Philology and the Problem of Culture

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Abstract:
At present philology seems to find itself in a decisive moment, from which there can be different ways forward. By taking two of the most recent attempts at reinvigorating and even reinventing philology, Turner’s *Philology* and Pollock, Elman, and Chang’s *World Philology* as a starting point, this article offers a retrospective glance at some of the investments made in the philological tradition in the last two hundred years. At the core of this tradition, I argue, is “the problem of culture”, which connects often very diverse authors and contributions from the early 19th century onward. Rereading some of the canonical texts in the history of the philology, by Friedrich Ast, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ferdinand de Saussure, Paul de Man and others, I claim that they are involved in similar ventures to liberate or protect the study of language and literature, in all their different forms, from the dominance of broad cultural categories, linking language to identity, politics, and ethics, and thus restricting dramatically the possibilities of language to produce new knowledge. Finally, the article returns to the present and asks what these rereadings could mean for how we see the future of philology and the philology of the future.

Keywords: world philology, orders of knowledge, humanities, culture, reading, globalization

1. Introduction

During the last two years we have seen the publication of two major works that both set out to redefine, or at least fundamentally change, how we think of philology. The fact that they coincide in time, but differ quite radically in their ambitions and visions, will probably only serve to increase their assembled effect on the field. Of course, there is also the chance that they will be completely forgotten, or rather added to the long list of attempts to reinvigorate a discipline, which has been the object of ridicule, belittlement and even contempt at least since the Renaissance—but which also came to define and dominate the organization of the modern
universities, and thereby the modern order of knowledge, emerging in Germany in the nineteenth century.

In James Turner’s *Philology. The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* from 2014 we are offered the second part of the story—a story of influence, rather than of belittlement—in which the American historian of science gives an overview, but a rather detailed one, of “the birth of the modern humanities in the English-speaking world from the womb of philology,” from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.¹ In the other path-breaking volume, published early in 2015, the time frame has been expanded back to Antiquity, but so has, even more significantly, the spatial range, which now encompasses not only the Anglophone or the Western world, but the globe: philology, in the hands of the editors Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-min Kevin Chang, has become *World Philology*. In this book, through essays on how philology, “the discipline of making sense of texts,” has been practiced in China, India, the Arab and the Ottoman World, Japan, etc., we learn how it is possible, and indeed legitimate, to speak of “philology in the singular as unitary global field of knowledge.”² Philology, Pollock states in the introduction, has been “both as historically deep as any other form of systematic knowledge and as global as language itself.”³ Both Turner and Pollock go on to indicate, more or less explicitly, that their rewriting of the history of philology should lead us to reconsider philology’s place in the modern university, where both of them perceive it as threatened.

The aim of this article is to take Turner’s and Pollock’s recent work as cue for trying to understand what the future of philology might look like, in light of its recent past, and in respect to one imminent issue in particular: the problem of culture.

2. Invoking Philology

In their works – which in Pollock’s case also includes a programmatic article from 2009 – both Turner and Pollock invoke “philology” as a label, a genre, a concept, and a discipline, in order to get at something larger, something beyond philology itself: in Turner’s case it is what he refers to

³ Ibid.
as “the modern humanities”; in Pollock’s case, it is “unitary global knowledge.” In this way, both of them place themselves in a long tradition of what we could call ‘philological invocations,’ in terms of speech acts, where philology is invoked to support a specific and often somewhat contested version of historical or linguistic scholarship. Among the most famous and often discussed invocations of philology in the post-war era, is the Belgian-born literary critic and theorist Paul de Man’s essay “Return to Philology” from 1982, which gave an unexpected twist to the poststructuralist theory wars, linking them to questions of reading.  

We will return to de Man’s text towards the end of this article. For de Man (1919-1983) invoking philology was a way of defending the turn to theory in general and his own friend and colleague Jacques Derrida in particular.

Another equally famous, though less controversial invocation is made by the German Romanist and literary historian Erich Auerbach (1892-1957) in his 1957 essay “Philologie der Weltliteratur”, in which he, in the context of post-war America, sets out to imagine what a global philology, or rather what he calls “a synthetic philology of world literature” could be like, in a certain sense anticipating the later work by Pollock and his co-editors, but in a very different way. Developing a “philology of world literature”, is for Auerbach not a sociological and historical question, which involves comparing philological traditions on different continents, it is a methodological one: how is it possible to work in a philological way with texts—that is reading them carefully and intensively like Auerbach himself does it in his magisterial work of literary history Mimesis, written in Istanbul during the Second World War—that are not from the same culture, not even from the same continent. Auerbach’s response is more often quoted than practiced; probably because finding the Ansatz [starting point] that opens up world literature in the way Auerbach suggests it, is easier said than done. The examples are rare and far between. The only example he himself can come up with is the mind-blowing work of another of great

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6 Ibid., 44.
8 Auerbach, “Philologie”, 41-42.
9 Auerbach, “Philologie”, 45.
German Romanist, Auerbach’s contemporary Ernst Robert Curtius (1886-1956), who in *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*, published in 1948, took it upon himself to show how the knowledge of Medieval Latin commonplaces and tropes could open up the European Renaissance and the modern literature in entirely in new ways. Maybe organizing large research collectives, a possibility flatly rejected by Aurbach, represents a more viable solution.

A third renowned scholar calling for a “return to philology,” though in reference rather to Auerbach, than to de Man, is the literary critic and political activist Edward Said (1935-2003), author of the strikingly influential work *Orientalism*, first published in 1978. In the anthology *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, published in 2004, the year after his death, Said links philology to another large-scale cultural trope, what he refers to as “humanism,” a comprehensive concept including both knowledge, values and power, both epistemology, ethics and politics. And philology, Said writes, “is paramount for humanistic knowledge.” And he goes on, arguing that “a true philological reading is active,” in the sense that it involves “getting inside the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what might be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we may have before us.” In this form of philological practice, the key ideas, which Said will return to many times in the text, are reception and resistance. On the one hand, the philologist’s task is to receive the text “in all its complexity and with the critical awareness of change.” This means to “gradually locate the text in its time as part of a whole network of relationships whose outlines and influence play an informing role in the text.” On the other hand, the philologist’s work ought to be devoted to resisting “the prepackaged and reified representations of the world that usurp consciousness and preempt democratic critique”, by means of reading and rereading closely and attentively. The heroes in Said’s version of philology are the cream of German Romanists, Ernst Curtius, Leo Spitzer (1887-1960), and the already discussed Auerbach.

11 Auerbach, “Philologie”, 47.
12 Auerbach, “Philologie”, 45.
15 Said, “The Return to Philology”, 58
These are just a few examples of philological invocations from the post-war canon of theory. If we broaden the scope just a little, there are many others, for example Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht’s analysis of the philologists’ *Wille zur Macht*, their Nietzschean “will to power”, in the essay *The Powers of Philology* from 2003, which succeeded his multi-biographical essay on the great German Romanists, including the already mentioned Auerbach. Another example is Ottmar Ette’s *ÜberLebenswissen. Die Aufgabe der Philologie*, published one year after Gumbrecht’s volume, in which he confronts the canonization of natural sciences as “life sciences,” and wants to reinstall philology in that role. According to Ette, that is “the task of philology”.

In order to close in on what it means—or rather what it meant—to invoke philology, I shall also briefly dip into my own biography as an academic writer. In 2001 I published a book with the Norwegian title *Lesningens vitenskap. Mot en ny filologi*, which literally translates into something like ‘The Science of Reading. Toward a New Philology’—but where the Norwegian “vitenskap” is more closely related to the German *Wissenschaft*, referring to different ways of creating or producing knowledge, of practicing “scholarship”, than to the Anglophone “science,” mostly reserved for the natural sciences. In this book, the problem I primarily wanted to deal with was the gap separating historical disciplines, on the one hand, and linguistic and literary disciplines, on the other, and not least the animosities between them. It came out of the on-going academic trench wars of the 1980s and 1990s, in which historians would attack literary scholars, in the poststructuralist or deconstructivist vein, for denying the existence of extra-linguistic reality, and generally being relativist, immoral, and prone to deny the Holocaust—whereas literary scholars would ridicule the naive positivism and frown at the reductionism of their colleagues in history departments. My reason for invoking again the idea of philology, even a

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23 This position is summed up by the Swedish literary critic Arne Melberg, in his book *Läsa långsamt. Essäer om litteratur och läsning* (Eslöv: Brutus Östlings bokförlag Symposion, 1999), 14-15.
“new philology,” as I optimistically called it, was to bridge this gap, to develop strategies and practices of reading which did not force us to choose between textual and contextual approaches, between sophisticated textual analysis and reconstructions of historical events, between focusing on words and rhetorical figures and focusing on people and actions.

My invocation of philology in the book pointed in two different directions, or rather, it targeted two different periods in the history of the humanities: one was the Golden Age of philology, in the nineteenth century, when what I referred to as the “philological paradigm” was at the height of its powers; the other was a set of post-war theories of texts and contexts, more precisely *Begriffsgeschichte*, “the history of concepts”, discourse analysis, and contextualism, often referred to as the “Cambridge school”, associated with the German historian and theorist of history Reinhart Koselleck, the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, and the British intellectual historian Quentin Skinner respectively. The argument I wanted to make to connect these two periods was quite simple. Both in nineteenth-century philology and in these influential contributions to twentieth century post-war humanities, the object of study was not language or history, not text or context, but always both, entwined and entangled in each other: language in history.

The reason why I think it is relevant to mention a fifteen-years old book in this context, is the strong feeling I get in rereading it that the context has changed. In other words, the book can work as a point of comparison for trying to understand what has happened in the meantime and thus what invoking philology means today, as opposed to what it meant in the beginning of the millennium.

Obviously, the main aim can no longer be to bridge the gap between historians and literary scholars, since that gap has either already been bridged by new, theoretically ambitious disciplines such as area studies and cultural studies, or it has changed to the extent that we cannot approach it in the same way anymore, sucked into the vortex of cross-, inter-, and transdisciplinarity. Among the most decisive events or transformations affecting the argument of the book to the extent that it can no longer be read in the same manner: firstly, globalization, which obviously also was around in the late 1990s, has now inserted itself into the field of

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24 Not to be confused with the “new philology” that had been announced in the journal *Speculum* in 1990 (vol 65, issue 1), which specifically addressed certain imminent issues in Medieval Studies.
language, history, and text to the extent that any question directed at any historical and textual material needs to take into account the global, globalized, or globalizing dimensions; second, the belief in the primacy and uniqueness of written language, of texts, dominating Western humanities, have come under serious attack—not least by a certain number of turns, the iconic turn, the practical turn, the cognitive turn, the material turn, the emotional turn, etc., which all represent attempts to move beyond language; third, contextualization have become more or less ubiquitous, to the extent that the first thing students of literature or related disciplines will tend to do, is to contextualize their objects of study—risking that texts become imprisoned in their contexts and that everything that transcends it, in terms of “social energy,” to use a term from Stephen Greenblatt, the godfather of the so-called “New Historicism,” or their “applications” in hermeneutic terms, are lost from view; fourth and finally, the humanities as such seem to have entered a new phase in their history, when they are challenged and questioned and asked to justify themselves in relation to social, political, and economic needs, and when existing orders of knowledge, borders between disciplines, methods, theories, etc. are being questioned in more fundamental ways.

Compared to when philology was invoked by Auerbach, de Man, Said, and, within a more personal trajectory, myself, we are now in a different moment in the history of knowledge, in which different possibilities exist and different investments and engagements seems possible. In the following I will try to understand this moment better, first by analysing two of the most prominent invocations of philology taking place in this moment, by the already mentioned Turner and Pollock, second, by looking backwards, in an almost genealogical fashion, to investigate to what extent the contradictions between these two eminent scholars and, indeed, within each of their works, are anticipated or at least have prior forms in earlier invocations of a philological approach.

3. The History of the Humanities and the Promise of Universal Knowledge

In their books both Turner and Pollock, Elman and Chang want to fundamentally redefine and reconfigure philology. But they do it in very different ways. For Turner the task at hand, not unlike the one identified by Ette, is the present state of the humanities, often discussed in terms of a “crisis”: “Higher education may be perpetually in crisis, but today pressures on it in America and Europe are exceptionally relentless.” According to Turner, higher education in general and the humanities in particular needs “reconstruction.” But this rebuilding, he adds, “can only proceed intelligently if we understand how knowledge have evolved over time,” and this is what he offers in his history of philology. The kind of knowledge he is primarily interested in is what we usually refer to as “humanistic learning,” including bordering disciplines such as political science and cultural anthropology, which both “ultimately derive from the philological tradition.” To the question what all these disciplines and knowledge practices have in common Turner answers: “All are interpretative in method: all deploy comparison in making their interpretations; all are sensitive to contexts, cultural or textual or visual; all believe historical lineages of some sort essential to understanding; all think that ideas, texts, paintings, institutions, artefacts, languages are products of history, shaped by their historical context.” As much as I sympathize with Turner’s position, and indeed, admire his erudite work, there is no denying that his version of philology is completely caught up in, confined to the tradition of modern humanities in the Western, English-speaking world. Thus, any future renewal must by necessity come from inside this very same tradition.

Before he co-edited and penned the introduction to World Philology, Pollock wrote an article in Critical Inquiry, which received a lot of attention, partly because of its scope and ambition, partly because of its dramatic language: “The core problem of philology today, as I see it, is whether it will survive at all: and it’s philology’s survival that I care about and how this might be secured.” The rest of the modern humanities, or the order of knowledge within higher education is never mentioned. On the contrary, one can get the impression that Pollock wishes to liberate philology from the close ties with other subjects and disciplines usually referred to as “humanities.” Throughout his essay he is more interested in associating his discipline of choice with the natural sciences: Philology, we learn, is “the paradigm of […] evolutionary biology” and

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30 Turner, Philology, xv.
31 Ibid.
32 Turner, Philology, xiv-xv.
33 Turner, Philology, 383
“if mathematics is the language of the book of nature […], philology is the language of the book of humanity.”\textsuperscript{35} Furthermore, it is “a global knowledge practice” and thus “merits the same centrality among the disciplines as philosophy or mathematics.”\textsuperscript{36} Whereas Turner wants to anchor philology more firmly in the history—and indeed the future—of Western humanities, Pollock’s ambition seems to go in a different, even opposite direction, abandoning not just the Western tradition of humanities, but the present order of disciplines altogether:

But is it sensible to think of reconnecting its cognate practices, fragmented today across departments despite the unity of its object of analysis, into some institutional configuration that is new and reflexive, conceptually unified, theoretically driven, and globally comparative? Any such restructuring presupposes that the conceptual problems of philology’s disciplinarity have been successfully addressed, enabling it to produce not just theoretically informed intellectual practices but practices that are themselves capable of generating new higher-order generalizations or at least contesting those generated by other disciplines.\textsuperscript{37}

Among “higher-order generalizations generated by other disciplines”, which Pollock enlists in his discussion, are the already briefly discussed “Return to Theory” by Paul de Man, which he qualifies as “outlandish” and as arguing “incoherently and contradictory,”\textsuperscript{38} as well as the work of Foucault, which he also wants to “move beyond.”\textsuperscript{39} Instead he stresses “the universal nature of philology.”\textsuperscript{40} And in the introduction to World Philology, he concludes that “disciplines can no longer be only local forms of knowledge that pass as universal under the mask of science; instead they must emerge from a new global […] episteme and seek global […] knowledge.”\textsuperscript{41} Philology, then, has less in common with other disciplines within the current form of the humanities, than with mathematics: “If, like mathematics, philology is a method; it is also, like mathematics, a discipline, aiming […] toward ‘analytic perspectives that disaggregate complex phenomena into potential general variables, relationships, and causal mechanisms […]’.”\textsuperscript{42}

Of the two scholarly ventures that in the last years have reconceptualized the field of philology, Turner’s historical narrative identifies philology with humanities, interpretative
scholarship and hermeneutics, whereas Pollock’s more systematic “world philology,” implies liberating philology from the prison house of Western humanities and catapult it into the field of universal knowledge, by the application of methods that are comparable and compatible to methods used in mathematics and biology. Although both of them share a deep veneration for traditions, forms of knowledge, and procedures for understanding assembled and integrated by the concept “philology,” Turner, the historian of science and scholarship, and Pollock, the Sanskritist, entertain very different view of the possibilities for future development and innovation. In the remaining part of this article I am going to look at how different versions of this opposition has been formulated at earlier moments in the history of philology, in order to explore how they gravitate around a set of questions that I here will refer to as “the problem of culture.”

4. The Problem of Culture

One way of understanding the contrast between Turner’s and Pollock’s versions of philology is the role they assign to culture. Implicit in the two outlines are very different answers to the question whether philology should aspire to become a version of “cultural history” or “cultural studies,” by scaling up from a textual to a cultural hermeneutics, or, on the contrary, if it should rather remain a refined and complex method for understanding language, more specifically written language, in the form of texts, comparable to how method is understood and used in the natural sciences. However, these possibilities and latent contradictions within the philological traditions are by no means new. In the following I will retrace these stand-offs between one model of philological inquiry, which is textual, primarily methodological and thus global or even universal, and another that is culture-oriented, content-based, and linked to specific historical and cultural communities, often in the form of nations.

Already two of the early founding texts of the “philological paradigm” emerging at German universities in the nineteenth century, Friedrich August Wolf’s *Darstellung der Alterthumswissenschaft* [Presentation of the Discipline of Scholarship of the Antiquity] from 1807 and Friedrich Ast’s *Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik* [Basic Rules of Grammar, Hermeneutics and Criticism] from 1808 open up this space for philological inquiry. As
a “master of language” and “antiquarian,” Ast (1778-1841) writes, the philologist is charged with the task of “dividing the handed-down letter into its smallest parts,” thus anticipating almost word by word Pollock by more than two hundred years. As a “philosopher” and an “aestheticist,” on the other hand, which are two other well-known disciplinary labels from the knowledge order of the modern humanities, his task is to “explore the spirit [Geist], which formed this letter.”

Ast’s concept of Geist is still not a concept of “culture,” in any modern sense of the term; it is, as he puts it, “the eternal principle of formation [Bildung] of all things.” At the beginning of the nineteenth century the only culture worth exploring in a philological manner was Greek and Roman Antiquity, in other words, all philology was still Classical philology; hence, the principle of universality, expressed in the concept of Geist, has not yet been challenged by invocations of cultural and historical specificity. By consequence, even as a science defined by its objects and contents, philology can claim to be universal, because its objects, Greek and Roman texts, are universal. At the same time, however, universality is being challenged by the advent of a new discipline, or rather by a renaming of Classical philology to Alterthumswissenschaft, literally ‘science of Antiquity.’ In his outline of this new, or at least renewed field of knowledge, Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824), defines it, again based on content, as “the essence [Inbegriff] of the knowledge and information familiarizing us with the actions and fates of the Greeks and the Romans, their political, scholarly and domestic relations, and their language, art forms and sciences, manners, religions, national character, and ways of thinking.”

In Wolf’s outline of Alterthumswissenschaft, philology is still dedicated solely to Greek and Roman culture, but this culture has taken on a level of specificity, far from Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s (1717-1768) idealizations, which make it increasingly difficult to uphold the traditional claims for universality. Indeed, Wolf reads almost like an echo of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who just ten years earlier had forged a strong link between language and culture in the second volume of his most comprehensive treatise on the philosophy of history Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit, [Ideas for a philosophy of the history of mankind] published in 1784. “The most beautiful investigation into the history and the diverse characteristics of human reason and heart,” he writes, “would be a philosophical comparison of languages,” thus evoking

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43 Friedrich Ast, Grundlinien der Grammatik, Hermeneutik und Kritik (Landshut: Jos. Thomann, 1808), iv. (All following translations from the German are made by the author)

44 Ast, Grundlinien, v.

45 Friedrich August Wolf, Darstellung der Alterthumswissenschaft, nebst einer Auswahl seiner kleinen Schriften; und literarischen Zugaben zu dessen Vorlesungen über die Alterthumswissenschaft (Leipzig: Dr. S.F.W. Hoffmann, 1833), 20.
one of the most prominent procedures of philological practice, comparing elements in one language with elements in another. Because, he adds, in any language we find “an imprint of the reason and the character of a people.” And he goes on: “The genius of a people is no place better expressed than in the physiognomy of their speech”: for instance “if a nation has many names or much action”; “how it expresses persons and times”; “what kind of conceptual arrangement it prefers.” Even though Herder here still uses anthropological terms like “reason,” “character,” and “genius,” they are about to be summed up in the concept of “culture”, or later in plural “cultures.” And as we noticed in Wolf’s Darstellung, even Greek and Roman Antiquity are about to become “cultures”, defined not by their universality, but by their particularity, to be compared and hierarchized. In this venture philology will play a very central part, divided into national philologies as well as national philological investigations. At the attention shifted from Homer to medieval national epics like the Germanic Niebelungen and the Norse Edda, and at the same time from the textual stemmata of Greek and Roman texts to the linguistic stemmata of sounds or language families, the primary object of study of philology became “cultures,” which could be characterized, historicized and compared. In the German context Karl Lachmann’s (1793-1851) work on the medieval German poets like Walther von der Vogelweide and Wolfram von Eschenbach in the 1820s and 1830s marked the shift from Altphilologie, exclusively concerned with Greek and Roman Antiquity, to Neuphilologie, dedicated to the origins of the modern national cultures.

Rather than repeating the fairly well-known and often rehearsed history of the concept of “culture,” found for instance in the study by Georg Bollenbeck, I now want to turn to the critics, in other words, those writers who want “save” philology from the ever-expanding conceptual influence of “culture,” in scholarly as well as in political terms. In a recent essay, Anglicists Cliff Siskin and Bill Warner have argued that the concept of “culture” as well as its academic institutionalization in “Cultural Studies” at Western universities needs to be “stopped,” because it prevents us from doing new, interesting and innovative work within the humanities:

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46 Johann Gottfried Herder, Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit. Edited by Martin Bollacher (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 353. (Italics in the original)
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
It’s the Teflon category. We fret over it—everyone complaining at one time or another that it doesn’t quite do the job—but the complaints don’t stick because it’s so easy to use. We simply don’t know what we would do without it. But our point here is that ease of use carries hidden costs: culture is the problem with cultural studies. As long as we entrust our differences to its totalizing indifferences—and give it the energy of our imperatives—it will keep us in the same categorical bind, always doubling us back into its own disciplinary agenda.50

In their essay Siskin and Warner are primarily interested in the part of nineteenth century philology that today is labelled “literary studies.” In their view, “the cultural turn,” as it is often called, in other words, the introduction of Cultural Studies as way of reorganizing and—at least initially—dehierachizing a series of disciplines in the humanities, has led the study of that textual genre we call “literature” into an impass, that it cannot get out of. And they trace the development back to the late eighteenth century, when this conceptual and disciplinary structure was first developed, in the works of Herder, among others.51 However, their ambition of “stopping culture” in order to save philology—more specifically literary studies—has been formulated several times before, in very different contexts. Moreover, for Warner and Siskin “philology”, the way it is used here, is part of the problem rather than the solution, because it prevents us from approaching language as a means or a system for producing universal and even explanatory knowledge. But as we have already seen, this is only part of the story about philology.

May be the first to set out to save philology from culture was Friedrich Nietzsch (1844-1900). In a rhetorical gesture similar to the one performed by Warner and Siskin, he wants to stop one kind of philology in order to make room for another one: “Many think that it is over with philology,” he writes in the unpublished fragment Wir Philologen [We Philologists] from 1874/1875, “but I think it has not yet begun.”52 In his Umwertung [re-evaluation] of the idea of philology, what he rejects is the integration of philology into the state-sponsored Prussian system of Bildung, in which philological work is subjected to general philhellenic ideas of the Germans as the new Greeks: “Out of 100 philologists,” he continues, “99 should have found themselves another profession.” And he asks, almost in despair: “What happens to a discipline run by these

A few years earlier, he gave a series of open lectures in Basel, where he was working as a professor of Greek philology, entitled Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten [On the Future of Our Educational Institutions], in which he depicts vividly how the attempts of the philologists to “restore the statue of Ancient Greece” is doomed to fail. What worries him, however, is not as much the people who are crushed every time the statue comes tumbling down again, but that the statue itself “might break in the hands of the philologists.” As soon as we are able to peel off the layer of Bildung encompassing philology, however, we might be able to save and restore it, in terms of a practice of reading, because, Nietzsche says, the texts of Antiquity “are the only ones that modern man still reads carefully.” After having done what he could to “stop” philology in terms of a general introduction to Greek and Roman culture, Nietzsche moves on to reinvent philology as the art of reading, or more precisely, in a slogan picked up by many of his successors, among them the Russian formalist and semiotician Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) and the deconstructivist Paul de Man, “the art of reading slowly.” In his following works Nietzsche will provide a series of different definitions of what he means by reading slowly, directed at other kinds of reading practices, in scholarship, but also, and not least, in Christian religion. The worst readers, according to Nietzsche in Antichrist from 1888, are the theologians, who lack both “justice” and “honesty”; the best readers, on the other hand, we can read in his Nachlass from the same period, are those who are able “to read the text as text, without bringing in interpretation,” based on cultural prejudices about the past as well as the present. In this light, one might add, Nietzsche’s own main philological work Die Geburt der Tragödie [The Birth of Tragedy] from the beginning of his career as a writer, in 1873, can only be seen as an example of bad philology, by which language is being replaced by culture.

To understand Nietzsche as a critic of “culture,” can hardly count as surprising, even though the links between Kulturkritik and philology have not yet been studied in full. Less obvious, perhaps, is the inclusion of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) in the

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53 Nietzsche, “Wir Philologen”, 324. (Italics in the original)
same trajectory. Readers of *Cours the linguistique générale* [Course in General Linguistics], the transcript of his lectures from Geneva between 1911 and 1913, have hardly noticed to what extent Saussure’s initial polemics against the philological tradition can be read as an attempt at liberating language from culture. In his introduction to the *Cours*, the editor Tullio de Mauro points out that “the divide between philology and linguistics was one of Saussure’s favourite topics, even in his private conversations.”⁵⁹ Saussure begins his lectures by discussing three phases in the history of “the science which constitutes itself around the facts of language”: grammar, philology of texts, and comparative philology. What interests us here, is the way he dismisses the two last ones, especially the philology of texts. As is well known from the massive Saussure-reception, his criticism against comparative philology, founded by Franz Bopp (1791-1867) and continued by the *Junggrammatiker*, concerned their one-sided interest in comparison and historical development.⁶⁰ His dismissal of textual philology, on the other hand, which consists in “establishing, interpreting and commenting texts”, has only been read as a dismissal of writing. At a closer look, however, it is as much a dismissal of culture as the only possible framework for studying language. The “tyranny of writing,”⁶¹ in his well-known, often quoted phrase, is as much a tyranny of culture. Philology, Saussure writes, proceeds by “comparing texts from different epochs, describing the language that is characteristic of an author, and explaining inscriptions written in an archaic and vague language.”⁶² The object of philology, Saussure states, should not be what he calls “literary language,” which does not pertain to literature alone, in the modern sense of the word, but any form of cultured language, serving an entire society.⁶³ In this sense, Saussure’s famous three dichotomies, *langue-parole, significantsignifie*, and *diachronic/synchronic*, can be read as conceptual tools to “stop” the dominance of the paradigm of “culture” in the study of language and start something else, what we usually refer to as “structural linguistics” or just “linguistics.”

In this article I would like to argue that the two traditions described above, reframing philology as “the art of reading slowly” and transforming philology into “structural linguistics,” which follow quite different trajectories in the Western tradition, share the attempt to liberate the

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⁶⁰ Saussure, *Cours*, 14.

⁶¹ Saussure, *Cours*, 53.


⁶³ Saussure, *Cours*, 267.
study of different forms of language from the dominance of “culture.” In my last example I will return to the probably best known intersection between these two trajectories, Paul de Man’s infamous essay “Return to Philology” from 1982. This is the text that Pollock refers to as “outlandish,” because it “regards the ‘turn to theory’ itself as a ‘return to philology.’”  

From a certain perspective Pollock is right, since the kind of textual autonomy de Man attributes to the texts he is interested in, from the high philosophical and literary canon, does not harmonize with the interpretative practices of philology. In the trajectory suggested here, however, of authors struggling to save philology from more or less totalizing ideas about culture and cultures, he is a perfect fit, drawing partly on Nietzschean ideas of reading, “mere reading” or “close reading” in the New Criticism idiom, partly on Saussurean structural linguistics. Contemporary literary theory, de Man states in his essay “Resistance to Theory,” “comes into its own in such events as the application of Saussurean linguistics to literary texts.” And this application, taking place in the works of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault among others, in practice implies a “return to philology.”  

Even though large parts of de Man’s essay today feel dated, such as his defence of Derrida against accusations that he is a “puckish Parisian” and a nihilist, his identification of the problem of culture and humanistic knowledge in the field of philology still has something to offer - the key passage being his description of the seminars he took with Reuben Brower at Harvard in the 1950s:

Students, as they began to write on the writings of others, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly or modestly, they were to start out from the bafflement that such singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge.  

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64 Pollock, “Future Philology?”, 947.  
65 De Man, “Return to Philology”, 24.  
67 De Man, “Return to Philology”, 22.  
68 De Man, “Return to Philology”, 22.  
69 De Man, “Return to Philology”, 23.
To de Man, this experience has a lot in common with the impact of theory, and these are the reading practices he has in mind when he labels the turn to Saussurean linguistics applied to literature a “return to philology.” What he primarily wants to achieve, however, is to distinguish philological practices, in terms of practices of reading, from other scholarly practices in the field of cultural studies and humanities. Thus, the “return to philology,” in de Man’s terms, would “involve a change by which literature, instead of being taught only as a historical and humanistic subject, should be taught as a rhetoric and a poetics prior to being taught as a hermeneutics and a history.”70 Or put in disciplinary terms: It is “able to transform critical discourse in a manner that would prove deeply subversive for those who think of the teaching of literature as a substitute for the teaching of theology, ethics, psychology, or intellectual history.”71 As opposed to Turner, who wants to return philology to the heart of the modern humanities, de Man wants to save the philological practices from being bogged down by general knowledge from the field we now usually refer to as “culture.” Instead of starting with a concept of “culture,” de Man want readers to start from a feeling of “bafflement,” produced by “singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure” in the texts they read. Although de Man’s version of philology might seem “outlandish” or at least rather narrow and even parochial, his ambition to sever the ties binding philology to the totalizing, all-explanatory concept of “culture” is by no means foreign or even new in philological discourse. Indeed, Nietzsche’s call for an *Umwertung* of philology, Saussure’s rejection of philology on behalf of linguistics, and de Man’s return to philology, in the guise of poststructuralist theory, all set out to deal with the same problem: the problem of culture, by which texts are reduced to mere examples, symptoms, or nodes in a larger cultural systems, expressions of pre-given, culturally specific ideas and values. At the same time, philology as “making sense of texts,” in Pollock’s words, loses its specificity as a method, which can be applied to texts from different places and at different times.

5. After Culture?

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70 De Man, “Return to Philology”, 24-25.
71 De Man, “Return to Philology”, 24.
Rereading the canonical texts by New Historicists like Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose and Catherine Gallagher, dedicated to reconstructing an almost materialist textuality of history,\textsuperscript{72} as well as following the rise of Cultural Studies, from the 1980s till today, one might be tempted to say that “culture” has won, giving new energy and vivacity to the broad field of the humanities, but at the same time relegating philology to the sidelines. In that sense Greenblatt’s idea of a “cultural poetics”\textsuperscript{73} and Montrose’s endlessly quoted chiasma of “textuality of history-history of textuality”\textsuperscript{74} have proved to be double-edged sword. As I argued in my 2001 book, they have helped overcome the gap between historical studies, on the one hand, and literary and linguistic studies, on the other, thus contributing to making philological methods ubiquitous across large parts of modern humanities. At the same time, however, these methods have lost much of their specificity and sharpness and have been watered down by other forms of cultural analytics, be it the broad analysis of large cultural phenomena, like identity, gender, or race, or, in a more presentist framework, ethnography, content analysis, or participant observation. This has led to strong, path-breaking work, but also, at least in a certain respect, to the demise of philology, dissolving into the pool of general humanistic theory and knowledge. Philology has become culture. And now, again, we are at a point were philology needs new ideas, new theoretical underpinnings, new directions of research to remain a strong force in the field of the humanities.

The way I read Turner’s and Pollock’s work, they are both very much aware of this predicament. Their versions of and ambitions for philology are to a large extent presented as responses to the current situation in the humanities. Turner responds by turning backwards, in order to go forwards, very much the way I tried to do it in my book from 2001. By documenting in large detail and across two centuries, how philology has spawned theories, methods, research fields, ways of reading or writing, which have been and still are indispensable for the emergence of the humanities in a Western context, he—at least implicitly—lays out a way forward, in which philology will reclaim its place in the modern humanities, reenergizing them at the same time. This would presuppose, however, that “the modern humanities” as an order of knowledge,

\textsuperscript{72} The term “New Historicism” was coined by Stephen Greenblatt and then cemented by H. Aram Veeser in the two edited volumes \textit{The New Historicism} (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) and \textit{The New Historicism Reader} (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

\textsuperscript{73} Stephen Greenblatt, “Towards a Poetics of Culture”, in Veeser, \textit{The New Historicism}, 1-15

alongside other orders like the natural sciences, or, today even more frequently, the life sciences, and the social sciences, will remain more or less the same in the future. But if we, on the contrary, presume that we are at a moment in the history of knowledge when the system of disciplines and fields of study are about to change radically, due to both internal factors like the digital revolution and new financial models, as well as external factors like globalization and climate change, then philology should be put in a position to assume new functions and roles, within a new order of knowledge different from the one that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the modern humanities.

In his essay in *Critical Inquiry*, Pollock approaches this question head on, already in the title, when asking about “the fate of a soft science”—philology—“in a hard world.”75 In the essay as a whole and later in the introduction to *World Philology* he envisions philology producing a form of knowledge, which is global, universal, methodological, and not least, applicable in the hermeneutical, Gadamerian sense.76 When he comes to “politics,” a central concern in the cultural analytics dominating humanities, rather than sidestepping or rejecting it, he gives it a specific philological twist: To “read politics philologically,” he argues, means to demonstrate “how the text of a political problem has been historically transmitted, reconstructed, received, and falsified.”77 In a sense, then, it is a bit disappointing that in coining the term “world philology,” and indeed, in making claims about universal global knowledge, Pollock and his co-editors, ends up publishing a volume, or rather, if you like, a “metavolume,” about different philological traditions in different cultures, thus both reproducing the concept of “culture,” though on a higher level, and dodging the questions of application and politics, which are so present in the essay in *Critical Inquiry* in 2009.

When I still would claim that Pollock gives the more interesting answer to why philology matters, and will continue to matter in the future, it is because he imagines philology as a collective, rigorously methodological and at the same time highly political project, which could take transfer forms and procedures of investigation into a new order of knowledge that might be different than the one we have today, and have had for the last three centuries, in which second order concepts like humanities, life sciences and social sciences might not play the same central role that they do today.

75 Pollock, “Future Philology?”, 931.
76 Pollock, “Future Philology?”, 958.
77 Pollock, “Future Philology?”, 960.
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