

The Powers of Philology

Dynamics of Textual Scholarship

HANS ULRICH GUMBRECHT



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What Are the Powers of Philology?

For reasons I will probably never quite understand, my mother, who studied medicine, has always, consistently and even more stubbornly, used the German word *Philologe* to refer to elementary-school teachers. But my mother's eccentric semantic creation was no more of the mark than is the use that some of my most competent American colleagues still make of the word *philologist* when they apply it to some of their great predecessors from the German tradition, such as Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, and Erich Auerbach. For none of these eminent scholars ever particularly excelled in the practices that the word *philology* is supposed to subsume. Ernst Robert Curtius laid the foundations of his academic reputation in the 1920s, when he was known as an eminent specialist in contemporary French and Spanish literature; he then, from the early 1930s on, began to concentrate on the history of poetological ideas and literary forms in the Middle Ages. Leo Spitzer had been trained, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, as a historical linguist, but he soon turned toward a highly subjective style of immanent-text interpretation (for which the concept of "lived experience" was key). Erich Auerbach, finally, who single-handedly created a new discourse within literary history, was notoriously weak when it came to the basic philological skills.¹ Neither Cur-

1. See my book *Vom Leben und Sterben der großen Romanisten: Carl Vossler, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Werner Krauss* (Munich: Hanser, 2002). The original English version of the Auerbach essay appeared in *Literary History and the Challenge of Philology: The Legacy of Erich Auerbach*, ed. Seth Lerer (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 13–35. I have dealt with the subjective and institutional motivations of the same generation of literary scholars in "Historians of Literature—Where Do They Take Their Motivations From?" in *Poetologische Umbrüche: Romanistische Studien zu Ehren von Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus*, ed. Werner Helmich, Helmut Meter, and Astrid Poier-Bernhard (Munich: Fink, 2002), 399–404.

the inspiration and momentary intuitions of great interpreters, as, for example, New Criticism did, philology has cultivated its self-image as a patient craft whose key values are sobriety, objectivity, and rationality.⁵ Fourth and finally, it follows from everything that I have said so far about philology that such craft and competence play a particularly important and often predominant role within those academic disciplines that deal with the most chronologically and culturally remote segments of the past (provided that we have at our disposal at least some traces of a written tradition that lead us back to those segments of the past). Philology is thus extremely important for Assyriology and Egyptology, and most classicists still regard it to be their core competence. Ever since the era of romanticism, moreover, philology has been used to reconstruct texts from the Middle Ages as the supposed context of origin for the different national-cultural traditions.

‡ ‡ ‡ Although I started my own scholarly life as a medievalist, that is, in relative proximity to the philological tradition, it is safe to say that I would never have thought to write a book about the “powers of philology” without an intellectual provocation and, later, the encouragement that came from five colloquia, held at the University of Heidelberg between 1995 and 1999, to which my much-admired friend, the classicist Glenn Most, had been kind enough to invite me. It was Most’s project to revisit the history of classics, his own academic discipline, by following the histories of the five basic philological practices: identifying fragments, editing texts, writing commentaries, historicizing, and teaching. Of course, this multiple return to the traditions of a venerable academic past was meant to yield inspirations and orientations for the future of classics as a discipline.

As a nonclassicist I was assigned to provide contrastive materials from the history of my own academic fields and their disciplines, that is, from the histories of Romance and German literatures and from comparative literature. Despite my best intentions, however, I soon got derailed. What increasingly fascinated me in the analysis of the philo-

5. See Karl Uitti, “Philology,” in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 567–73.

conjures up the desire of embodying the text in question, which can transform itself into the desire of also embodying the author of the text embodied. The writing of historical commentaries is driven by a desire for opulence and by its corresponding geometrical dimension, that is, the empty margins around the text on which to comment. Historicizing means to transform objects from the past into sacred objects, that is, into objects that establish simultaneously a distance and a desire to touch. Well-understood and successful academic teaching, finally, demands from the instructor that he or she refrain from transforming every content and every phenomenon taught into a preanalyzed and preinterpreted object, which means that these contents and these phenomena, as challenges in untamed complexity, can never completely lose their status as physical objects. Most of these different types of a desire for presence, as they are conjured up by the philological practices, also bring into play the energy of the philologist's imagination. This coemergence of imagination with the desire for presence is by no means random, for imagination is a comparatively archaic faculty of mind, which implies that it has a specific closeness to multiple functions of the human body.

Surprisingly, not to say strangely, we could also claim that these ambiguities—the tension, the interference, and the oscillation that the philological practices are capable of setting free between mind effects and presence effects—come close, in both their structure and their impact, to contemporary definitions of aesthetic experience.¹⁰ Never-

of my following four contributions to the proceedings of the Heidelberg colloquia followed the same syntactical pattern: "Play Your Roles Tactfully! About the Pragmatics of Text-Editing, the Desire for Identification and the Resistance to Theory," in *Editing Texts/Texte edieren*, ed. Glenn Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998), 237–50; "Fill Up Your Margins! About Commentary and *Copia*," in *Commentaries/Kommentare*, ed. Glenn Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1999), 443–53; "Take a Step Back—and Turn away from Death! On the Moves of Historicization," in *Historicization/Historisierung*, ed. Glenn Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2001), 365–75; "Live Your Experience—and Be Untimely! What 'Classical Philology as a Profession' Could (Have) Become," in *Disciplining Classics/Altertumswissenschaft als Beruf*, ed. Glenn Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2002), 253–69.

10. See, for this aspect, chapter 3 of *The Powers of Presence*.

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