Editorial Preface

Shimmering philology

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After literally centuries of debate, what more is there to say about philology in the twenty-first century? Each essay here provides its own answer. Contributors examine philological practices in the past – and they examine themselves practicing philology in the present. While these case studies are neither comprehensive nor representative, they are reasonably diverse and address a variety of world languages across multiple time periods (Sanskrit, Arabic, Malay, English, Latin, French, Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Old Nubian, Low Greylag, Breton). They are part of the energetic disciplinary reflections that continue to appear with regularity – further evidence of the perpetual need for 'return' that has always characterized philology.

We did not set out with a coherent plan but instead put faith in the alchemy of disparate practices, and listened to the sparks fly when the pieces came together at a conference held at Dartmouth College in 2013. For the occasion, I had invited Carolyn Dinshaw and Marget Long to recreate a performance I had seen them present the year before (Dinshaw and Long, 2012). With a montage of medieval manuscripts, original photography and film clips, they explored various places that vanish or simply don't exist. Their savvy troping of *mirage* inspired me to turn the philology project into a conference: I wanted to see what might emerge from an explicit philological framing of their visualizations of language and time. In the event, *mirage* solidified in my mind as a figure that shimmers in the background of each essay.

A mirage, as presented by Dinshaw and Long, illuminates philology in several ways. First, as a geophysical phenomenon, a mirage is 'physically real, a nowhere that is somewhere' (Dinshaw and Long, 2013). In its most common form, a mirage appears when heat causes light rays to bend, causing an image from above to appear inverted below. The turbulence of rising hot air makes the image unstable and distorted; it appears only along specific sight lines.[1] While the image is real, it produces illusions as we try to make sense of it: the sky projected onto the ground 'looks like' bluish water. *Mirage* thus captures the nexus of reality and projection that defines interpretation. Whether at the graphic level (What *is* that blurry letter on the page?) or the abstract level of language systems (Is that mark a blurry letter?), philology constructs meaning out of materiality and imagination.

Since the mirage is physical, it can be photographed. (See this issue's cover for an example.) The photograph itself adds layers of time, for it is 'an image of the past, a record of the present, a projection of the future' (Dinshaw and Long, 2013). This conflation of temporal referrals makes photography akin to philology, which also occupies mixed temporalities: its forms derive from some past image, fix a record of a present interpretation and project that interpretation into the future by inscribing it in some durable form. Just as photography enacts 'the desire to fix an image for future consideration' (Dinshaw and Long, 2013), so does philology as a practice of transcription, translation and transliteration. A mirage photo in particular functions as a 'low res mixed reality space' (Dinshaw and Long, 2013): like an old, smudged document, it is hard to read; it calls up our desire to interpret. As we try to establish linguistic coherence out of fragments, we might wonder if the image was ever clear in the first place.

Mirage shifts to another order as a trope in fictional film, where it often functions as a synonym for fantasy – the hyperbolic opposite of reality. These mirages capture the material fictions that haunt philology at its core. Subjectivity and desire, as the essays here show, *do* motivate material forms – under the guise, though, of *not* motivating them. Dinshaw and Long introduced the fantasy mirage through Long's two-channel video installation, *You Were Drifting* (Long, 2013). On a 25-minute loop, the piece stitches together footage from 20 films, shown on two monitors, the lower one upside down to replicate the geophysical characteristics of a mirage (See Figure 1). The upside-down images challenge legibility, just as a mirage challenges perceptions: it is difficult to focus simultaneously and equally on both monitors. Striving to see the installation as a single image, we encounter the processing effort that takes place even when we aren't explicitly noticing. Similarly, with philology, we try to see more than one place and time but easily slip into more limited views.

One of the clips in Long's installation features a dispute about how to pronounce *mirage*, a scene that Ika Willis characterized at the 2013 conference

1 Medievalists will want to know that a rare form of mirage is called a *Fata Morgana*, after the Arthurian character Morgan le Fay: it appears above instead of below its source; it includes multiple refractions, both inverted and not; it changes almost constantly (Wikipedia). This bit of scientific medievalism makes philology a natural expression of *mirage*.

Figure 1: Curley goes swimming (Long, 2013, min. 11:28).

as sharply philological. The scene is from the Three Stooges' short film *We Want our Mummy* (1939), in which they find themselves in the Egyptian desert:

> Curley: 'Look, water. Real pure salty water. It's the ocean.'
> Larry: 'Ocean, nothing. That's a MIRage'
> Moe: 'MIRage is something you see yourself in. That's a mirAGE.'
> Curley: 'MirAGE? That's where you keep your automobILE.'
> Moe: 'I said MIRAGE'
> Curley: 'MirAGE, MIRage, whatever it is, I'm goin' swimmin' '
>
> (Long, 2013, min. 10:37)

This exchange refracts philology in several ways. First, it shows that even debates about physical reality (Is there an ocean?) hinge on language (What do we call it?). The debate itself draws attention to the materiality of language: semantics

depend on stress patterns; patterns must not vary or the language will 'drift' toward confusion. Finally, in order to understand this debate, we must listen for the words *not* spoken – mirror and garage. That is, we need to see what isn't there. Reference turns out to be a mirage. In the end, no matter the pronunciation, a mirage is still illusory – or still real: Curley performs his water play so convincingly that the others jump in too (they land instead on the trap door that leads to the rest of the silly story).

All three characters seek correct interpretation – and all fail in ways that demonstrate the structures of authority at stake in philology. Each time they try to fix meaning, it slips away; each correction brings a new error. Larry 'correctly' dismisses the reality of the ocean, but then mispronounces the phenomenon. Moe 'corrects' the pronunciation, but proffers a spurious distinction: a *MIRage* is not a *mirror* (even if both words owe their meaning to the Latin *mirare*). Curley 'correctly' concludes that the stress pattern is irrelevant, yet bathes in sand (not water). Finally, while the fictional frame maintains Curley's error, the depiction of the mirage is the most 'real' of the sequence – actual footage of a steamship. Throughout, all three characters pronounce the 'g' of *mirage* as \j\ not \zh\ (as the dictionary says): another error, or a dialectical trait? Phonological variation reminds us of philology's often illusory relations with rectitude. In the end, with everyone so right and so wrong, we can only embrace their contradictory claims as proliferating variants of an ever-receding reality.

An earlier clip in Long's installation captures the elusive desire for the 'other' that also shadows philology, perpetually slipping toward desire for the 'same.' We find ourselves mirrored in texts even as we strive to fix their differences – in time, culture, graphic system and so on. The lesson comes from another piece of early cinema, *The Road to Morocco* (1942). In a scene that explicitly genders the desiring structures of fictional mirages, the princess Shalmar rises from the desert sands as her two suitors, Jeff and Orville, clamber across the dunes. She sings a song previously voiced as a duet with each of them, 'Moonlight becomes you' – which takes on new meaning as she shimmers into solid form.

The two men join her in song, but as Jeff moves his mouth, we hear the sound of Shalmar's voice. This dubbing displacement performs philology, enacting the mobility of sources and their ability (aided by technology) to appear in new guises. In this case, moreover, the 'mirage' takes over the 'real,' heedless of customary (gendered) differences. One speaks for another, even without intention or consent (and indeed, Jeff is startled to hear himself not himself) – just as philologists speak for their sources. As the song continues, the voices trade back and forth. In the final sequence, Shalmar voices each character in turn, followed by a concluding chorus of herself – three female voices in harmony as three bodies appear to sing. The scene shows that forms can be filled in many ways, including ways that transgress the real, the conventional or the correct.

Despite the unreal trading of voices, by the end the two men have such confidence in the reality of the mirage that they lean in simultaneously for a

Figure 2: Jeff and Orville lean in to kiss 'Princess Shalmar' (Long, 2013, min. 4:18).

kiss: the princess fades away and they kiss each other instead (See Figure 2). In this moment of greatest desire to touch the 'other,' difference vanishes and each encounters the 'mirror' image of himself. The queer kiss that slips in unintentionally, mediated by a mirage, is indeed a figure for the slips of language that philology operates. As we seek to recover past intentions, we project our own intentions, which themselves are detoured by unstable materialities.

Together, these clips illustrate many of the philological claims that traverse the essays collected here. Sheldon Pollock, for example, makes two major points: there are no incorrect readings (*We Want Our Mummy*); when we seek the other, we find ourselves (*The Road to Morocco*). Pollock posits that since all readings arise from human consciousness, philology's task is to explain how a given text summoned those expressions. By making explicit the often implicit role of subjectivity, Pollock's vision of philology recognizes the circuits of desire in

interpretation. Viewed through the prism of mirage, the idea of three historical dimensions explains how philologists seek to see through layers of time: all the layers are co-present and equally real; our imaginative work is to keep them all simultaneously in view while nonetheless distinguishing one dimension from another.

The layering of time and perspective that Pollock calls 'dimensions' looks very much like what Karla Mallette calls 'cosmopolitan.' Discussing literary Arabic, Mallette shows how a single lexical item signifies in more than one historical dimension. A cosmopolitan language is something like a temporal mirage: multiple realities shimmer before the philologist's eye. In a particularly apt passage, Mallette describes cosmopolitan language as a 'lexical hall of mirrors in which individual words may refract meaning like shards of light pulsing from a source far away in time and space.' Perhaps not incidentally, a significant part of Mallette's story takes place in nineteenth-century Egypt, where Edward Lane planned work with the *camera lucida* to make more accurate reproductions of historic monuments. In his Arabic-English dictionary, language itself is prone to 'flights of fancy,' 'mysterious transferences' and 'luminous discontinuity' – all consistent with the ethos of mirage.

Where Mallette finds lexical multiplicity, Chris GoGwilt addresses the multiple facets of writing – specifically, how transliteration into the Roman alphabet refracts languages like Arabic and Malay. GoGwilt reminds us that even as we imagine philology's global dimensions, our visions are mediated by culturally specific scripts. The literal 'writing over' of one script by another turns entire languages into 'flickering' forms. *Mirage* expresses this tangible and intangible process: romanized renderings of other scripts are 'aftereffects' – fictions that turn real and so change place with the prior script, causing *it* to fade from reality. GoGwilt argues that digitization amplifies this exchange: the pixelated Roman letters by which you may be reading these words are not letters at all but numbers. Actually, they are points of light … or rather, points of not-light (black) surrounded by points of light. Their 'reality' as letters, and thus as representations of language, is a fictional mirage.

The aftereffects of transliteration also shadow Old Nubian, the linguistic subject of Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei's essay. The few surviving medieval fragments of this North African language raise issues that intersect with Mallette's and GoGwilt's arguments: What language *is* Old Nubian if it must be compared with Greek for decipherment? How does romanization further submerge the language 'itself'? Van Gerven Oei's larger argument addresses the prospects for making philology a companion to philosophy. He posits that the very 'object' of language disturbs meaning, whether approached philologically or philosophically. In the reconstruction of Old Nubian, philology provides the heat that generates the mirage of a 'readable' language. As a problem of seeing, reading replicates mirage in its reliance on 'spectral' texts. The problem of reading actually preoccupies all of the contributors: How do we distinguish what is there

from what isn't? Do we know what language we are seeing? At what point has interpretation intervened?

Mirage also reminds us of what Martin Foys calls here the 'visualist framework' in which we practice word-love. Foys strives to get beyond the visual to aural and physical phenomena that inhabit Anglo-Saxon: the sounds of bells and the silence of sign language. Here again, the mirages of Long's installation ring true: in *We Want Our Mummy*, we must listen carefully to 'hear' the words not spoken (mirror, garage); in *The Road to Morocco*, sounds that contradict what we see remind us that *all* filmic sound is voiceover. When sound and sight are decoupled, silences become newly perceptible. Foys exposes how lived experience underlies signification, bringing to the lexical level the interplay between reality and imagination.

Lexical material becomes narrative in etymologies, the philological performance that frames Sarah Kay's assessment of medieval bestiaries. In the biblical tradition, the naming of animals inaugurates time – and bestiaries use the history of names to encode memory. At the end of time, 'comparisons between humans and other creatures' become reversible and so shift the ground of the 'real.' Kay defines this dynamic in which animals are simultaneously included and excluded as a 'space of exception.' It might also be 'low res mixed reality space,' in which etymology effaces differences and so mirrors the queer kiss of the *Road to Morocco*. Philology, then, addresses fundamentals of the human condition – and also contributes to post-human ethics. If other species have language, do they also externalize memory in durable form? Do they have philology? The themes that run through Kay's essay – translation, rewriting, allegory, reading – all replicate the malleability of the 'real' that characterizes the mirage trope.

Modes of reading, and post-humanism, also concern Ika Willis. Like other contributors, Willis uses philology to define the genesis of interpretation. Willis shows how Roland Barthes resignifed the word 'text' in the 1970s: in contrast to the static text of philology, Barthes conceived of a 'trembling' [*trembler*] text of semiology; Jacques Derrida expressed a similar idea as 'drifting' [*dérive*]. If the task of classical philology is to stop the trembling and prevent drift, the task of philology in these essays is to capture the 'shimmer' – somehow render its motions despite the graphic and semiotic limits of (romanized) 'text.' Mirage is the metaphor for this philology poised between reality and fiction (*You Were Drifting*). Willis concludes with a short story by Ursula Le Guin: in a future defined by an increase in philological capacity, 'geolinguists' read rocks and air (and 'therolinguists' the writing of ants). If you can read rocks, then you can also read the heat waves drifting from them that rescript the landscape. Mirage becomes a futuristic text, both science and fiction, as it has been all along.

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Philology has long attracted creative adjectives (lists in Warren, 2010, 286; Eisner, 2011, n10; Porter, 2013). This collection continues the tradition

with: liberation, sensual, disturbing, cosmopolitan, dimensional, post-human, romanized, befriended, shimmering. These images highlight reception and locate the philologist in time. As images – metaphors – they ensure that when it comes to philology, etymology remains a question rather than an answer (What is love of the logos?). They keep ideology visible and denaturalize history. I am thus drawn to Werner Hamacher's suggestion that philology is poetry – figural by definition (Thesis 14: Hamacher, 2009, 37; Hamacher, 2010, 15). Hamacher's own text (which makes several appearances in these essays) is itself a poetic performance. We need figures so that we have a glimmer of a chance of observing how epistemology acts upon observation itself.

In the end, philology is retrofuturist – simultaneously excavation, projection and fixing (in the present, but also for all time). It's a snapshot. And it's slow – perhaps the one characteristic taken as indisputable since Nietzsche, friend of the 'lento' (Nietzsche, [1881] 1980, Preface no. 5; Nietzsche, [1881] 2011, 6). But even at a snail's pace, or a glacier's, the documentary impulse almost always reaches a limit. In the grander scheme of time, our ability to preserve is fleeting. And yet philology, as a 'global knowledge practice' (Pollock, 2009, 934), conditions every iteration of textuality, from ancient stones to the latest tweet. Illusory or not, philology belongs to contemporary cultural life. Can it be 're-signified' as such for non-philologists? Perhaps not, but we should keep trying. So much baggage can weigh us down, but it is also full of supplies we just might need.

Acknowledgements

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