I would have called it historical sociolinguistics I think, because I have become more and more dubious about the word 'style' and its usefulness). But the point is this: I naturally think of literature as a part of language. And
therefore, it is subject to society in the same way language is and reflects society. What goes wrong all the time is that people read books of the past as if they were written in the common language of the past, which they are not. The literary language has some relationship with the common language of the past, but that relationship is difficult to establish. You take the Oxford English Dictionary, for example, which they began in 1857 and finished in 1920, 1923, something like that. It's almost entirely founded on texts and most of those texts are literary texts. The reason was that in 1857 they didn't realize what was available to them in terms of recorded speech. There was quite a lot, particularly in records of evidence in court. Now, during the last 50 years there has been effort to make use of these legal and other resources for the actual language of the past. My work on Ben Jonson was intended as a prelude to writing on Shakespeare: we have sound evidence that Ben Jonson, unlike Shakespeare, went around taking notes about what people said, and made use of them in his work. Ben Jonson had a subtle and delicate relation to language, which is undoubtedly due to a great deal of close observation of a totally different kind from Shakespeare's.

To add all of this up, we need to put literature into its social context and we need to do it from a number of points of view, of which the Marxist point of view is a stimulating and helpful one. What is wrong about the Marxist point of view is not their idea that literature reflects society, but their whole account of society. In Sweden they quickly recognized that Marxism was not necessarily left-wing philosophy at all, and conservatives in Sweden have made regular use of it during the last forty years. In working with Shakespeare, I have to remember that his plays are language artifacts, just like Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. There is some relationship between those artifacts and the normal dialogue of the time. But it is an extremely difficult one to state. It is about as different as the difference between recitative (even melody) and intonation in speech. There was some effort in Vienna between the wars to approximate song and speech intonation.

Question: You mentioned that we all begin at what we call the linguistic stage, and then you mentioned that there's a relationship between linguistics, philology, and rhetoric. Do you mean to suggest that there is a hierarchical relationship among those three?

AHK: Yes I do.

Question: And if so, can you spell out a little more clearly the realm of each?

AHK: It is awkward that we use nomenclature at all, and that we're talking about philology, linguistics, and rhetoric, because obviously these terms overlap, and Hugh Nibley's use of 'rhetoric', as we're going to hear later this afternoon, is rather different from mine. When I talk about rhetoric, I mean the study of the language as a whole, the total language, from all points of view. It is no doubt true that in the past the study of rhetoric was used pragmatically, but that did not prevent those studying rhetoric to do more than merely utilize it as a tool or recommend how it should be used as a tool. They got into linguistic problems. There is a professor of rhetoric still in Edinburgh University, and he's the senior professor of English literature. That's the kind of point of view that I would like to see. I see rhetoric as something which tells us that the spoken word and the written word of all kinds and so-called literature are all part and parcel of the same thing. That is the first point. The second point is that I see linguistics as a young science endeavoring to make itself as much as possible like natural
science, like economics and like psychology and like sociology and so on, and I think that this is a misdirected effort, because I do not see any reason at a time when physics has abandoned its principles of the last 300 years, and then promptly proceeded to abandon that set of principles after a further 26 or 30 years. It seems to me that in that kind of situation, for any humanistic study to want to approximate to the physicist’s processes of mind is a mistake.

What in the end we have to base ourselves upon in humanistic study is tradition. And tradition has to be regarded in some sense as authoritative. The argument from authority is like G. K. Chesterton’s “Don’t take down a fence until you find out why it was put up.” We put that fence there. Well, we don’t know why it’s there, but if we took it down, what might happen? This is a relevant way of looking at history and looking at conduct. In fact, from the point of view of faith it seems to be the only way. To try to make your faith into something reasonable from which you will deduce how to live is to do it the wrong way around, and you will never get anywhere with it, because reason is the tool. Reason being the tool, it is a mistake to use reason to try to generalize in such a way that what you are doing is serving the generalization that you want to make, rather than the particulars from which you are making your generalization. The discipline of philology succeeded to the tradition of rhetoric shall we say from about what, 1780, 1790, onwards. We don't really get philology until we get the establishment of what is nowadays called comparative linguistics. I suppose we can say that philology dates from the discovery of Sanskrit’s relationship to Greek and Latin. The distinction remains, what are you using the text for? And the answer is, I’m trying to use the text for the text. And this is my objection to the kind of philology which led to linguistics when linguistics hived off from what I call true philology, because philology was failing itself. I think of Luick trying to finish a history of the sounds of the English language. And those other people of the late-nineteenth century who failed to finish because they had undertaken such gigantic works of rational approach to something which could not be dealt with in that kind of way, and works on principles and assumptions which were based on Darwin. All this business of a proliferation of language from one ultimate, one source, etc.; one language becoming another; a dialect coming from a language and splitting up, and so on--there’s lots of evidence of similarity of this kind. There’s equally evidence of similarities that go across, languages which coexist. You can’t say that New English grew out of French, and you can’t say that New English grew out of Anglo-Saxon. New English grew out of the coexistence of French and Middle English over about 300 years.

Philology is safe in trying to stick to detail; linguistics may pursue what generalizations occur to it; rhetoric could once again become the overriding discipline, with the techniques of hermeneutics.