William Dwight Whitney’s linguistic thought represented a gathering of diverse streams. His Orientalist studies prefigured aspects of his scientific ideal; Victorian debates about God, man, and nature set the ideological context; Scottish Common Sense theory supplied the philosophical framework; and Boppian comparative philology provided the essential research base. Surrounding all of these, however, was an additional set of issues that we have not yet seen, involving the character of linguistics as a scientific profession. The present chapter begins to show why these issues became central to Whitney’s theoretical agenda.

Our starting point, once again, lies in the years prior to the Smithsonian lectures, only now focusing on an entirely new sphere of Whitney’s activities. These include his involvements with some of the nation’s leading scientific institutions, his role in establishing the American Philological Association, and his efforts to enhance language study in American universities. Experiences such as these did much to shape Whitney’s thinking about linguistics’ status as a bona fide science. As a preliminary to that story, we consider the nineteenth-century redefinition of science itself.
On “Science” and the Naming of Disciplines

W. D. Whitney wanted fervently to see language study achieve parity of status with the most advanced sciences of his day. Indeed, he regarded the vindication of his field’s scientific standing as one of his most important tasks as a theorist. This effort, he realized, inevitably included a rhetorical dimension, involving the choice of labels used to name and categorize that field.

Historians of linguistics and other knowledge disciplines could learn a lesson in this area from studies of social class formation, particularly those that focus on the language of class identity and conflict. A similar approach appears in political histories that explore contests to define legitimating “keywords.”

Like social and political movements, academic disciplines form themselves in competition with their rivals — adjacent fields with which they vie not only for intellectual territory but also for the most potent symbols of status. Nomenclature thus plays an important role in the struggle to achieve standing in the hierarchy of knowledge. And this has been true especially where the word science has been involved.

It is well known that “science” enjoyed burgeoning prestige during the nineteenth century. Every group, it seems, wanted their scholarly endeavor — and often their religious or commercial endeavor — to come under that rubric. This aspiration could claim warrant more often than is perhaps realized, since it was based on a legitimate and time-honored definition of the word. We have already seen examples of how the term science, as used in W. D. Whitney’s day, was not restricted to the investigation of natural or physical phenomena. Rather, it stood for systematic knowledge of any kind.

Accordingly, well into the second half of the nineteenth century, the most basic division of knowledge fell, not between the natural sciences on the one hand, and the humanistic and social fields on the other, but between science and “art.” As the dictionaries pointed out, this was essentially a distinction between theoretical knowledge and applied skill: “A science teaches us to know; an art, to do.” Even as late as 1875, the American astronomer Simon Newcomb noted the deep divide between “the so-called ‘practical men’ in our country,” and “the investigator in any field which deserves the name science or philosophy.” As this remark shows, the latter two terms could almost be used interchangeably.

Disciplinary names based on this broad definition proliferated in the nine-
teenth century, often applied to fields that are now considered as belonging, at least in part, to the humanities. Examples include moral science, historical science — and, of course, the science of language. F. Max Müller was hardly the first to use this title to designate linguistics. English-speakers had been calling the field by that name at least since the 1830s. Nor was the inclusive definition of \textit{science} in this case a matter of nineteenth-century English-speaking philologists directly borrowing the broad resonance of the German \textit{Sprachwissenschaft}. That sense of the word had been naturalized in English long before. Nor again was it only language scholars themselves who used it in this way. Charles Darwin, for instance, on at least two occasions described philology as a science.

Beginning around midcentury, however, the definition of \textit{science} began to shift toward its more restricted modern meaning. This did not happen by accident; it was an effort to redefine, and thereby gain exclusive possession of, one of post-Enlightenment Europe’s most coveted keywords. The trend apparently began among natural scientists, spreading from there to general usage. Many noted the change at that time, and not a few complained about it. Princeton Seminary’s top theologian, Charles Hodge, in his book \textit{What is Darwinism?} (1874), said: “The word is becoming more and more restricted to the knowledge of a particular class of facts and of their relations, namely, the facts of nature or of the external world.” W. D. Whitney had begun making the same complaint, for reasons of his own, a full fifteen years earlier.

Whitney was committed to preserving the old inclusive definition of \textit{science}, the one still found in the dictionaries. For under that definition, fields such as linguistics could claim full scientific status so long as they were studied in a systematic manner. This would not be the case, however, if the term were allowed to become a shorthand for natural science alone. Whitney’s desire to maintain the traditional meaning was therefore quite understandable. Yet it was also deeply ironic. After all, Whitney himself taught that word definitions were subject to continuous change, that the influence of popular usage could not long be resisted, and that prevailing speech practice was the ultimate arbiter of a word’s meaning. He also pointed out the routine historical phenomenon in which an unchanged phonetic symbol underwent either an expansion or a contraction of meaning. The word \textit{science} experienced just such a process, specifically involving contraction. This particular redefinition, however, was different from all others, for in this case the change tended to undercut Whitney’s efforts to promote the scholarly credentials of his own discipline.
Threats from the Scientific Associations

W. D. Whitney had been steeped from his youth in botany, ornithology, and geology, and his college years started him toward an impressive layman’s knowledge of astronomy. Even after he chose Indic studies as his professional field, he continued to stay involved as much as he could in the affairs of natural science. He did this especially in the years leading up to his lectures on general linguistics. That timing is significant because Whitney’s firsthand encounters with the American scientific community in this period would have a profound impact on the content of those lectures—hence on his theoretical system as a whole.

In the six years prior to his Smithsonian and his Lowell Institute series—that is, between 1858 and 1864—Whitney was invited to join nearly all of the nation’s leading scientific associations. Each of these bodies already had some philologists among its members, for at least officially, these organizations represented the full range of academic disciplines. Each was divided into three main departments: the physical and mathematical sciences, the earth and life sciences, and the ethnological, political, and philological fields. This was the arrangement, for instance, in the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the first such group to elect W. D. Whitney a member.

Whitney looked forward to his initial AAAS meeting. The event was to be held in Baltimore, so it would be his first-ever visit the southern section of the country. As he remarked in a letter to Josiah, he had “never been south of Philadelphia, you know, never breathed the soul-oppressing, disgust-arousing, and purity-contaminating air of a slave state, nor seen the great national beer-garden.” (Presumably this last reference indicated Baltimore itself.) More importantly, Whitney was curious to see what the AAAS was like. He especially wanted “to find out by observation whether the department of Ethnology and Philology is likely to be of consequence enough to take hold of.”

As it turned out, Whitney thoroughly enjoyed the host city’s hospitality, which included a group excursion to the nation’s capital. The meeting itself, however, proved disappointing. Whitney gave two papers at poorly attended sessions. (The first was on a proposed phonetic alphabet for the English language, and the second was a description of a twelfth-century Arabic treatise on astronomy.) The other main offering in his own department was from J. Peter Lesley (1819–1903), a prominent Philadelphia geologist and an amateur lan-
guage scholar. Whitney reported afterwards: “Lesley’s philological paper was bosh of the purest and most unmitigated description.”

Here Whitney pointed to one of several irritants he discovered in the scientific associations—the problem in this case being natural scientists who dabbled in philology as a sideline. Whitney would later applaud such multiple interests on the part of the Smithsonian geologists George Gibbs (1815–73) and John Wesley Powell (1834–1902), because linguistic fact-gathering among the Native American peoples nicely complemented their geological fieldwork. But it was different with armchair dilettantes like Lesley. For the most part, Whitney wanted each man to stick to his specialty. Having expertise in one field did not give someone the authority to speak in some other area in which he was not trained. By allowing this kind of thing to happen, Whitney complained, the scientific associations were making themselves forums for philological quackery.

Goaded by what he had heard, Whitney resolved to act as a “proper representative” of his field at the next year’s association meeting to be held in Springfield, Massachusetts. As he told Josiah, “I mean to get up for the Am. A. [A.] S. a little paper on philology as a science, because I think said science ought to utter a word there, after all the precious nonsense which has been got off in the association, pretending to be philology.” The result was his 1859 paper on “The Scope and Method of Linguistic Science,” his earliest work on that general subject. Whitney confronted in this paper a further irritant he had discovered in the national associations. Although only in his second year of AAAS membership, he used the occasion to chide his listeners. Philology, he said, was “regarded and treated by many as most nearly allied to metaphysics.” To counter this impression, he outlined the field’s scientific qualifications, seeking to show that it was “as strictly founded upon observation and deduction as any other natural science.” Whitney was hardly the first to make such claims, although he perhaps was the first to address them directly to a group dominated by natural scientists.

Whitney did impress some of the association’s leading members, yet this came as a result of a separate paper he presented at the meeting. An early statement of his views on Indian astronomy, this work drew praise from the mathematician Benjamin Peirce and the astronomer Benjamin Apthorp Gould (1824–96). This response was gratifying, yet Whitney failed to gain his larger point about philology as a science. Despite his confident swagger, he sensed that he stood only on the margins of the AAAS. He especially resented the
cliquishness of the physical-science big-wigs who dominated that group and the condescension they showed toward those from outside their own fields.\footnote{11}

Whitney discovered, moreover, that this condescension could manifest itself in a particularly insidious way. Increasingly, the leaders in the various associations used the term *science* to describe the natural and physical disciplines only. Whitney first observed this practice at meetings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an old and venerable body headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Like its sister organizations, the American Academy officially embraced the three great domains of academic knowledge. Whitney was elected an “Associate Fellow” in 1860, joining E. E. Salisbury, Theodore Dwight Woolsey, James Hadley, and George Perkins Marsh of Vermont among the group’s philologists.\footnote{12} To all appearances, this arrangement suggested parity of status among the disciplines.

The spoken word, however, told a different story. After a meeting in 1863, Whitney made a telling complaint against the astronomer B. A. Gould, who, in addition to his prominent role in the AAAS, was also a leading light in the Academy of Arts and Sciences: “Gould was very friendly, but did not think to apologize for monopolizing the name ‘science’ to the *materialische* branches of knowledge. It is really an outrage to call Academy of Science a body which has to do with only the Physical Sciences.”\footnote{13} Through this narrow and partisan use—this “monopolizing”—of that all-important word, Gould had implied that a number of fields, philology among them, did not really belong within the charmed circle of the sciences. Naturally, Whitney was offended.

This exclusivist spirit showed itself in yet another organization, the National Academy of Sciences. An elite group of natural scientists had founded this body during the Civil War, ostensibly to advise the government on matters of scientific policy. As with the other associations, the National Academy officially embraced the entire range of scholarly disciplines, including philology and ethnology. W. D. Whitney’s election in 1865 as the first member to represent that department augured well for the organization’s breadth.

Once again, however, the emphasis remained narrow in practice. Whitney suggested as much to his friend Charles Eliot Norton: “The meeting of the ‘National Academy of (Physical and Mathematical) Science’ is the attraction which I thought *might* bring you hither [to Northampton] this week. But I knew you were not much given to running after such shows.” Although a number of prominent life-scientists had been among the National Academy’s
founders (Louis Agassiz was perhaps the most famous), they often skipped the meetings, hence Whitney’s sneer at the group’s “physical and mathematical” leanings. Two months later, in his first full-length article appearing in the North American Review, Whitney summed up his experience with the nation’s scientific associations: “The votaries of physical science are unreasonably exclusive and recalcitrant; nor have we yet observed that the physicists have hastened to welcome the linguists into their own body, as engaged in pursuing the same end by like means with themselves.”

Whitney referred here to the physical scientists in the strict sense, the astronomers and physicists, because by reputation they were the leaders of the American scientific community. As such, they were the worst offenders. Yet in principle his complaint included the other natural scientists as well—those representing biology, geology, and natural history. Ultimately, all of these fields comprised what were commonly called the “physical” sciences, those dealing with either physical or organic nature. These were normally distinguished from the “historical” (or “moral”) sciences. One sign of that solidarity was that the biologists, geologists, and so on increasingly joined the physicists in monopolizing the unmodified term “science.” By implication, this excluded the historical sciences altogether.

Whitney was highly sensitive to this semantic shift, something he encountered, not in the theoretical abstract, but in the face-to-face world of association meetings, arenas in which personal influence and in-group prestige could affect the intellectual standing of entire disciplines. He therefore felt with special intensity the challenge that all linguists of his day came up against—to prove that their field was a true science. For those like Whitney, living in English-speaking countries, that challenge was made more difficult by the new definition of science itself.

W. D. Whitney eventually grew disenchanted with the scientific associations. In addition to the annoyances described thus far, he was discouraged by what he regarded as the low intellectual tone of the AAAS and by the decline in attendance at NAS meetings after the Civil War ended. The NAS nearly ceased functioning at this time, yet it was slow to act on the solution Whitney recommended. Based on his experience in the American Oriental Society, he urged the Academy to seek a larger constituency while keeping control in the hands of its original incorporators. With the membership doubled (“and the yearly payment likewise”), the NAS could produce a regular publication which would help it appeal to private citizens for support. Despite the organization’s
troubles, Whitney’s plan was not approved until 1870, when the NAS asked Congress to amend its charter by changing the wording from “not more” to “not less” than fifty members. This change, which rescued the Academy, was credited then as now to Wolcott Gibbs and Joseph Henry.16

Most disappointing of all was the way the associations handled a bitter ten-year dispute involving Whitney’s brother Josiah. During the 1850s, Josiah had conducted a number of state geological surveys and taught chemistry at the University of Iowa. Then, in 1860, he was made director of the California survey, a position he would hold for the next fourteen years. He continued this work at the same time that he began teaching at Harvard.

The dispute arose from the fact that Benjamin Silliman, Jr. (1816–85), the son of the famous Yale chemist and himself a Yale professor of geology and chemistry, also did fieldwork in California. Operating as an independent consultant, Silliman made upbeat assessments of the new state’s oil and mineral potential. In particular, he forecast rich deposits in locations where Josiah had concluded that little wealth would be found. The Whitneys attributed these optimistic reports to venality on Silliman’s part, for they brought lucrative fees from mining promoters. Naturally, those reports also embarrassed Josiah and threatened to discredit the official state survey. The Whitneys responded by trying to have Silliman ousted from both the AAAS and the NAS on the grounds of unprofessional conduct. When the organizations demurred, the brothers resigned their memberships in protest.17

We will see later how this episode actually affected one of the nineteenth-century’s most sensational linguistic disputes. For the Silliman affair came to a head during the most rancorous phase of W. D. Whitney’s long-running battle with F. Max Müller.

The Sheffield Scientific School

Despite these discouraging experiences on the national stage, Whitney enjoyed excellent rapport with his scientific colleagues at Yale—Silliman excepted. Indeed, he made his home base, not in Yale’s classical College, the place where one would expect to find a language scholar, but rather in the Scientific School. There Whitney found embodied the inclusive definition of science that he valued so much.

Yale established its Scientific School in 1854 and soon renamed that institution for its chief benefactor, the railroad builder Joseph Earl Sheffield (1793–
By the 1860s the Scientific School had assembled an impressive faculty. The luminaries among its ten or so members were James Dwight Dana (1813–95) in geology and Benjamin Silliman, Jr. in chemistry. Yale’s Collegiate Department, meanwhile, looked askance at its scientific counterpart. With no required chapel attendance or morning prayers, the Sheffield School seemed a hotbed of atheism. Neither did the School require the study of classical languages, a policy that sinned against the Yale Report of 1828. In that famous statement, the College had rededicated itself to the notion that rigorous drill in Latin, Greek, and mathematics provided the best “discipline” of a student’s mental powers. Departing from this standard gave the Scientific School, in the College’s eyes, a look of intellectual shoddiness.

This scornful attitude did have an advantage, for it allowed the Sheffield School to go its own way in molding its curriculum. The result was a remarkable balance between science and letters. The School’s three-year course toward a Bachelor of Philosophy required work not only in the natural and experimental sciences but also in history, government, economics, and modern languages. And in 1871 there was added a two-year course in English literature taught by Thomas R. Lounsbury—Yale’s first venture in that subject. In these ways, the Sheffield School anticipated the modern “general education” requirement much more closely than did Harvard’s open elective system—the famous experiment launched in this period by Charles W. Eliot. Most importantly, in this setting even a linguistic scholar could feel himself an equal partner in the Scientific School’s business.

W. D. Whitney developed a strong attachment to the Sheffield School and was proud to play a role in advancing its interests. It must be said that he was not always enthusiastic about his teaching duties there, which consisted mostly of recitations in German and French. But at least he preferred his Sheffield students to what he called the “shirks” in the College. The Sheffield students were more motivated. The teaching itself, moreover, became more interesting with time. While preparing his Smithsonian series, Whitney gave a course of lectures on the “Principles of Linguistic Science”—which became part of his regular Sheffield offerings.

Whitney made his most important contributions to the Scientific School in the area of administration; he served on the School’s governing board from 1859 until his death. It was also here that he found his closest associates at Yale other than James Hadley. His particular friends were the metallurgist George Jarvis Brush (1831–1912) and the geographer Daniel Coit Gilman (1831–
1908). D. C. Gilman is of special interest because of the way his and Whitney’s careers intertwined. Gilman would later make his reputation as the founding president of The Johns Hopkins University, yet he gained his early experience in academic governance during his seventeen years on the Yale faculty, often working in collaboration with Whitney. During much of that time, Gilmore served as Recording Secretary for the American Oriental Society, which elected him a member on the strength of his geographical interests. Gilman also drew up the Sheffield School’s original organizational plan, and he went on to serve that institution as Librarian, as Secretary of the Faculty, and as Professor of Physical and Political Geography.

It was Whitney who presented the obvious choice, however, when it came to defending the Scientific School’s lack of a classical language requirement before a tradition-minded public. His colleagues turned to him when they needed a statement describing the appropriate goals and methods of a scientific education for the School’s 1868 Annual Report. Whitney explained in private: “They put me up to it because I am a college-larnt man and a philologist by trade, and can say some true but disagreeable things about classics and science with more show of authority than the rest of them.”

Whitney presented two main themes in his essay for this occasion. First, he set forth an ethical argument in support of specialized higher education. In an environment of rapidly increasing knowledge, each individual was obligated to make a particular contribution to the public good; any kind of training that fit a man for a specific calling was therefore “truly disciplinary.” A student still might choose to concentrate on the classical languages, but this would be a subject for advanced study. It could no longer, by itself, be considered the basis of a general education. In making this case, Whitney challenged the most fundamental premise of the Yale Report of 1828.

Secondly, Whitney proclaimed the equal worth of all legitimate academic disciplines. This message, of course, served to elevate the standing of the natural sciences, for it suggested that they should no longer be looked down upon by the guardians of classical learning. Yet Whitney also promoted equality in a broader sense by invoking the old inclusive definition of “science.” He said that the Sheffield faculty strove “to make the instruction given in the School thorough, to give it a truly scientific character, by carrying each study back to the fundamental principles on which it reposes.” And so, even as he endeavored to situate Yale’s Scientific School among the worthy institutions of higher learning, Whitney also made sure to suggest that even historically oriented
disciplines such as philology — if rightly pursued — were genuinely and equally scientific.

The Inauspicious Inception of the American Philological Association

W. D. Whitney’s reputation as a scholarly organizer is rightly linked to both the American Oriental Society and the American Philological Association, the two main bodies representing language study in the United States in the nineteenth century. Yet the strength of Whitney’s connection to these organizations was by no means equal because he would always be more closely bound to the Orientalists. As for the American Philological Association, Whitney had grave doubts about the idea of even starting such a group. The idea certainly was not his own, and he came very near to skipping the group’s inaugural meeting.

The real motivating spirit behind the APA was George Fisk Comfort (1833–1910), a scholarly entrepreneur who taught art history at Cornell and helped to establish New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. G. F. Comfort had dabbled in a variety of subjects while a visiting student at German universities in the mid-1860s; he also had attended meetings of a regional Philologische Kongress, which inspired him to promote a similar, albeit national, organization in the United States. Language study as such had no institutional headquarters in America at that time. (In Britain, by contrast, the London Philological Society had been in operation since 1842.) The American Oriental Society filled the bill to some extent, although it was relatively specialized in its subject matter and its membership was centered in New England.

Seeing the need for something more inclusive, G. F. Comfort submitted his idea to the country’s leading philologists in the spring of 1868. He did not, however, receive much encouragement. He thanked W. D. Whitney, for instance, for sending his “calm and candid review of the difficulties to be surmounted.” Comfort believed, nonetheless, that there was ample public interest in philology, and as proof he cited the large domestic readership Whitney’s lectures had attracted in the year since their publication.²⁵ He therefore continued to pursue his vision, hoping all along to gain Whitney’s support.

Joining Comfort in this effort was the Reverend Howard Crosby (1826–91), a future president of New York University. Together Comfort and Crosby planned an organizational meeting to be held in New York City that Novem-
ber. Again, however, their invitations brought cautious responses. Some feared that a new organization would draw interest away from the American Oriental Society. Another invitee, the Hartford lawyer and philologist James Hammond Trumbull (1821–97), worried for a different reason. Trumbull and Whitney were well acquainted, and they agreed in their view of the matter. As Trumbull said, while an association intended for all American philologists would be a good thing in principle, “it ought to be ‘alive and productive,’ else it had better not be at all.” Whitney concurred, hence he showed little enthusiasm for the New York meeting. As he told Josiah, “I shall perhaps go down, tho’ with small hope that anything will come of it.”

In the end, Whitney and Trumbull did attend the planning session, and the official record describes them as among the leading discussants. In private Whitney portrayed himself more as a skeptical onlooker. He referred to the event as “Professor Comfort’s gathering,” and he found it, as such, lacking promise. Despite being well attended, the meeting attracted “few men who could be relied upon to give such a Society character and to keep it alive. What will come of it is very doubtful: the individual at the head of the movement hasn’t the brains and character to give it success.”

Blessedly ignorant of Whitney’s opinion, Comfort forged ahead with preparations for the group’s first regular session, slated for Poughkeepsie, New York, that next July. He probably lowered himself in Whitney’s estimation even further, however, when he sent Whitney a list of dignitaries promising to attend. Among these were General James Garfield and possibly Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, the latter invited to give the opening address. (This did not occur.) As Comfort soberly acknowledged, these figures were “‘non-professional’ linguists.” Still, his plan had its commendable aspects. No one, at least, could accuse Comfort of envisaging an organization of narrow scope. He proposed that it be made up of seven “sections,” devoted, respectively, to the Oriental, classical, modern European, English, and American Indian fields; linguistic pedagogy; plus, a field in its own right, “the science of language.” He submitted the details for Whitney’s approval, still hoping to secure the backing of the country’s foremost language scholar.

As the summons to Poughkeepsie went out, however, America’s leading philologists once again voiced their doubts. They knew that a national organization could potentially advance their cause. Yet they also knew something else: if the efforts of their humbler colleagues were put on public display, it could harm the reputation of the entire field. Everything depended on whether
the numerical majority of philologists was balanced by a sufficient showing of the eminent. And so, like the true believers, the skeptics as well looked toward New Haven to see where Whitney stood. And Whitney stood firm. His hands full with the Oriental Society, he told Josiah in April: “I have entirely declined having any active part in the various philological societies which are now trying to organize.”

G. F. Comfort continued to make arrangements for the opening meeting, getting fifty names pledged to attend and twelve papers promised. One of those papers he extracted from G. H. Trumbull, and this single act probably made the launching of the American Philological Association a success. Sometime in the late spring or early summer, Whitney changed his mind about attending the meeting—most likely because Trumbull, who had already committed himself, persuaded him to go. At any rate, Comfort later gave Whitney much of the credit, telling him that without “the timely and efficient cooperation of yourself, and Crosby, and Mr. Trumbull, I fear the meeting would have been nearly a failure.”

In July of 1869, the worthies of Poughkeepsie welcomed nearly one hundred philologists, assembled at the city’s First Congregational Church, to the “Athens of the Hudson.” The meeting began in convention, quickly voted itself the American Philological Association, and immediately elected Whitney its first president. Chosen as vice presidents were Whitney’s distant cousin Benjamin Woodbridge Dwight, a clergyman, and Albert Harkness (1822–1907), a Latin professor at Brown University. G. F. Comfort was elected secretary. By Comfort’s design, much of this first session was spent discussing the place of language, both classical and modern, in collegiate education. In an evening address, B. W. Dwight urged continuation of the classical curriculum, on the traditional theory that only it could produce sufficient “intellectual power” among the nation’s future leaders.

Two of the other papers delivered at the initial meeting concerned American Indian languages, which were J. H. Trumbull’s specialty. Trumbull spoke on how best to study these languages, and Joseph Henry of the Smithsonian Institution sent a report to be read at the gathering in which he described the Institution’s sponsorship of ethnological fieldwork among Native Americans. Referring to the fact that Henry himself was a physicist, one participant (probably Comfort) described this message as “an olive branch held out by Professor Henry from natural science to language.”

Whitney no doubt resented the suggestion that olive branches were needed
in this context, and he surely deplored the use of the new association for defending the classical curriculum. (He later complained of Dwight’s “interminable” paper on that subject, which “wearied the audience for nearly an hour and a half.”) Nevertheless, the former skeptic stepped determinedly into his new role as the APA's standard-bearer. He told Josiah that the first meeting had been “quite a successful affair,” although he added: “Not much of matter really new and valuable was offered; more of disquisition and general talk.” Intent on making the next year’s meeting more substantive, Whitney and his friends began to set the stage.

Whitney managed this campaign quite effectively. In an unsigned “literary note” printed in the New York journal the Nation, he heaped shame on the many able philologists who had failed to show up at Poughkeepsie. Although blatantly hypocritical, his remarks were still true enough:

The friends of the movement have felt from the first the importance of having it controlled by the best men, and in the interests of the highest scholarship. . . . If, after all, it turned out in any degree to be the case that second-rate men obtained the care of the convention and leading places in its counsels, it was not the fault of the convention, but of those scholars of eminence who unfortunately stayed away. For the absence of these men was painfully evident. There were hardly half-a-dozen present who can fairly be considered as standing in the front rank as philologists.

Not wanting to embarrass the absent scholars by name, Whitney effectively did as much by listing the colleges and universities that had gone unrepresented—scant mercy for those who had followed too long in his own reluctant footsteps. He solemnly testified, moreover, that unqualified participants would have commandeered the meeting “had not Yale been alive to the importance of the occasion.” Still, he wrote, this mere handful of eminent philologists had not been able to prevent all damage, and so those of lesser ability had played an outsized role at the convention. From whence came this philosophical rank and file? Mostly amateur and clerical, it had its home in the nation’s many provincial colleges, local study groups, and sectarian publications. Whitney wanted to wrest control of the field from these lesser types and to promote leadership that was secular and professional. This was the social, as distinct from the theoretical, dimension of his campaign to secure the autonomy of language study.

One week after Whitney’s notice in the Nation was published, there ap-
peared an anonymous “reply”—again written by Whitney himself. This second piece endorsed the remarks from the original note while adding some specific recommendations. First, the way to keep bad papers from being presented at future APA meetings was to have good papers crowd them out. Yet it was too early, Whitney said, to establish a regular journal, so the Association’s annual *Transactions* would have to suffice for the present. (This became the official policy for the next ten years.) Whitney also warned that the APA must face the inevitable comparisons with the better-established scientific societies. Yet such comparisons need not be feared, he said, if philologists would emulate the rigorous spirit of natural-scientific investigation.36

Emulating what was best in the natural sciences did not, however, require kowtowing to their representatives: Whitney moved to squash any signs of deference in the APA’s dealings with the nation’s older scientific organizations. Just after the initial APA session, G. F. Comfort proposed sending an official greeting to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, then holding its annual convention. He drafted a statement calling for mutual respect between the two groups: “We are assured that in the Confederated Republic of the Sciences there will be among the true statesmen no unworthy rivalries and jealousies.” Whitney vetoed the idea of issuing this statement, and Comfort dutifully complied. Yet he maintained (speaking to Whitney) that he had had good reason for making his proposal: “It was suggested to me that it would be well for us to disown any unfriendly feelings, at the very outset of our existence, towards science (using this word in its popular and limited sense). Hence I hastily wrote what I did.”37

Whitney was well aware of the “popular and limited sense” of the word *science*, and of the distance it implied between the natural sciences and philology. Still, he looked for ways of dealing with this problem that did not themselves reinforce that sense of inequity. He demonstrated his own approach a year later in his address as the APA’s outgoing president. Rather than play up to the AAAS, he cut it down to size. Warning that the long-term success of the Philological Association was not yet assured, he noted that “the scientists have long had a pleasant and useful organization of the same kind. [But t]he advantage popularly ascribed to them [sic] in the range of their subjects and the rapidly progressive character of their methods and results, is wont to be greatly overrated.”38 (Here Whitney used the neologism “scientist,” indicating a student of the natural sciences.)

Whitney also used his address to recommend guidelines for the profes-
sionalization of American philology. First of all, he wanted the APA to showcase original research: applied subjects such as pedagogy and spelling reform should be kept off the agenda. He also wanted to separate the professional guild from the gallery of onlookers: “The character of the audience we address must be borne in mind, and popular and elementary explanation cut short. General exposition and defense of the merits of philology is also out of place before philologists.” These principles, Whitney hoped, would enhance the status of the APA and set it on a productive course.

Subsequent meetings, however, betrayed the signs of a struggling organization. The few substantive papers still came from the acknowledged leaders of the group, these mainly from Harvard and Yale. (The New Haven contingent included Whitney, James Hadley, Thomas R. Lounsbury, and Addison Van Name (1835–1922).) As a commentator (not Whitney) in The Nation observed, the voices of these scholars “were always needed to sift the crude lucubrations of the half-learned.” Whitney himself confided in 1872 that he hardly expected the APA to continue for another five years. Even so, he did believe that the Association’s essential blueprint was sound. For as little faith as he had in G. F. Comfort’s leadership, he approved of Comfort’s plan for a single institutional forum embracing “philology” in nearly all of its manifestations.

**Philology and the University**

Like most scientifically minded academics of his generation, W. D. Whitney was anxious to see America’s leading colleges incorporate university-level research and instruction. Yet how best to promote this end? His own idea was to encourage intellectual rivalry among the nation’s most prestigious academic institutions, particularly between Harvard and Yale. A healthy competitive relationship between these schools would spur them as well as others toward adopting university standards.

Whitney often alluded to this idea in private, yet he also conveyed its essence on a major public occasion—Harvard’s graduation ceremony in June of 1876, during which he received an honorary degree. In an acceptance speech consisting of three sentences, Whitney praised Harvard’s achievements and expressed his sincere wish “that Harvard may lead in the race of American education just as long as it is possible.” For as long as that situation continued, other colleges would have a visibly high standard to aspire toward. Then, however, Whitney delivered a puckish conclusion: “And I am sure you will all join me in the
earnest wish that other institutions shall overtake and pass her [Harvard] just as soon as they are able.” In other words, successful emulation should beget genuine competition, which would turn out for the nation’s greater good and for Harvard’s as well — because Harvard needed strong rivals in order to attain her best. If Whitney perhaps doubted that his audience would entirely accept this logic, he kept those doubts to himself.

Whitney worked to implement his strategy mainly by building up the academic offerings at Yale. Yet on at least two occasions he made efforts to build up Harvard as well, specifically in the area of language study. The first of these, as we saw earlier, was his attempt to get prominent Bostonians to endow a chair in Sanskrit. The second occasion, several years later, brought an even bolder proposal: Whitney urged Harvard to establish the nation’s first professorship in American Indian languages. He was led to this idea by an unlikely series of events beginning in the spring in 1866. At that time, Yale’s Sheffield Scientific School made a significant addition to its faculty by hiring Othniel C. Marsh (1831–99), a rising star in the field of vertebrate paleontology. Marsh also happened to be a nephew of the financier and philanthropist George Peabody (1795–1869). Soon after his appointment, Marsh proposed that Yale build a museum of natural history to house its growing fossil collection, and for this he secured from his uncle a donation of $150,000.

Even as this project was getting underway, Marsh went to work on a second venture. He was inspired by having recently participated in an archaeological fieldtrip, apparently more out of personal than professional interest. The party had excavated an Indian shell-mound near Newark, New Jersey, in search of Native American artifacts. Impressed by this experience, Marsh suggested establishing a second museum, to be dedicated to Americanist ethnology. This, he proposed, should be located at Harvard, which was his uncle’s alma mater. Peabody (who resided in London) agreed to finance this institution for the same amount as the one at Yale.

W. D. Whitney heartily approved of these projects, each of them dealing with a subject in which he took considerable interest. What captured his attention the most, however, was a report that the Harvard museum’s curatorship was to be combined with a new academic chair. The character of the museum itself was being described somewhat vaguely, in terms of both ethnology and archaeology, and the precise nature of the related professorship was not yet specified. Still, it was Whitney’s understanding that the position would emphasize Native American linguistics. It is unclear where this idea originated,
although O. C. Marsh (as his correspondence suggests) fully agreed with it. In any case, Whitney was confident in his expectation. As he told Josiah, “You will hear more of the Peabody professorship of American language and archaeology in due time, I presume. Mr. P. is in the country, and the doings both there and here [at Harvard and at Yale] will have to be settled in the course of the summer.” Whitney warned that the plan was thus far a “great secret,” but he said that it was “expected to be put through all right.”

As the fall of 1866 arrived, however, there was as yet no announcement of who would fill the new teaching post. Whitney became uneasy, fearing that the position might represent the wrong kind of ethnology. Alerted by Marsh that this was the drift of things, Whitney appealed to one of the museum’s leading trustees. He wrote to the Harvard botanist Asa Gray (1810–88), urging that “the place should be filled by one who should be especially a linguist, both because that is the most abundant and promising field for the American archaeologist and because help in the physical departments will always be readily obtainable at Cambridge. It will be a great shame if this is not made a chair for American languages.” Asa Gray thanked Whitney for his suggestion but noted that, by the terms of the trust, the founder was likely to name the chair’s first incumbent. Moreover, he said, the trust itself appeared “to give rather a natural historical than philological turn to it, in the first instance.”

As things turned out, although the Harvard museum and curatorship were founded as planned, the Peabody Professorship of American Archaeology and Ethnology would not be established for another twenty years. (In the interim, the money allocated for that post went toward building up the museum’s collection.) Especially bad from Whitney’s perspective, the museum’s brand of ethnology turned out to be physical rather than cultural. The curator’s position went to Jeffries Wyman (1814–74), Harvard’s longtime professor of comparative anatomy, whose chief interest was the measurement of human crania. On hearing of this appointment, Whitney declared in disgust: “As if it were to be merely a post for a craniologist!”

When finally established, the Peabody Professorship was filled by Wyman’s successor at the museum, Frederic Ward Putnam (1839–1915); Putnam thus served both as curator and professor. Trained under Louis Agassiz, the founding director of Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology, Putnam not surprisingly kept up the Peabody Museum’s already-established tradition of anatomical studies. Only now this was the emphasis of the professorship as well. As a result, Whitney’s efforts notwithstanding, the nation’s first academic post
bearing the name *ethnology* had nothing to do with language. Even more troubling in Whitney’s eyes, ethnology was being claimed as a province of anatomical science. His worries about how this could affect linguistics will be seen in a later chapter.

### A Call to Harvard

Once again, Whitney had failed in an attempt to enhance the philological offerings at the nation’s leading college. Even so, he continued to follow developments at Harvard with interest, especially during the years 1869–71, a new epoch at that institution as well as, less famously, at Yale. By that time, Josiah had begun teaching at Harvard (concurrent with his work on the California survey), and the two brothers rejoiced over the selection of Charles W. Eliot as the college’s new president. A leading modernizer of the nineteenth-century American academy, Eliot is remembered especially for the curricular reforms he introduced soon after he began his Harvard tenure. Whitney commented: “I have always had a very high opinion of Eliot’s ability, both scientific and executive. . . . If we could only get such a man for President here, a new era would begin. Our Prex., I was told, vented at the Club the other evening one of the current sneers at the ‘bread and butter sciences.’ I am beginning to despair of Yale—who don’t tell any one so.” Clearly dissatisfied with Yale’s Theodore Dwight Woolsey, Whitney congratulated Josiah on Harvard’s prospects: “I hope that your *live* President is going to be a vivifying and grow-making power in the institution.”

That “live” president soon took one of his characteristically bold steps. Just weeks into his administration, in the summer of 1869, Eliot set out to resuscitate Harvard’s University Lectures. First offered several years earlier, then discontinued, these lectures were meant to provide an annual postgraduate course in liberal arts subjects. Although himself a chemist by training, Eliot picked modern languages and literature as the topic for the coming year. He then invited W. D. Whitney to participate. Eliot suggested that, should Whitney agree to come, he could confine his lectures to the three weeks of Yale’s spring vacation.

However well-intentioned, this invitation proceeded from a misunderstanding. Seeing that Whitney taught modern European languages, Eliot suggested that Whitney lecture on some aspect of German language and literature. He did not anticipate how this offer would strike Whitney, who
responded: “I should look upon the summons as much less imperative than might be one of another character. I am teaching German and French chiefly as bread-work, because I have no other means of support. But it is not my mission: that is the study of the old tongues and institutions of the far East and of language itself as one of the oldest and most important of institutions. An invitation to teach in these lines would appear to me a call of duty of a higher character.”

Whitney therefore begged off, citing in addition his packed schedule: he was conducting eighteen recitations per week and already had little time for his own research.

Soon, however, he changed his mind. He agreed to come, provided he could emphasize the “philological relations and aspects of the modern languages rather than what is ordinarily meant by ‘lessons’ in them.” This was fine with Eliot, who pressed Whitney to name a specific topic. Whitney then asked for more information about the series itself. Eliot sent him the impressive list of names of those who had already signed on—William Dean Howells, James Russell Lowell, and Francis James Child, among others. By now, however, Whitney was having second thoughts about the whole engagement. He told Josiah: “I fear that it will add one more to my list of burdens for the year, with little to show on the other side.” That is, his account book would register small gain for the work expended. His regret at having committed himself showed in his further communication with Eliot: although he confirmed his intention to come lecture that next spring, his reluctance was obvious. For his part, Eliot would have had good reason by this point to be fed up with Whitney’s vacillation. But if so, events a few months later suggest that he had learned to subordinate such feelings in the pursuit of higher goals.

After enduring in relative silence for fifteen years, Whitney was becoming increasingly vocal about his unbalanced ledger. His salary at Yale had for some time stood at $2600, which, as he told Josiah, was “about two thirds of what it costs a family to live economically.” (By then, that family included five children.) With this thought in mind, Whitney wrote to his patron E. E. Salisbury, now retired to his home in Lenox, Massachusetts, and reported on his recent activities. In addition to the heavy teaching load, he was in the midst of preparing a German grammar and reader for classroom use. He had taken on this extra “bread-work,” he noted, “as a possible means of making my income meet my expenses.”

Only days after dropping this hint, Whitney received stunning news: he was offered a full-time position as a professor of Sanskrit at Harvard. The timing
of this event relative to his letter to Salisbury was purely coincidental: he had had no prior knowledge of the offer. Charles Eliot was recruiting new faculty at this time, seeking talent especially in medicine, the applied sciences, and the modern languages. His overriding concern, however, was to attract top scholars, regardless of discipline. Consequently, even though Whitney represented one of the most esoteric of the humanistic fields, he sat near the top of the list of those being sought by Harvard. Eliot extended the offer informally, via Josiah, who was quick to point out its advantages: “You can do such teaching as will be in every way agreeable to you, in the optional course of the senior year in philology, be relieved from all your present drudgery, have plenty of time for scientific research, and be in all respects as pleasantly situated as it is possible to be in this country.” Moreover, Harvard would pay $3000, with salaries reportedly set to increase to $4000 shortly. “Indeed,” said Josiah, “I cannot see why you should not accept for you certainly cannot stand your present work.”

On the heels of this timely offer, Whitney received Salisbury’s reply to his letter describing his work load and financial straits. As yet Salisbury knew nothing of the job offer from Harvard. Neither did he respond directly to Whitney’s complaints. Rather, he used the occasion to broach a separate concern. He did not, as we will see, describe that concern directly: his apparent worry was that he and Whitney were losing their once-friendly relations. This, he implied, was due merely to a difference in temperament: “For myself, I allow that I am too sensitive to those rather sharp expressions of critical judgment which seem natural to you, but behind which is, I know, true geniality of spirit.” Whitney accepted these remarks at face value and he replied, at least in part, with thoughtful consideration. He addressed Salisbury for the first time ever as “Dear friend,” and he assured him of his own cordial feelings. He blamed himself for the aloofness Salisbury perceived, and in so doing, he sketched a rare self-portrait: “I am myself of a more than usually reserved and unsocial nature: I avoid society as much as I can, and am never quite comfortable in the company of any excepting those with whom I am most nearly bound. My besetting sin is (as my wife could tell you) burying myself in my books and papers, and too much overlooking all that is outside of them—partly from natural tendencies, partly because I feel that in that way I shall on the whole do most good and give most pleasure to others. I have never known any abatement of esteem and affection for you, who were my earliest teacher and patron.”

Having confided these intimate thoughts, Whitney abruptly changed the
subject. He was obliged to tell Salisbury about the offer from Harvard, and he pulled no punches in describing Yale’s relative demerits: “It is the most tempting offer that could, so far as I know, be made to me: for, on the one hand, I have greatly grudged the time which I have had to steal from Oriental and linguistic studies for German and French; and, on the other hand, what I have received for my services to the College has not for a good while paid more than about half my expenses.” (Note: he had told Josiah that his pay covered “about two thirds” of his expenses.) Still, he said, he was “simply perplexed” about what to do, and he asked Salisbury for his advice. No doubt he hoped that these declarations would elicit a counter-offer from Yale. All the same, most of what he told Salisbury was the plain truth: he had been surprised by Harvard’s offer, was indeed tempted, yet was still undecided.

In private, Whitney made a clear-eyed appraisal of Eliot’s offer. He did not, at bottom, want to leave Yale. As he told Josiah, “I have so identified myself in feeling with the College, especially the Sc. [scientific] School, that the thought of tearing myself away is by no means a pleasant one.” He doubted that he could find “a more whole-souled and high-toned body of men” than his Sheffield colleagues, particularly George J. Brush. Nor did he suppose that there was “any one in the country who could be to me what Mr. Hadley is.” Family ties, too, were strong.

These matters aside, Whitney still had four issues to consider. At the top of the list were the interrelated questions of teaching load and salary: he very much wanted to quit his modern language duties and to become “a real University professor” with commensurate pay. A third issue, at least potentially, was the matter of religious belief. Yet Whitney perceived no change in the surprisingly tolerant spirit he had discovered at Yale years earlier, prior to his engagement to be married: “I have not felt myself constrained here. Many people know, and others have an inkling, how it is with me, and if they can stand it, I can: no one now-a-days ever troubles me upon the subject; and I suppose that I exert some influence toward liberality of belief and sentiment, and so may feel that I am not here for nothing.”

The fourth and final issue Whitney had to consider was the prospect of working side by side at the same institution with Josiah. Yet as he tactfully suggested, he could not count on his brother remaining at Harvard permanently without some project calling him elsewhere; hence, Josiah’s presence could not be regarded as a major factor. The upshot was that a clear-cut improvement in salary and teaching load would probably induce him to stay.
The Yale community as a whole was rocked by the possibility of Whitney’s departure, news of which — somehow — leaked to a local paper. From a certain perspective, of course, public knowledge of the offer was not such a bad thing. Whitney told Charles Eliot that he was mortified by the disclosure, but he said he was now obligated to give his Yale friends a chance to respond. Eliot’s reaction was brisk: “Never mind about the unexpected publicity.” He urged Whitney to come to Cambridge and talk things over: “Any day will suit me.”

Yet how would Yale respond? The answer was not predetermined, for the College’s religious “liberality,” it turned out, was not really as strong as Whitney thought. At least some faculty members, behind the scenes, had begun to question Whitney’s continued presence there. Salisbury was one of these; hence there was more than met the eye in his lament about Whitney’s lack of cordiality. Noah Porter was surely another colleague who felt that it might be best to let Harvard have Whitney. Porter, who was a close friend of T. D. Woolsey, was personally a gracious man; yet he was anxious to have theistically oriented teachers on the faculty. That very month (October of 1869), in an article appearing in the New Englander, he had called on America’s colleges to actively challenge atheism in their classrooms. He warned especially about the kind of atheism that masqueraded as mere neutrality toward religion.

Porter must have been thinking, at least in part, of Whitney. Doubtless he was aware that the publication of Language and the Study of Language (1867) had prompted a Princeton theologian to brand Whitney a “positivist.” And even more recently, Whitney had written the Sheffield School statement rejecting the old definition of mental discipline — a clear affront to Yale tradition. It is therefore not surprising to find Yale’s leadership questioning whether Whitney really supported the College’s mission.

Fortunately, Salisbury sought advice on this matter from Daniel Coit Gilman, who urged that Yale do all that it could to convince Whitney to stay. Gilman presented his case masterfully by focusing on the future prospects of Yale’s Department of Philosophy and the Arts — which Salisbury himself had helped to organize. From its beginning in 1847, that department had projected an ambitious program of postbaccalaureate offerings in both science and letters. Over the years, however, the natural-scientific side had pulled far ahead. At the time Gilman wrote to Salisbury, the department’s thirteen PhDs all had been awarded in the physical sciences. Meanwhile, the section on history, philosophy, and philology attracted only a few students each year, and none of these had taken a degree. Whitney himself was the department’s sole out-
standing product in that area, this from his brief time at Yale before he pro-
cceeded to his studies in Germany. And Whitney’s own few students in Sanskrit
represented the main hope for the future.

It was with this backdrop in mind that Gilman (writing also for G. J. Brush)
appealed to Salisbury. Whitney’s departure, he warned, would be fatal to the
balanced plan of offerings originally envisaged for the Department of Philoso-
phy and the Arts. That plan, said Gilman, “surely ought to go forward and not
backward if there is to be here a University.” True, the Scientific School would
also be hurt were Whitney to leave. But this, Gilman said, would be “quite
secondary in comparison with the injury which would be done to other uni-
versity interests at New Haven.” Finally, it was rumored that Whitney was only
the first of Harvard’s “proposed captures.” (Charles Eliot indeed was trying
to raid the entire Sheffield School.) Gilman warned that Whitney’s influence
over the younger faculty was such that his departure alone might spark a stam-
pede. Salisbury was not unmindful of these concerns, for he still hoped for
greater things from Yale’s graduate department. Even so, he pressed for infor-
mation on one further point. In response, Gilman supplied what was needed,
vouching for his friend’s benign moral influence on the undergraduates in the
College.

Having received this answer, Salisbury immediately made Whitney a
counter-offer. He would increase Whitney’s salary, which would allow for a
reduced teaching load in French and German. (As a result, he said, Whitney
naturally would want to sever his connection with the Scientific School, “where
you do not belong except as teacher of modern languages.”) Whitney would
thus be able to concentrate his instruction in Sanskrit, its literature, and “its
Relations to Kindred Languages.” Here Salisbury repeated the threefold de-
scription of responsibilities that he had used years earlier when Whitney first
took the position.

Yet Salisbury now implied — apparently for the first time — that Whitney
had neglected to perform all that had been expected of him. He emphasized
the several facets of Whitney’s appointment, he said, “in order to recall to you,
in case it should have escaped your mind, that Comparative Philology is ex-
pressly included in your department at Yale”—comparative philology being
equivalent to “relations to kindred languages.” For several years Whitney had
given lectures on “linguistic science” in the Sheffield School, but Salisbury
wanted a course in comparative philology per se, and for these to be pre-
sented in the College. (Whitney would comply, although he was not enthu-
Finally, Salisbury asked Whitney to name a likely candidate to fill his place in the event of his unexpected death. In a note to his wife, Whitney summed up these proposals: “Mr. S’y offers me $3000 to stay, in a letter which I don’t altogether like.” Yet most of Salisbury’s wishes, in substance if not in tone, fit in with Whitney’s own desires.

Unable to comprehend his brother’s hesitation, Josiah urged him to accept Harvard’s offer. He again pointed to the school’s intellectual eminence and suggested that this had been achieved through its commitment to academic freedom. With this thought in mind, Josiah passed along a suggestion from Eliot: Whitney should demand that Yale accept from him a statement of his “liberal Christian” ideas; so that at least the principle might be established that a man of liberal ideas can hold a professorship in an Orthodox college and you shall not longer be one *Sub Rosa*, as it were.” (The term “liberal Christian,” reflecting the Unitarian tradition at Harvard, likely was introduced by either Eliot or Josiah; it was not a label Whitney normally used to describe himself.) Eliot probably was betting that such a proposal would never fly at Yale, and that it would therefore push Whitney his way. On the other hand, if Yale went along, although Harvard would lose Whitney, the precedent thus set would at least help to abolish the tacit orthodoxy-test for American college faculty.

Whitney declined to pursue this scheme, yet he did—in his own fashion—make religious toleration a bargaining point in his negotiations. He expressed interest in Salisbury’s offer, while mentioning several items he wanted cleared up. He would be glad to quit teaching French but he would want to continue with German, for he still would need income beyond what his professorship paid. And he would do this teaching, he said, not in the College but in the Sheffield School. There was also the problem of “the wide difference between my views on certain most important subjects and those held by the most of my friends, here and elsewhere.” Gilman no doubt had told Whitney that religion was still a sensitive issue on the College’s side, and now that Whitney had an offer in hand, he pressed his advantage on this point.

In his reply to Salisbury, he wondered aloud whether “many of those who love the College would not, on the whole, think it as well or better if I retired.” By raising this possibility, Whitney moved to force the hand of whatever opposition he still faced on purely religious grounds; the threat of his departure over this issue alone, he calculated, would lay the matter to rest. The response he wanted was quick in coming: Salisbury assured him that, “as much as they [the Yale trustees] regret the difference between your religious opinions and
their minds, they are of one mind in desiring that your connection with Yale should not terminate, notwithstanding that difference."  

With this roadblock removed, and with the all-important teaching and salary matters settled, Whitney’s reconciliation to Yale was complete: by mid-October, he had made his decision. As he told Josiah, “I have a great many roots out in this soil which it will take a great wrench to pull up, and I don’t get any help toward the disruption from any quarter here. They are bent on making it worth my while to stay, and I cannot find any one who considered my heterodoxy as any reason for going away, altho’ I find that my position is quite well and generally understood. They are much more tolerant here of differences of religious opinion than they have the credit of being; and, as I have not felt hampered in the past, so I see still less reason why I should be so in the future.”

Whitney was right: in spite of what Noah Porter and others may have wanted ideally, the religion question would never again affect his position at Yale. Still, he took the opportunity to clear the air further. He waited for two weeks before giving Salisbury his answer, thus leaving the trustees in suspense. And he kept the religion question alive during this time. Addressing Gilman, he again wondered whether, as a matter of conscience, he perhaps should retire from Yale. Gilman no doubt took the hint and ran further interference with the College leadership.

Charles Eliot, meanwhile, still had hopes of retaining Whitney, and Harvard’s language professors now joined the effort. Francis Child and James R. Lowell wrote to describe how Harvard’s new elective system would free him to teach his favorite subjects. And Ezra Abbot, a co-worker in the American Oriental Society, told Whitney that he “must come to Cambridge and do your part towards making this College of ours a real University.” But the moment of decision was already past. In accepting the refurbished Yale professorship, Whitney put aside the mistrust of the previous weeks and made a gracious proposal: the chair should be named after Salisbury. The latter agreed on the condition that the change not go into effect until after his death. This eventual renaming of the Yale Sanskrit chair was in a sense quite fitting. The stipulations Salisbury placed on Whitney’s continuing in that position could now be met because Salisbury had finally given him the means to do so.

Whitney’s attitude as he looked back on his Harvard decision revealed much about his character: especially, it showed once again a considerable degree of scholarly patriotism. Whitney was glad not to have found sufficient
cause to leave Yale, for by remaining there he could “do as good work for science and for American scholarship as I could do anywhere—which is the great thing, after all.” As usual, he saw the competitive relationship between the nation’s top colleges as a primary means to that end. He acknowledged that, apart from the Sheffield School, Yale was “playing a losing game.” Yet it was still imperative, “for Harvard’s sake as well as her own, that she should not fall into a wholly secondary position, leaving H. without a rival.”70 Yale’s traditionalism therefore had a double-edged on Whitney: while it had made Eliot’s offer all the more tempting, it also reminded him that New Haven was where he was most needed. Moreover, by staying at Yale he would leverage his influence: not only would he enhance scholarship at that institution, but he would goad Harvard toward greater achievements of its own. Did this thinking betray an inflated sense of his personal significance? Charles Eliot’s persistent campaign to hire Whitney suggests that it did not.

Yale itself stood at a crossroads in this period, its future direction to be decided with the choice of a new president upon T. D. Woolsey’s retirement. The decision was to be made in the summer of 1871. Writing to Josiah, who was then on a trip to California, Whitney confessed his gloomy view of the prospects: “Mr. Eliot is pushing things on fast at your establishment, that’s a fact. As for us, I despair of any new life here: we shall surely have an old fogy for our next President, I think.” The candidates for that job were Noah Porter, Timothy Dwight (the grandson and namesake of the past Yale president), and a dark horse, D. C. Gilman. Whitney hoped against hope that his friend would get the job, even though Gilman had a strike against him because of his close ties to the Sheffield School.

Months later, boasting in regard to what might have been, Whitney told Josiah: “If we had Gilman for Pres., you would see things fly.” But the reality was otherwise, for by then Gilman had been rejected in favor of Porter. Whitney tried to put the best face on things, remarking that “Mr. Porter will at any rate be much more of a university man than Mr. Woolsey, and things are not quite ripe for a really new start.”71 Noah Porter did become more of a university leader than his predecessors had been—but not “much” more. He famously reaffirmed Yale’s commitment to old-fashioned mental discipline, and, as Whitney predicted, he launched no major initiatives in graduate instruction.72

Whitney and Gilman, on the other hand, were quietly working on an ini-
tiative of their own. Gilman had prepared the ground with the remarks he made to E. E. Salisbury during the crisis over Whitney’s offer from Harvard. At that time, Gilman had directed Salisbury’s attention to an article Charles Eliot had recently written for the *Atlantic Monthly* in which Eliot praised the outstanding work being done in Yale’s Department of Philosophy and the Arts. Through its training of a modest number of graduate students, Eliot said, Yale had shown what steps needed to be taken by America’s “‘universities,’ which will then better deserve their ambitious title.” Certainly this was an encouraging word. Yet as Gilman noted, Yale’s graduate department continued to train mostly astronomers and physicists; the original plans for its philological offerings, especially, had thus far gone unrealized. Could not some positive measures be taken to rectify this imbalance—that is, in addition to simply retaining Whitney at Yale?

A brief notice suggesting an answer to this question appeared in the *Nation* a number of months later. Written by an unnamed New Haven alumnus—probably Gilman himself—this piece called for an expansion of Yale’s postgraduate offerings in philology: “If courses of lectures by Professors Whitney, Hadley, Porter, and others were established, and the fact widely advertised, so as to be brought to the knowledge of graduates of the other colleges, of teachers, and of the public generally, no one has a right to say that success would not follow. The example of the Sheffield Scientific School shows what may be done where there is faith, and faith attended by works.”

This proposal led to the formation of Yale’s “School of Philology,” which began to accept students in the fall of 1871. The School built on Yale’s existing philological strength, augmenting this with several adjunct faculty and combining the whole into an integrated teaching department. Students were offered an impressive range of courses in Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Romance languages, Chinese, and Japanese; and soon J. H. Trumbull would add instruction in the Indian languages of the American northeast, particularly the “Algonkin dialects.” Whitney benefited especially: he gained five new students in Sanskrit and nearly a dozen for his lectures on linguistic science—all of them, he said, “graduates and men of mark.”

This new venture quickly raised Whitney’s estimate of Yale’s prospects, leading him to boast (in private) that “we have taken a good long step this year toward realizing the University.” He went so far as to reverse his opinion about the relative merits of Yale and Harvard: “Our method of making progress in
that direction, I am sure, if less showy that Mr. Eliot’s, is sounder and more solid.” Even some of Harvard’s faculty, he reported, “think that we have taken a better start toward a University than they.”

These assessments, as the coming years revealed, were far too optimistic. Noah Porter’s Yale would continue to give the lion’s share of resources to the undergraduate College, while the Department of Philosophy and the Arts still had no funding or faculty of its own. Yet Whitney’s estimate of Yale’s new potential does suggest a point that has largely been forgotten. In her study of New Haven scholarship, Louise Stevenson shows that nineteenth-century Yale, remembered mainly for its reaffirmation of the old-time curriculum, actually was one of the first American colleges whose faculty believed that they should not only teach but also do original research. What needs to be added as of equal importance is that the emerging university ideal included the recruitment and training of younger scholars. It was this teaching function that made Yale’s “School” of philology a significant early embodiment of university aims.

As it turned out, the School’s actual product would be meager in terms of fully prepared researchers. Whitney’s students were the main exception, and even they usually did their advanced study elsewhere. Moreover, many of these graduates would eventually become instructors of classical languages, since that was still the most likely job for a philologist in America. Still, the very existence of that school, like that of the larger department to which it belonged, must have had a stimulating effect on neighboring institutions. These developments would have presented Yale’s academic rivals with the kind of challenge that, as Whitney saw, made them rise to greater efforts.

The span of W. D. Whitney’s lifetime saw a growing belief that “science” represented what was of highest value in this-worldly knowledge. Seeking high status for his own field, Whitney naturally argued for its inclusion under the scientific rubric. Yet this aspiration collided with the shrinking definition of the word science at that time, a change that Whitney experienced firsthand in the nation’s leading scientific organizations. Still to be examined, however, are the more direct kinds of threats that accompanied that new definition, threats coming, not from American physicists and astronomers, but from leading European representatives of language study itself.