

*The Art of Philologist in 15 Points\**  
(for use by young newcomers to the discipline)  
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The reader of this note will find a series of short arguments that summarize the characteristics which I consider essential to a philologist's work. The range of typologies and methods of philological approach to literary texts in the vernacular is so wide that its boundaries cannot be easily defined. Moreover, in philology, each case is a case in and of itself that is to be dealt with and solved in specific and particular ways each time; nothing or almost nothing can be generalized. Nevertheless, the function of a philologist, and in particular of a philologist-editor, is always and in any case to provide mediation between the author and the reader. After all, a basic course in philology is sufficient enough to realize that reading a literary work from past centuries in a modern edition is not the same as having the text under one's eyes in the precise form written by the author's pen. If Petrarch's *Canzoniere* were transcribed in a way that faithfully respects the spelling of the original text (the manuscript that we have and preserve),

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\* Traduzione di Robert Bucci.

today's reader would be in serious difficulty: there are abbreviated words; articles are linked to referent nouns; *u* and *v* written in the same way; there are different punctuation marks than ours, etc. Even more problematic is the situation of the *Divine Comedy*, of which no autographs are preserved, but only transcriptions done by copyists. In many places, we are not even sure of the words that Dante actually wrote. Dante and Petrarch are authors from eight centuries ago, but things, at least in principle, do not change even for modern or even contemporary authors. The literary texts we read in our books are always the result of some philological mediation; for authors up to the sixteenth century, there is also the additional need for transcoding from one writing system to another, theirs to ours. The work of a philologist must therefore reconcile two inclinations: on one hand, rendering the text in a form that is compatible with current writing and reading practices, and, on the other, safeguarding the text's authenticity. These are apparently contradictory objectives, and, in order to reconcile them, the tradition of studies has developed and fine-tuned a series of operational procedures that constitute the wealth of skills of the philologist. To this art, «a form of high intellectual craftsmanship» (A. Stussi) – and to the work undertaken as interpreters, historians, and editors of literary texts – I dedicate an unusual pentadecatalogue, on the basis of my experience.

### 1. *Silence, Slowness*

«Philology is an art that requires one thing above all from its devotee – to step back, to leave time, to become silent, to become slow» (F. Nietzsche). This quote alone highlights how old-fashioned the practice of philology is. The philologist is called to stand aside at a time in which being present is valued above all. Yet, despite any outdatedness, anyone who has only occasionally approached the objects of philology ends up being fascinated by them. Viewing an ancient manuscript (even just a reproduction of one), turning the pages of an incunabulum or of a sixteenth century book is an exciting experience, even for those who will do or already do something else in life.

### 2. *Measure*

Studying an author's manuscript or printed material, collating them, and studying their language is the only way to enter into the text's fibers. And it is this, above all, that a philologist finds gratifying. In the face of the text,

the philologist is required to respect its “Majesty” (C. Segre). This requires an attitude of service, of humility, and never penchants for superimposition or even abuses of power. But what does it mean “to serve the text”? It means that, in the preparation of a new edition, for example, the text does not become a pretext for exhibiting one’s knowledge. Measure is an essential virtue for a philologist; it is the ability to stop oneself in front of all that is non-functional and irrelevant. The text, never those who work on it, must always remain at the center.

### 3. *Critical Idea*

There are still numerous editions with exaggerated, overflowing, and clearly superfluous commentary. And then there are others with comments that are seemingly extracted, asphyxiated, and insufficient; not to mention those that neglect or gloss over what is not known or understood. By doing so, in order not to admit one’s surrender, the frustration of this lack of understanding is unloaded on the reader. Comments must be functional to the critical idea behind the edition, because there must always be a critical idea at the base of an edition. It is unacceptable to publish a classic and reserve the rights to an introduction for oneself while entrusting the notes and commentary to a collaborator (as if the introduction did not also arise from the annotation). Good introductions do not pre-exist the text, they arise from working on the text. Otherwise they are generic, not very incisive, and even useless.

### 4. *Commentary*

Annotating a text is a long job that requires patience, but it is never boring. It is a job that must be calibrated to the type of edition, to the series, and to the critical aims that are proposed. But this process of annotating, glossing, and paraphrasing a text is not something that only benefits those who have difficulty in understanding obsolete vocabulary or complex syntax. Commentary also serves the philologist who provides it, all the more so if it is a critical edition. Anyone who has produced annotated critical editions knows that, had it not been for the commentary, many places would have been unwittingly passed over, the opacity of this or that passage would not have been grasped. If we agree that «an unexplained reading is not truly established» (G. Inglese), the absence of commentary affects the quality of an edition.

### 5. *Clarity*

The philologist also has the duty to serve the text with adequate writing. Brevity, essentiality, and above all clarity are necessary qualities. Since being clear should be an obligation for philologists, one should be wary of those who exhibit crypticity and unnecessary technicalities in philological works. Clarity does not mean trivialization. The quality of a philologist is also measured by the ability to treat complex topics with transparency and maximum brevity.

### 6. *Discovery*

It is expected that any project, which aspires to be defined as philological, will contain novelties compared to what is already known. By this, I mean new textual data that somehow relate to manuscripts or printed material – that is, the discovery or use of new witnesses, the specification of dates, the demonstration of previously unclear intertextual relationships, etc. In order to succeed in this, it is always necessary to go to the sources and to not be satisfied with what critical literature has already presented. An essential task of the philologist is to produce new knowledge, that is, to carry out a cognitive process.

### 7. *Doubt*

To produce new knowledge in philology, as in any other field, it may be necessary to approach problems from a new perspective. All philologists are obliged to have preconceived suspicions about previously reached results by others who preceded them, even if they were scholars of the first magnitude. In fact, it is not easy to arrive at proposing new and original ideas, but, if you do not have this disposition, you will remain entangled in what has already been said. The quality of philological work is not assessed by the more or less good reorganization of what is already known, by the formally irreproachable citation of previous critical literature, but by the novelty, the plausibility, and the interest of what is proposed. In scientific research, contradicting the opinion of others, if there are sufficient reasons to do so, is not an option, but a duty. Such a statement is considered obvious in scientific research, but it is not always so in the humanities.

### 8. *Progress*

I am not soliciting presumptuous or even arrogant behavior, but advocating the necessity of having faith in one's abilities, of maturing one's identity as a scholar. Progress does not occur because those who preceded us did not know or understand and therefore made a mistake. Because new conditions are determined in the progress of research, and other knowledge matures, new tools are thus available, all of which contribute to the opening of new perspectives. Those who defend their own positions or the ideas of a school of thought, even when they are obviously unsustainable, have more love for themselves or for their circle than for the truth. They reverse the ancient maxim: not *Amicus Plato sed magis amica veritas* but *Amica veritas sed magis amicus Plato*.

### 9. *Intuition*

But what is the ability, to some extent also innate, that is required of a philologist? Attention and precision are prerequisites that are superfluous to talk about. Instead, I would emphasize the attitude of associating, comparing, relating, and identifying the similarities and differences that define the objects of study. It is on this basis that intuition – which will then be subjected to verification – is born. Discoveries are always made following an intuition. Textual databases are tools that, when used with philological competence (which is more necessary than computer science), constitute very useful support in establishing comparisons and identifying relationships that would otherwise be impossible to grasp. Serendipity is another way to discover new things. Surely, it involves a certain amount of luck, but even in this case it is never just luck: knowledge and sensitive antennas are always needed.

### 10. *Competency*

Intuition is not enough without “science”: I use this term in an etymological sense, let it be known. A philologist is required to have literary, linguistic, palaeographic, bibliographic, historical skills, etc. Basically, a philologist should know everything that revolves around the text under study – which is impossible. But the more you know, the more the possibility increases of collecting useful data to validate a starting hypothesis, which may also be partially modified or even recognized as erroneous during a

project's progression. If you receive support for your thesis from the data acquired, it is necessary then to produce an argument, which would still have circumstantial roots. A scientific hypothesis is superior to another if, when compared, it is able to explain more aspects of a phenomenon. This is also true in the field of philology.

### 11. *Making Connections*

“Circumstantial roots”: I used the words of the title of a famous essay by Carlo Ginzburg from 1979 (“Spies: Roots of a Circumstantial Paradigm” [*Spie. Radici di un paradigma indiziario*]), which brings together Giovanni Morelli’s attributive method, the police investigations of Sherlock Holmes, and the Freudian theory of *lapsus* and *parapraxis*. Morelli, Conan Doyle, and Freud were all doctors: according to Ginzburg, their methods were all based on the experience of clinical semeiotics, a discipline based on the observation of details. Philological work is also based on details that must be connected together to form a picture, on the ability to establish relationships. The quality of the results depends on the relevance, quantity, and quality of the elements adduced.

### 12. *Changing Your Mind*

What if things do not add up, what if a hypothesis does not have sufficient confirmation? This is where things become delicate, because philologist might fall in love with a hypothesis and go on looking only for what they are interested in finding, and thus base their demonstrations on partial data that would have been contradicted if the research had been carried out in every direction. Here, the philologist’s weaknesses come into play: the difficulty in distancing oneself from a thesis when there is doubt or even the certainty that a wrong path has been taken.

### 13. *Argumentation*

I was saying that philological work is based on details that needed to be connected. First of all, this involves producing an argument. The ability to lay out and establish an argument is another quality that is required of the philologist. Argumentation is a technique that the philologist must acquire: philological criticism is always argumentative. One must not only have the ability to argue, but also to counter-argue. If you have the convi-

ction that you are right, you need to foresee all the objections that could be addressed to the thesis you support. Studying argumentative techniques should be a fundamental step in a philologist's training.

#### 14. *Philological Truth*

Good argumentation advances the more economical of hypotheses. But it also bases its judgment on the greatest amount of data. Arguing is necessary for choosing one reading over another, for establishing a manuscript's best quality up to the highest degrees, such as the explanation of a text's authorship. Philological truth is related to the relevance, quantity, and quality of the elements called into play. But philological truth is not historical truth, in the same way that, in a criminal trial, verdicts establish procedural truth and not the truth of what happened. After all: «Revelation would mark the death of philology» (F. Schlegel). Philology is a historical discipline, not a hard science, and as such it does not allow for experimental verification. But it still has its own protocols, to which – so as to be based on proven rules – objective validity must be recognized.

#### 15. *Scientificity*

In any case, the philological route remains the only possibility for increasing knowledge of texts, for opening up untrodden paths to research. The correct application of a methodology leads to the growth of knowledge. And this makes the practice of philology a job that can be considered “scientific”.

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