Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities
James Turner
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Review by Andrew Doig

There was a certain highfaluting pretension in me that turned my attention to the title of this book: Philology; the study of words, isn’t it? Or the study of language? Or is it the study of texts? Actually, I quickly realised that I didn’t really know what philology is, other than some beautifully obscure and highbrow field of academic interest. In many ways, after completing Mr Turner’s book, I’m still a bit unclear on how to define philology and all the better for it (though his last words do provide a perhaps too neat, aphoristic definition, ‘Philology: the love of words’). Philology: The Forgotten Origins of Modern Humanities gives a convincing understanding of what a wide ranging, historical, literal, linguistic and cultural area of study it can potentially be, or certainly what it was historically before our universities were divided in to faculties, schools and disciplines for study.

At the core of Turner’s book is the idea that what we see in Modern universities as the separate disciplines of the humanities are, to a large extent, sets of intertwining knowledge that can be viewed as a whole under the study of philology. Indeed, he
lucidly describes how the separation of the disciplines of literature, linguistics, history, classics and politics is principally a modern phenomenon, and that if we are to trace the origins of these disciplines, ‘the trail usually leads back to one big, old thing: philology – the multifaceted study of texts, languages, and the phenomenon of language itself.’

His writing style is always accessible and frequently entertaining, which is a godsend given the 550 pages presented on what is a vast and dense subject matter. However, despite his light style, the necessary concentration of historical detail included did make the work at times, for this reviewer, a little hard going. Perseverance is to be encouraged, however, as it is both the scholarly detail and the story as a whole that make this book worthwhile.

The book is divided into three parts, through which Tuner puts forward distinct phase in the development and eventual decline of philology.

Part I takes us back to antiquity, particularly Greek, and great inventions such as the first public library, the first dictionary and punctuation; all created to aid philologists in the analysis of the slowly growing collections of written texts. This provides what, for Turner, was the golden age in which the scholar was endowed with a ‘voracious and undistinguishing appetite’ and a ‘deep erudition ingeniously applied,’ continuing through the renaissance until the late eighteenth century.

Part II is where the humanities start to form, as scholars begin to recognise patterns of similarity across areas such as languages and literatures. Gradually areas of study such as classics, archaeology and history begin to be studied in their own right.

Part III describes how, in the modern era, the polyglot, erudite, borderless subject studies coalesced into firm disciplines, and philology began to be understood as no more than the study of ancient Greek and Roman texts, or biblical studies. Through this period of time, Turner explains how, in this process, the humanities have formed a rigidity that does not encumber, for instance, the life sciences.

In epilogue, Turner drives home his point by saying, ‘Today’s humanities disciplines are not ancient, integral modes of knowledge. They are modern, artificial creations – where made up lines pretend to divide the single sandbox in which we all play into each boy’s or girl’s own inviolable kingdom. It’s a sham. Students of early America freely mingle history, archaeology and anthropology; literary scholars write history, and historians study literature.’

The bottom line to this book, if you would like one, is that if you have a passing interest in philology, then it is probably too in-depth and too entrenched in historical detail to give your time to; however, if you are keen to gain clear sight of philology as a broad field of interest and get to grips with the progress of this fascinating subject through ancient and modern times, indeed, to get a righteous sense of its worth and the scholarly world’s loss at its distribution around the humanities, then you will enjoy James Turner’s engaging writing style and thorough erudition.