

# What Is Philology? From Crises of Reading to Comparative Reflections

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The past twelve years have seen a veritable explosion of books and articles about philology, reacting against the general neglect of a field that was once, but is certainly no longer, the most prestigious branch of academia.<sup>1</sup> Ambitious studies such as *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* by James Turner (2015) and *World Philology* by Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang (2015) have attempted to resurrect what is by any measure—institutional standing, economic funding, student enrolment, popular appeal, or academic impact—a dilapidated discipline. The new wave of philological self-reflection offers some much-needed hope for the future of the discipline, but it is worth noting that philology has been here before (Hui 2017: 139; Warren 2003: 23–24).

As Frances Ferguson (2013: 323) put it, there has been a “steady drumbeat” of philological revivals over the past fifty years, including most famously two essays by Paul de Man (1986) and Edward Said (2004), both entitled “The Return to Philology” and both written shortly before their author’s deaths (see Harpham 2009: 35). In 1984, Jerome McGann launched a theoretical broadside against the conventions of philology, arguing for a less author-centric view of literary creation, and in 1990, a special issue of *Speculum* launched a

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<sup>1</sup> The “new wave” of philological studies began around 2009, marked by two seminal articles by Pollock 2009 and Harpham 2009. They were followed by—among others—Hummel 2009; Gurd 2010; Warren 2010a; Holquist 2011; Eisner 2011; Altschul 2012; Momma 2012; Vadde 2012; Messling 2012; McGann 2013; Ferguson 2013; Bajohr et al. 2014; Warren 2014; Nichanian 2014; Pollock, Elman, and Chang 2015; Turner 2015; Daston and Most 2015; Stock and Canitz 2015; Grafton and Most 2016; Masten 2016; Moore 2017; Hui 2017; Lönnroth 2017; Cox 2017; Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl 2018; Sela 2018; Most 2018; Magnani and Watt 2018; as well as the articles that have appeared in *Philological Encounters* since its founding in 2016.

“New Philology” that opposed the traditional focus on textual stability, aiming to infuse philology with a greater sensitivity to material conditions (Nichols 1990). In the same year, Jan Ziolkowski organized a conference around the theme “What Is Philology?” that brought together some of the leading theorists and philologists of the day, and de Man and Said were later joined in their philological dalliance by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2003). But if these calls for a “return to philology” were meant to be effective proclamations, urging scholars and funding back to this endangered field, they failed: philology may now be in a worse state than ever.

One reason for the failure of these “returns to philology” is that they struggled to produce a convincing definition of what philology is. If we cannot say what we want to return to, the trip hardly seems worth the hassle. As Ziolkowski (1990: 5) summarized the proceedings of “What Is Philology?” he found himself unable to give an answer: “At this point I still lack the courage to offer a dictionary-style definition.” Gumbrecht (2003: 2) felt the same way, noting that the term philology, “which seems predetermined to function in a simple and unspectacular way, has developed a sometimes confusingly broad range of meanings and uses.” According to Harpham (2009: 50), the same confusion plagued the essays by Said and de Man, who saw in philology only what they wanted to see: “when some recent American critics wished to recall the glories of philology, they had a wide—a chaotically wide—range to choose from.”<sup>2</sup> Michelle Warren (2003: 20) notes that, “Etymologically, philology designates a potentially infinite range of activities conducted for ‘the love of language.’ Disciplinarily, the range is only slightly less broad.” For some, the ambiguity of the term was a reason to abandon it altogether: René Wellek and Austin Warren (1949: 29) claimed that “since the term has so many and such divergent meanings, it is best to abandon it.” This unclarity of definition beset the field already in 1869, when Nietzsche (1909 [1868]: 145) began his inaugural lecture at the University of Basel by stating that the cause of philology’s troubles could be found “in the lack of an abstract unity, and in the inorganic aggregation of heterogeneous scientific activities which are connected with one another only by the name ‘Philology.’”

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<sup>2</sup> As Sean Gurd (2010: 2) puts it, “when philology is recovered, the dynamics of its recovery often involve an element of forgetting”: one aspect of the field is highlighted, most are forgotten. Said and de Man focused on philology as, respectively, a critical exploration of historical context and a close reading focused on stylistics and rhetorics, but had little to say about textual criticism, surely a key aspect of philology. However, it is important to consider the context in which these articles were written. De Man did not set out to defend philology, but to respond to a specific accusation being levied against literary theory: that it dealt only with matters of linguistic form, not literary content. His turn to philology was a polemical countermove, claiming that the same could be said of the hallowed discipline his accusers were holding up as a contrast to abstract theory.

The new wave of philology self-reflection has shown little interest in theory, turning instead to the field's global and interdisciplinary history.<sup>3</sup> Rather than a single modern discipline, philology is coming into view as a global practice that extends from Nineveh to Nanjing to New York, and from antiquity to the present (Pollock 2015), as well as an inherently cross-disciplinary endeavor that is naturally at odds with the current fragmentation of academia (Turner 2015). This new turn is promising, but if it is to succeed where previous attempts have failed, we need a much clearer sense of what philology is (Pollock 2009: 946–47). The call for a global, transhistorical, interdisciplinary philology only makes a concise definition all the more urgent: what is it that binds philology together across its many subfields and historical incarnations? As Michael Holquist (2000: 268) puts it, “the paradox here is that everyone agrees philology is among the very oldest disciplines in those cultures where it has flourished, yet a hard-edged, agreed upon definition has not emerged.”

The question seems simple: What do philologists do? They work with texts, but so do many other disciplines. Many philologists work with ancient texts, but not all—philological analysis can be brought to bear on poems by Rilke and by Virgil alike (König 2015). Many philologists work with literary texts, but not all—philological journals regularly print literary analyses of poems next to, say, studies of regional differences in the legal terminology of some imperial administration. Philology therefore cannot be defined by its object, but neither does it have a coherent methodology, since it entails a baffling array of methods and practices: textual criticism, linguistics, hermeneutics, poetics, contextualization, religious history, and so on. A philologist may collate a fragment in the morning, read up on dialectical variation at midday, and propose a new interpretation of an epic after lunch.

It is telling that definitions of philology tend to end on a resigned “etc.”<sup>4</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “the study of literature, in a wide sense, including grammar, literary criticism and interpretation, the relation of literature and written records to history, etc.” Holquist (2000: 283) argues that philology can be defined as “a set of technical practices” that includes “attention to changes in grammar, lexicon, the appearance of neologisms, changes in word usage, spotting details in manuscripts such as dittographies,

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<sup>3</sup> The distinction between the two “waves” is of course arbitrary to a significant extent. For example, the article “From Book to Text” by Christian Jacob was published in 1999, but share the “new” wave’s focus on historical and cross-cultural comparisons; and scholars like Holquist and Gurd have published similar articles reflecting on philology both before and after 2009, my tentative cut-off point for the “new wave.”

<sup>4</sup> All emphases in this paragraph have been added by the author.

*etc.*” Ferdinand Saussure (2001 [1916]: 1) noted that “the early philologists sought especially to correct, interpret and comment upon written texts. Their studies also led to an interest in literary history, customs, institutions, *etc.*” McGann (2013: 338) likewise attempts to list “philology’s various subdisciplines: paleography, bibliography, stemmatics, textual criticism, hermeneutics, *and so forth*” (all emphases added). Each “*etc.*” marks the failure of definition, as there is always a remainder of meaning hovering beyond reach. Further, the tendency to define philology through a list of activities is itself revealing, depicting it as not a coherent field but as “a vague congeries of method” (Pollock 2009: 946).

Pollock’s (2015: 22) attempt at a definition is better than most: he contends that philology is “the discipline of making sense of texts.” That is undoubtedly true, but it may not sufficiently distinguish philology from its academic neighbors. The close reading of literary critics and the source criticism of historians also make sense of texts; indeed, any reading at all, whether mundane or academic, attempts to make sense of texts. I do not think Pollock’s definition is wrong, but I fear that it does not give us a clear enough sense of what is unique about philology. Philology does make sense of texts, but it does in particular ways and under particular circumstances.

I would suggest that philology is defined by crises of reading. If philology makes sense of texts, it is unlike other disciplines in that it works against a perceived lack of sense. As Michael Edward Moore (2017: 462–63) puts it, “what motivates the philologist is wrestling with a text . . . There may be something wrong with a text—it defies comprehension or appears to be faulty—the textual tradition seems broken into shards or has been muddied by spurious readings, interpolations, or contamination.” Philologists react to such crises, resolving cruxes, lacunae, hapax legomena, obscure allusions, and any other perceived problem, until the text becomes readable once more. Other disciplines also engage with crises that interrupt our reading, but nowhere except philology is that the primary object of research. Literary critics might confront a problematic passage in Milton, but they can at least read the words on the page, whereas philologists will more commonly confront, say, four manuscripts written in the rare dialect of a dead language, each of them fragmentary and at odds with one another. It is the difference between interpreting how meaning is made and establishing the text to be interpreted (Ferguson 2013: 323).

In short, I would propose that philology is the result of an inability to read a given text combined with an unwillingness to turn away from it in incomprehension. Like all definitions, the one set out here is inherently imperfect. No definition can capture every instance of a practice that is as widespread and multifaceted as philology; as Nietzsche (2006 [1887]: 53) remarked, “only something which has no history can be defined,” because

historical objects are constantly changing and so escape any neat delimitation. When Plato uses the word *philología* in the *Theaetetus* (146a), he means by it a love of engaged conversation, not the detailed study of manuscripts, a meaning that the word would acquire only later. Still, if we want to posit that philology can be found in a wide number of different cultural contexts, we need a starting point that will allow us to bring those varied iterations together for comparison and scrutiny. I believe that the definition of philology as a systematic engagement with “crises of reading” can prove useful, not as the final word on what philology is and has always been, but as a point of entry into the field’s rich history, a basic outline that we can subject to illuminating complications.

In what follows, I first lay out what I mean by crises of reading and then explore what those crises can tell us about the historiography and future of philology. I show that the history of philology can be understood as a sequence of responses to the crises engendered by textual circulation: philologists in ancient Alexandria, renaissance Italy, and eighteenth-century Germany saw different kinds of crises in their texts and reacted accordingly. Finally, I argue that the latest wave of philological self-reflection is taking the discipline in a new direction: *World Philology* and Turner’s *Philology* present the field as an anti-disciplinary discipline, a meeting place for countless methods, topics, languages, cultures, and periods, which are bound together by a common focus on historical change and comparative reflections.

### **1. Crises of Reading and Textual Desire**

The statue *Granskende pige* (“Scrutinizing Girl”, 1934) by Anders J. Bundgaard shows a girl kneeling over a runic inscription, intent on deciphering it but visibly frustrated. With one hand she tears at her hair, with the other she holds down the scroll that she is consulting for help. The furrowing of her brows, the bend of her back, and the discomfort of her position all reveal the intensity and the failure of her attempt to read the text. The statue depicts the *Urszene* of philology: the confrontation with an unreadable text and the powerful frustration it produces.

Philology happens when readers encounter a text that they are, for whatever reason, unable to read. It may be that the text is fragmentary, encrusted, or unclearly written; that different manuscripts give different versions of the same text; that the scribes, copyists, or typesetters have made mistakes; that the language is dead, dated, or otherwise obscure; that the grammar is complex or garbled; that reference is made to unknown circumstances; that the text is inconsistent or simply difficult to understand. A crisis of reading can occur in any number of ways, and philologists then marshal the apposite tools to resolve it: textual

criticism, manuscript collation, stemmatics, historical contextualization, close reading... etc. In other words, philology has many methods because reading has many parts. The act of reading entails a sequence of operations, from the physical viewing of letters through unconscious linguistic analysis to the contextual interpretation of meaning. Normally these operations take place so quickly and so smoothly as not to be noticed, and we therefore conflate them all under the single rubric of “reading.” But any one part may be independently interrupted, requiring philological engagement. The shared focus on crises of reading thus binds philology together while multiplying its methods.

In turn, the focus on crises of reading keeps philology distinct from other disciplines. Whereas religious history deals with religious texts, literary history with literary texts, the history of law with juridical texts, and so on, a philological subdiscipline such as Indology or Egyptology typically covers all these genres and more: poems, philosophy, scriptures, laws, omens, letters, contracts, administrative records, royal inscriptions, graffiti, and school exercises—all written evidence that have survived the passing of time. Philology is not focused on one kind of writing or one aspect of the evidence, but on reading as such. It is defined by the *cruxes*, not the content, of texts.

This focus on crises confers upon philology an often baffling breadth, which is one reason why so many attempts have been made to separate it out into parts: “lower” vs. “higher” criticism, *Wortphilologie* (focused on text editions) vs. *Sachphilologie* (focused on cultural context),<sup>5</sup> and *Textkritik* (textual criticism) vs. *Kulturgeschichte* (cultural history). As Warren (2003: 20) puts it, philology “mediates between the broadest understanding of text-based knowledge and the most specialized techniques for producing texts.” But crucially, these extremes are equally philological, as they all respond to crises of reading. At one end of the scale, there is the immediate crisis of not knowing what a text says; then there are historical crises, which call on us to slot the text into its time and tease out its allusions; and then the crises of interpretation, which have us probing the text’s internal contradictions and confusions. In its broadest forms, philology deals not with individual works but with the cultural logic that undergirds and produces them, thus blending into other forms of cultural criticism. But even in its more abstract and culture-oriented configurations, philology is still driven by a sense of struggle, and my use of the word “crisis” is meant to reflect that. By “crisis,” I mean the experience of one’s reading being somehow hindered, warped, or held back, whether by a tear in the text or by the inherent and unresolvable complexities of

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<sup>5</sup> On this split in eighteenth-century German philology, see Güthenke (2015: 281–84). See Zetzel (2015) for the double nature of philology already in ancient Rome.

literary discourse. Philology's attempt to undo these crises can take the form of new proposals for how to fix the text in place and unambiguously resolve its reading; but it can also lead to a self-critical and open-ended investigation into how meaning is made and how texts interact—after all, not all crises can or should be resolved (Johnson 1990: 28–29). McGann (1985) suggests that not only philology but also literary criticism are at their best when they manage to shuttle back and forth between these modes.<sup>6</sup>

One might here pause to ask why crises of reading arise in the first place. Again, *Scrutinizing Girl* gives us a sense of what is at stake. Her entire body is contorted by her desire to read the text, as she pulls out her hair and stares at the obstinate signs. But why this ferocity of feeling? Why should we want to read unreadable texts? After all, if we cannot read them, we do not know whether they deserve our exertions, whether they will have anything interesting to tell us once their crises have been resolved. Still, we want to read them, all the more so because we cannot. According to Gumbrecht (2003: 3), philology is driven by “a desire for the textual past,” “a desire close to the level of physical appetite” (6). McGann (2013: 399), for example, writes that “everything of the old is worth holding on to,” meaning that all historical texts have an inherent value, regardless of their contents. Perhaps behind this desire for historical texts there lies a more fundamental desire for texts in general. It may be that what generates our desire for texts is not a prior belief that this specific text will hold some worthwhile information, but the belief that it is a text at all. The very notion of a text generates a will-to-reading, and if that will is thwarted, philology happens—that is what *Scrutinizing Girl* depicts. Philologists mobilize whatever means they have at their disposal—perusing scrolls, pulling out their hair—to undo uncertainty and secure access to the text. The crises of reading depend on a prior desire for texts: without that desire, the interruption of reading would not provoke frustration. We would leave the text unread and pass on, uncaring of its contents. But as it is, the text calls on us, promising nothing but the pleasure that comes from reading (Barthes: 1973). Textual pleasure is therefore central to the workings of philology, not because of the actual enjoyment that comes from reading, but because its interruption creates a strong urge to restore the text to readability. In evaluating proposed interpretations, philologists employ one criterion above all others: satisfaction. A reading is accepted as valid if it is found to be satisfactory; that is

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<sup>6</sup> Note also David Greetham's (1999: 26–63) analysis of the double nature of texts, as both physical objects and figural abstractions. Texts cannot be reduced to either of these two modes of being, since the two modes cannot be extricated from one another, and as a result, philology is caught in a double relation to its object, since texts evince both the editorial difficulties of a recalcitrant, changeable materiality and the theoretical complexities of a socially determined set of meanings.

the gold standard of the philology. There are acceptable alternatives (“Left without any completely satisfactory reading . . . we may obelize or emend,” Fisher 1970: 195), but satisfaction really is the goal. A reading is held to be satisfactory if it makes grammatical and contextual sense, if it accords with our knowledge of the period, and if it resolves the initial problem—in other words, if it undoes the crises of reading and sates our desire for the text.

Of course, the language of desire and satisfaction is not without its problems, especially in a field as male-dominated as philology. It is tragically telling that the statue I have been holding up as an emblem of philology shows a young and inexplicably naked girl: the sexualization of reading and the objectification of the female body fit all too neatly into the often chauvinistic field of philology. Harpham (2009: 53) notes that “calls for a ‘feminist philology’ have been heard since 1987,” but despite his optimistic choice of the plural form for “calls,” he cites only a single article (Bal 1987), which in retrospect looks more like a swallow than a summer. However, feminist and queer philologies are now finally making headway (see especially Masten 2016 and Magnani and Watt 2018), and one of the topics to be explored under those banners is precisely the role of desire in structuring the operations of the field.<sup>7</sup>

The importance of desire to philology is embedded in its very name. Because philology ends in -ology, it is easily mistaken for a construction parallel to, say, geology, sociology, or astrology: the study of *philos*, “love.” Yet philology is not the lore of love, but the love of lore, or more precisely, the affection (*philia*) for words, discourse, and study (*lógos*), just as philosophy is the affection for knowledge (Momma 2012: 3). Philology thus takes its name not from a systematic investigation into anything in particular, but from the textual desire that is the precondition for its crises. If philology is the love of words, then philologists are lovers engaged in a constantly thwarted courtship, whose intensity only grows with each new snag. Desire leads to crises, but in turn, those crises can also reinforce desire. Walter Benjamin ([1921] 1994: 175–76) wrote of philology that: “I was always aware of its seductive side”, and that seductiveness stems in no small part from the fact that philology, “proceeding on the basis of details, magically fixates the reader on the text.” If the text in question could be easily accessed, it would not have to be examined in so painstaking detail: there would be no fixation and thus no allure.

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. the opening metaphor in McGann (1992: 3–4), which frames the editorial activity as a sexual encounter: “We make love and we make texts.”

Because there is something alluring about the crises of reading themselves, philologists may come to resist a premature satisfaction, and instead insist on staying with the crisis. According to Nietzsche (2004 [1895]: 157), such an insistence is the most valuable aspect of philology: “Philology is meant to be understood here, in a general sense, as the art of reading well—to be able to pick up facts *without* falsifying them through interpretation, *without* losing prudence, patience, and elegance in the desire for understanding. Philology as *ephexis* in interpretation: whether it be a question of books, newspaper reports, fate or weather data” (emphasis in the original). The word Nietzsche has in mind here is *epékḥō*, “to stop, to hold back, to take up a fixed position”; and the nominal form *ephexis*—which he all but invented for the purposes of this paragraph—must then refer to a pause, an interruption of flow: *ephexis* is a form of suspense, a temporary holding back.

For Nietzsche, philology combines a “desire for understanding” with a willed interruption of that desire. The patience he ascribes to philology does not seek to resolve interpretation all the more convincingly, but rather to hold the reader back from a superficial satisfaction. This kind of crisis does not emerge from the text: *ephexis* is an act of will. Nietzsche’s philologists consciously generate a continuous crisis, a self-imposed constraint that slows down their reading. If Nietzsche makes desire central to philology, he also makes it a distinctly atelic, self-perpetuating kind of desire.<sup>8</sup> The notion of *ephexis* suggests that philology, when it is practiced well, is not only about bringing the crises of reading to an end, but about staying with them and appreciating the insights they yield—a hermeneutics of duress, if you will. This double urge—to end the crisis and to stay with it—is described by Warren (2010b: 286) as “the dualistic nature of philological analysis: it creates and dismantles coherence, stabilizes and undermines tradition, multiplies and singularizes, wanders and roots.”

Nietzsche’s account of philology illustrates how a troubled desire for reading can lead to a self-reflection on reading as such. When we do not simply read for the content but are held back, or hold ourselves back, from easy understanding, we become all the more aware of what we are doing: when reading is interrupted, its operations come into view. Reading becomes, in the Heideggerian terminology, “present at hand”: we notice it as an instrument that we had previously taken for granted. As Pollock (2015: 22) puts it, “if

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<sup>8</sup> Note that Balfour (2010) also employs the term “crisis of reading” to describe the operations of philology, but in a somewhat different sense than the one employed here: for Balfour, following Walter Benjamin, the crisis of reading is specifically a severing of the text from the historical and material context in which it was produced. Balfour thus insists that philology confronts a “*permanent crisis of reading*” (206, emphasis added) and, crucially, does not resolve it (212), dovetailing with Nietzsche’s notion of a self-imposed and open-ended *ephexis*.

philosophy is thought critically reflecting on itself, then philology may be seen as the critical self-reflection on language.” Philosophy and philology are invested in (*philo-*) knowledge and discourse, respectively, so the crises they face lead to a reflection on that very investment and its customary operations. Philosophy begins to examine how knowledge can be acquired (that is, epistemology), while philology begins to examine how reading works and how meaning is produced (that is, hermeneutics). The crises of reading are the moment when language becomes visible to itself, and so can begin to interrogate itself.

## 2. The King’s Boast

The first philologists were the Babylonian and Assyrian scholars of ancient Iraq, who studied literary, scientific, and religious texts written with the cuneiform script in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages (Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl 2018). The two languages could hardly be more different from one another, but they coexisted from the third millennium BCE onward and so became deeply intertwined, forming the twin foundations of cuneiform cultures: this bilingualism gave cuneiform cultures “a sensibility for language-related problems and an abundance of philological activity that is unparalleled in other early civilizations” (Frahm 2011: 12). By the early first millennium BCE, when one sees the first clear instances of cuneiform philology, Sumerian had died out, becoming a learned idiom of scholarship and religious ritual, much like Sanskrit in India or Latin in Europe. Akkadian was still spoken, but the language had changed dramatically since major works like *Gilgamesh* had been composed. The Babylonian and Assyrian scholars of the first millennium thus worked on texts whose history reached back thousands of years and whose language was either dead or obscure to them, and it was these problems that gave rise to philology.

The scholars added glosses to the ancient texts, providing synonyms for obsolete Akkadian words. When copying a manuscript, they noted fragmentary sections with the word *hīpu*, “break” (if the text already had such a note, they would write *hīpu labiru*, “old break”), and flagged variant readings with either the word *šaniš*, “alternatively,” or a *Glossenkeile* (essentially, a cuneiform colon). They compiled Sumerian-Akkadian dictionaries, lists of rare signs and unusual words, and grammatical texts that explained the complex Sumerian verbal chain. They studied the paleographical development of the cuneiform script, collecting ancient versions of each sign. They wrote explanatory commentaries that clarified unusual phrases, and exegetical commentaries that revealed the hidden significance of a text, using the “grammatological” hermeneutics of cuneiform cultures (Frahm 2011; van de Mieroop 2016). They collated multiple manuscripts to establish the correct reading, with one famous example allegedly being compiled from seven different manuscripts from seven

different cities (Heeßel 2011). When the scholar Esagil-kin-apli authored a new edition of the medical series *Sagig* and *Alamdimmû*, he claimed that the words of the series had previously been scattered like “tangled threads,” as no two copies of the texts were alike (Schmidtchen 2018; Wee 2015).

In short, the scholars engaged in all the practices that characterize philology to this day (Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl 2018: 179–221).<sup>9</sup> Cuneiform philology was held in high regard; so high that the most powerful man of his time aspired to be a philologist. The Assyrian emperor Assurbanipal (668–631 BCE) boasted in his royal inscriptions that: “I have read erudite tablets in obscure Sumerian and in an Akkadian that is hard to make sense of, I have studied stone inscriptions from before the Flood that are cryptic, impenetrable, and confused” (Novotny and Jeffers 2018; Assyrian tablet 2, l. i 17’–18’; translation mine). Though undoubtedly exaggerated, the king’s boast illustrates a crucial aspect of philology. The crises he claims to have overcome all derive from the circulation of texts across cultural borders. When texts move across time, space, and languages, problems arise, necessitating philology.

The first border in the king’s boast is linguistic. Assurbanipal spoke Akkadian but claims to have read texts written in Sumerian, a language radically unlike his own, which by the seventh century BCE had been dead for over a millennium. The second border is temporal. The “Akkadian that is hard to make sense of us” probably refers to the high literary diction of works like *Gilgamesh* or *Enuma Elish*, which were written in Standard Babylonian, a dialect of Akkadian that had since become obsolete. The survival of the tradition made its language obscure, provoking the difficulty that Assurbanipal claims to have overcome (Frahm 2011: 336–37). The third border is also temporal, but in a different sense: epochal may be a better word for it. The Flood that Assurbanipal mentions is the mythical cataclysmic deluge that nearly wiped out humanity. According to the Babylonian tradition, the Flood had split history in two, into a time “before” and “after the Flood” (*lām abūbi* and *arki abūbi*). The time before the Flood was all but unknowable since the Deluge destroyed all records on clay, leaving only a few cryptic stone inscriptions such as the ones that Assurbanipal claims to have deciphered.

Assurbanipal’s boast shows that philology is always connected with circulation. It is the circulation of texts across languages, cultures, manuscripts, and time that create the two key ingredients of philology: desire and difficulty. Circulation creates difficulty of understanding because the language of the text becomes obscure (dead, dated, foreign, or

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<sup>9</sup> It is inexcusable that these endeavors are snubbed in *World Philology* as “preconceptualized, or underconceptualized, philology” (Pollock 2015: 16), and as—sin of sins—“pre-Axial,” (Elman 2015: 64), the in-vogue euphemism for “primitive.”

otherwise perplexing), and the context in which the text was composed disappears, so its references and assumptions are no longer clear. But circulation also creates desire, because the perception of a text as somehow “antediluvian”—ancient, rare, foreign, exotic, mysterious, or auratic—engages the interest of the reader: for Assurbanipal and his scholars, ancient texts were imbued with the authority of a remote past. And it is the combination of desire and difficulty that yields the crises which lead to philology.<sup>10</sup> As Pollock puts it, “philology grows in exile; the further away you are in space and time from the language the more intense your active philological attention” (Pollock 2009: 950). In short, philology is bound to the time “after the Flood”: the discipline is founded on distance and delay, always having to reconstruct what was lost in circulation.

If philology is tied to circulation, then one must remember what is meant by “circulation” in the premodern world: texts were circulated by scribes who copied out manuscripts. Copying texts is a complex, time-consuming operation, and scribes inevitably introduced variation into their texts. In the Western tradition, philology first emerged as an attempt to correct the vicissitudes of the manuscript tradition, and Franco Montanari (2015) traces the origins of Classical philology to the Alexandrian grammarian Zenodotus (330–260 BCE). Before Zenodotus, copyists had merely sought to establish the best workable manuscript, by correcting obvious mistakes, choosing among preserved variants, and simply deleting passages that seemed to them suspect. But Zenodotus’s goal was different: he wanted not only to make the best available copy of the *Odyssey*, but to recover the *Odyssey* in its original form. He invented a new sign, the *obelos* (a vertical stroke) indicating that he was uncertain about the authenticity of a given passage. This moment of doubt shows that Zenodotus must have thought about the relation between the copy in front of him and the original text, or in other words, about the “transmission-induced damage” of the text’s circulation (Montanari 2015: 43). That doubt, according to Montanari, is the bedrock of Western philology: the *obelos* “marked a decisive intellectual change,” namely the insight that texts had a history which could be reconstructed, and whose adverse effects could be ameliorated (33; see also Jacob 1999).

Montanari’s triumphant tone is somewhat undercut by the fact that this same intellectual revolution had already taken place four centuries earlier. The Babylonian

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<sup>10</sup> This combination of desire and difficulty finds an echo in Most (2016: 166), who notes that ancient cultures’ most canonical texts were the most frequently copied, and so evinced most manuscript variation, leading to “a fundamental and potentially deeply unsettling paradox: the texts that were central to many of their most important activities were available to them only in copies that diverged from one another in at least some passages.”

scholars used the sign KUR<sub>2</sub> in exactly the same way as the Alexandrian scholars used their *obelos*, so Zenodotus's editions can only be said to mark the birth of philology in the West, specifically.<sup>11</sup> These quibbles aside, Montanari's study shows that philology began with an interest in the damage inflicted on texts by their transmission. In other words, philology studies texts in order to understand *the process behind their presence*: how did the texts get here, and how were they shaped by that journey? As McGann (1992) puts it, "the textual condition's only immutable law is the law of change": as soon as words are put into writing and circulated among human readers, they become subject to the changeful processes of the physical and the social world, including the interventions of editors, the vagaries of transmission, the degradation of manuscripts, and so on. Philology came into being as a reaction—often a counter-reaction—to this law of textual change.

Compare this fundamental insight—that texts change as they move from manuscript to manuscript—with the broader insight that would be developed more gradually over the history of philology, that texts also change as they move from one historical period to another. Turner (2015: 38) celebrates this development as one of the fundamental contributions of philology to the study of human culture, noting that: "Philologists awoke to the possibility of anachronism," leading to a "growing mindfulness of cultural variance between historical periods" (47). To fully understand a text, one had not only to reconstruct its original form, but also its original context, since both had been transformed in the course of its circulation. The development is especially associated with the humanist scholarship of the Renaissance, but of course the shift was not a single moment of revolutionary insight; as Anthony Grafton (2015: 170–71) shows, philological labor in the Renaissance was still very much constrained by practical needs and material demands, and the historical consciousness that would later dominate philology came about as a gradual and bricolage affair. Turner (2015: 276) patiently traces the slow development that led from Petrarch's budding notion of historical difference to the fuller "historicization" of philology in the seventeenth century—or, as he puts it, "the weirding of Greece and Rome." Hotchpotch as it was, this development still transformed philology by centering it on the transformation of both texts and cultures over time, and philology preserves that double focus to this day. According to Lee Patterson (1994), philology is currently split into two forms: some define it narrowly as textual

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<sup>11</sup> On the cuneiform sign KUR<sub>2</sub>, see Lambert (1982: 216); Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl (2018: 209–10). The sign consists of two cuneiform wedges crossed to form an X, and like the *obelos*, it is placed at the end of a line where a scribal error was suspected. See e.g. l. IX 172 in the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where an ancient copyist used KUR<sub>2</sub> to note that Gilgamesh likely went "to look" (*ana amāri*) at the gods' jewel-decked trees, not "while looking" (*ina amāri*) at them, as the received text had it (George 2003: 867).

criticism, *Textkritik*, others more broadly as cultural history, *Kulturgeschichte* (see also Altschul 2010). As noted above, the field is permanently zigzagging between these forms, which is one reason why philology is so difficult to define: philological analysis can swing at a moment's notice from an analysis of a rare verbal form to a general theory of Chinese hermeneutics.

This breadth of operations is easier to understand if one keeps in mind that *Textkritik* and *Kulturgeschichte* have a common origin in the crises of reading produced by circulation: an ancient text is difficult to read both because its culture is foreign and because its language is dead. But it is no coincidence that the so-called Golden Age of Western philology, that is, mainly German philology c. 1770–1880, was marked by a strong belief in an inherent link between these objects—the individual text and the cultural whole. As detailed by Constanze Güthenke (2015), the work of German philologists such as Friedrich August Wolf relied on a notion of a shared cultural spirit that was specific to a people and their time—a historical *Geist*. Beginning with Johann Gottfried Herder, philology was driven by a search for a distinct, continuously evolving cultural whole, whose character would be apparent in every product of that culture (Turner 2015: 127–28). Philology was thus seen as “the study of the spirit (*Geist*) suffusing the inner and outer life of the classical world and its textual sources” (Güthenke 2015: 269). This organic whole was thought to permeate every part of the Classical world, meaning that every Classical source could be used to access it. Wolf established the methodology of modern philology because he wanted to reconstruct the precise phrasing of Homer's epics, but he also wanted to recover “*the philosophy of the history of human nature in Greece*” (quoted in Harpham 2009: 39, emphasis in Wolf's original)—a sentiment echoed by Friedrich Schlegel, August Boeckh, and Wilhelm von Humboldt, among others. The philologists of the “Golden Age” saw no essential difference between textual criticism and the search for a historically embedded human nature: one would lead organically to the other. For Wolf, it was central that philologists should aim to discover behind the mass of textual and material evidence “a sense of the intellectual component that forms everything individual into a harmonious whole” (quoted in Güthenke 2015: 276), and in their search for a cultural “wholeness” (*Gesamtheit*), German philologists focused especially on ancient Greece, precisely because its wholeness was not already apparent, but had to be recreated by philological means. As Boeckh put it, “antiquity is more remote, more alien, more incomprehensible and fragmentary and thus in need of reconstruction to a far higher degree” (quoted in Güthenke 2015: 278). Once again, distance begets crises, and crises beget philology.

It was the intrinsic link between the two forms of philological crises, textual and historical, and the two sides of the discipline, *Textkritik* and *Kulturgeschichte*, that gave the nineteenth-century philology its vigor and tenacity, but also its complicity with ethno-nationalism. As shown by Harpham, German philology was animated by a vision of cultures as distinct and internally homogenous entities, which fitted perfectly into the age of high nationalism. For Humboldt, the appeal of philology lay in its ability to “disclose the origins of myths, religions, and even national characteristics—the elements of a *Volk*” (Harpham 2009: 39). Philology split into subdisciplines—Classical philology, English philology, Indian philology, and so on—each focused on a national entity and its supposed *Geist*. Nineteenth-century philologists laid the groundwork for much later thinking about race by assuming that studying the structure of a language would disclose the mental faculties of the people who spoke it: comparing languages became a way of creating and ranking categories of people. The reconstruction of a Semitic language family based on linguistic affinities led directly to a notion of a “Semitic people” and their supposed “character.”<sup>12</sup>

Intriguingly, Susan Burns (2015) shows that a parallel development took place in Japanese philology, beginning in the 1760’s. The difficulty of reading ancient works of Japanese literature led to the discovery that they were written in an obsolete dialect. In turn, this heightened awareness of historical transformation led to a fascination with the singularity of Japanese culture, a rejection of Chinese influence, and claims to cultural superiority. When the philologist Haga Ya’ichi visited German universities in 1900, he found that the philological traditions of the two countries had, in a way, converged: “their method is precisely like the method employed by the nativist scholars of our country . . . taking the national language and national literature as a foundation, they tried to explain the country” (quoted in Burns 2015: 261). Both philological traditions were founded on a minute examination of texts but, spurred on by the belief that those texts were small-scale reflections of an organic whole, they developed into a “science of the nation.”

In turn, this emphasis on cultural coherence led to the field of linguistics breaking off from philology and establishing itself as an independent discipline. According to Saussure ([1894] 1964: 95), the problem with philology was that it focused on “the picturesque side of a language, that which makes it differ from all others as belonging to a certain people having certain origins” (translation in Watkins 1990: 23)—that is, on the cultural differences rather than the structural similarities across languages. As noted above, the differences were

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<sup>12</sup> On the history of philology and racism, see also Messling 2012; Olender 2008; and the essays collected in Dayeh et al. 2017. This focus on ethno-national specificity existed alongside and in dialectical opposition to the more world-literary perspectives of figures such as Goethe and Herder.

fundamental to philology, because they produced the crises of understanding that philology sought to resolve. But linguistics was interested in the regular operation of language, not its crises and interruptions (on the gradual split between the two fields, see Chang 2015; Turner 2015: 236–53). And where nineteenth-century philology had explored the mutual imbrication of language and culture, linguistics turned to the autonomous logic of language, independent of its national affiliation. As the linguist Otto Jespersen (1922: 65) put it: “While the philologist looked upon language as a part of the culture of some nation, the linguist looked upon it as a natural object.” Linguistics was just the one of many fields that broke off from philology: anthropology, comparative literature, religious history, and the like soon followed suit. According to Turner, the splintering of philology into subdisciplines marked the end of true interdisciplinarity in the humanities, and the rise of a modern academic system fragmented into countless bubbles of specialization. Drastically reduced and internally divided, philology soon faded into its present obscurity, little more than a byword for textual criticism and outdated approaches to literature.

This brief sketch of philological history is merely meant to suggest that philology’s development can be seen as an ever-changing set of responses to textual circulation and the resultant crises of reading. The attempt to restore the reading of a text has led philologists to confront very different kinds of crises, from the bilingualism of the Babylonians, through the “transmission-induced damage” of Zenodotus and the historical alterity that came into focus during the early modern period, to the convergence of textual and cultural studies in the nineteenth century and their dispersal in the twentieth. There is much to lament in the history of philology, and just as much to celebrate. At its worst, philology has been complicit in establishing pseudo-scientific modes of thought about racial and Oriental others; at its best, it has led to a sustained, systematic, creative, and intellectually curious engagement with other cultures and periods. But what now? Where is philology heading, and will it succeed in undoing the damage that has been wrought on it over the past century?

### **3. An Anti-Disciplinary Discipline**

The current neglect and obscurity of philology is bewildering not least because practically all other disciplines in the humanities rely on philology in one way or another. World literature and literary history would be inconceivable without access to reliable text editions of works from outside the modern West. Comparative religion, historical linguistics, and the histories of philosophy, economics, and law all rest on the bedrock—and sometimes the quicksand—of philology. Without philology, most of the key texts that allow us to study the past would be either unreadable or practically impossible to understand with any degree of

sophistication. So why are the contributions of philology not more apparent in contemporary academia?

In one sense, philology tends to make its own contributions invisible: the goal of philology is its own disappearance. As Schlegel noted, “a completed, absolute Philology would cease to be philology” (quoted in Balfour 2010: 198), because philology aims to resolve crises of reading: once they are resolved, philology is no longer needed. Text editions of Aristotle’s *Poetics* or Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* make those works available to readers from other disciplines, so that they can become part of the history of philosophy and literature, but the philological labor that went into producing them is no longer apparent. Other philologists may be familiar with the challenges involved—Alexander Beecroft (2018) speaks of a “philological empathy” by which philologists appreciate the efforts of each other’s fields without knowing the precise details involved—but outside readers tend to take the solutions proffered by philologists for granted. To resort once more to a Heideggerian terminology, the edited texts become ready-to-hand, and their crises fade from view. But as Schlegel also pointed out, actual philology will never be completed or absolute, because translation and interpretation are interminable affairs. Furthermore, the thousands of texts that remain unpublished, and the depths that remain unplumbed in those that have been edited, make the “completion” of philology unlikely to happen anytime soon. Nonetheless, the telos of philology is, in a real sense, its own superfluity. As Nietzsche ([1875] 1974: 334) bluntly wrote: “Task of philology: to disappear.”

Philology’s knack for self-effacement—its presentation of evidence for other fields to employ without any real understanding of the labor that went into producing it—goes some way to explaining why philology is both crucial and invisible to the humanities writ large. Few outside philology even know what “philology” means, let alone why it matters. But the fact that philology is taken for granted is dangerous to other disciplines, because they end up relying on editorial and interpretative choices made by philologists whose rationale they cannot follow, and which they would sometimes do well to question. As McGann (1985: 71) argued, literary criticism “surrendered some of its most powerful interpretive tools when it allowed textual criticism and bibliography to be regarded as ‘preliminary’ rather than integral to the study of literary work.” And the blackboxing of editorial work is certainly dangerous to philology, which now faces an endless barrage of institutional cuts, mergers, and closures. Retiring professors of philology are often unlikely to see their chairs filled, and student numbers dwindle with every passing year. Fully caught up in saving their own disciplines, philologists from various subfields—Egyptology, Japanese studies, Classics, Indology, and so on—rarely have time to reach out to one another and engage in

collaborative projects or comparative analyses, despite the obvious similarities of their methods. Philology is disappearing, not because its task has been completed, but because the importance of that task has been forgotten by most scholars except philologists.

That is what makes the simultaneous appearance of Turner's *Philology* and *World Philology* in 2015 so promising. The two books respond to the current crisis of philology, and I would argue that they converge on the same conclusion, though they get there by very different routes: in the end, both depict philology as an anti-disciplinary discipline. In stark contrast to the current fragmentation of the humanities, the two books contend that philology is an intellectual pursuit that reaches across disciplines, periods, places, languages, cultures, genres, methods, theories, and topics.

*World Philology* examines the global history of philology, beginning from the simple but powerful premise that philology is not confined to the modern West, but can be found in ancient Alexandria, medieval China, early modern India, and the seventeenth-century Mughal empire, to name but a few. Unfortunately, modern Western philologists have often scorned the efforts of their predecessors, deriding and discarding their methods as unmodern (Montanari 2015: 39–42; Pollock 2015: 135; Alam 2015: 196–97). But instead of splitting past philological efforts into “correct” and “lapsed” solutions to the same crises, the emergent field of world philology proposes that we treat the long history of the discipline as a rich repository of readings, interpretations, and textual reworkings (see already Jacob 1999). Philology can thus be seen not as a dusty corner of modern academia but as a global, cross-cultural, and transhistorical endeavor, which may differ substantially in its methods from place to place, period to period, and person to person, but which is always connected by a shared attempt to “make sense of texts,” in Pollock's words. Just as importantly, *World Philology* presents a working model for how philologists from different disciplines can compare their findings and so work against the fragmentation of the field.<sup>13</sup> Implicitly, the notion of world philology invites us to think of ourselves not as Egyptologists, Assyriologists, papyrologists, theologians, Hellenists, Latinists, Arabists, Iranianist, Indologists, Sinologists, Japanologists, or the like, but as first and foremost philologists. Reconceiving philology as a global activity opens the way for a sustained collaboration across siloed disciplines.

Turner, by contrast, focuses exclusively on the Western history of philology, and primarily on the modern part of that history. One would think that his study is therefore the

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<sup>13</sup> An ambitious project in the same direction, collecting and comparing key philological terms from different cultural traditions, is currently being edited by Glenn Most, Martin Kern, and Anne Eusterschulte.

polar opposite of *World Philology*, but in fact, he reaches much the same conclusion. Turner examines the long, slow, and gradual process that led to the emergence of modern disciplines in the humanities, including anthropology, religious studies, history, archaeology, literary history, Classics, art history, and linguistics, all of which were once encompassed by philology. In the late eighteenth century, interdisciplinarity was the norm, seeing as there were no fixed disciplines to be “inter-” between. Philologists would move back and forth between studying, say, the odes of Horace, Roman coins, Anglo-Saxon remains, and the New Testament, since these were not conceptualized as belonging to distinct fields. As a result, intellectual trends would flow more smoothly from one area to the next: findings in Biblical history would be cross-pollinated into literary criticism and vice versa, enriching both. For Turner, philology should be celebrated not just because of its historical sensitivity and unique access to understudied texts, but because of its inherently cross-disciplinary approach. To reclaim philology is to reclaim the broad intellectual exchanges that the field once allowed for. It is not only the philological subdisciplines that should rediscover their similarities; for Turner, all of the humanities would do well to remember their common grounding in philology (see already Holquist 2000).

Though Turner mainly examines the philology of the modern West, and *World Philology* anything but that, the books both foster a view of philology as inherently anti-disciplinary. Philology is anti-disciplinary in the sense that it reaches across geographical areas, historical borders, objects of study, and methodological approaches, connecting religion in ancient Egypt with economics in medieval India and poetry in early modern Japan; but it is also a discipline in the sense that it is still characterized by a specific set of assumptions. Intriguingly, both Turner and Pollock list what they see as three defining aspects of philology (Turner 2015: x; and Pollock 2015: 23). They agree on the first two: philology is characterized by a heightened historical awareness and a comparative methodology—“globally comparative,” as Pollock (2015: 23) stresses. As for the third aspect, they give different but compatible suggestions. Pollock adds that philology is characterized by a methodological pluralism; Turner that it is genealogical, in the sense that it examines how texts, cultures, languages, and institutions came to be as we find them in our sources (the process behind their presence, as noted above).

Turner and Pollock are not alone. Many of the books and articles that have appeared in the new wave of philological self-reflection over the past twelve years have evinced a comparative, cross-disciplinary, and self-reflective approach to philology. It is still early days, but it seems to me that a definite shift is taking place in philology, towards an increased awareness of the field as a whole and a self-conscious engagement with its history,

including the less savory parts of that history (especially its relations to racism, imperialism, and nationalism from the eighteenth century onwards). This development will likely lead to the establishment of more journals, associations, and institutes dedicated to philology more generally and not just one subdiscipline: the journal *Philological Encounters* is an example for others to follow. One further aspect that may strengthen collaboration across the previously disparate subdisciplines is the digital revolution that they are all undergoing, as vast text corpora are currently being made available through online, often freely available repositories. McGann (2013) speaks of a “philology in a new key,” as digital technologies continue to transform both the practices of textual criticism and the dissemination of its results. The digitalization of philology is an occasion for collaboration in at least two ways: it is a methodological hurdle that many subdisciplines must learn to clear simultaneously, inviting cross-philological conversations about shared challenges; and it is an empirical groundwork that is creating a massive set of interlinked databases, providing the foundation for comparative studies in the future. McGann’s “philology in a new key” will thus only strengthen the anti- and inter-disciplinary dialogue championed by Turner and Pollock.

This trend towards a new notion of philology as an anti-disciplinary discipline follows seamlessly from the definition set out in this essay: if philology is an attempt to resolve crises of reading, its anti-disciplinary qualities follow. Philology can resolve crises in any kind of text, not just in religious or literary works, and its methods can be applied to texts from any period or culture, not just ancient Babylonia or medieval France. And because reading can be interrupted in many different ways, philology can analyze texts on many levels too, from smudged signs to unclear ontologies—in Pollock’s (2015: 23) words, it is marked by a “methodological and conceptual pluralism,” unconfined by any one theory or practice. As such, its focus on crises of reading transcends the more limited perspectives of religious studies, literary history, area studies, or theoretical paradigms; making philology ideally suited as a crucible of cross-cultural conversations.

If this new wave of philology prevails, the field will be brought into still closer contact with another discipline that is currently moving in much the same direction: world literature. I argued above that philology results from crises of reading brought on by the circulation of texts across cultures, languages, and periods, giving it a natural affinity to world literature. Like philology, world literature also studies how texts move across time, languages, and regions, and how they are affected by that movement (Damrosch 2003). The connection between the two fields was foreshadowed by Erich Auerbach ([1952] 1969: 2), who argued that “the presupposition of *Weltliteratur* is a *felix culpa*: mankind’s division into many

cultures,” a division to which philology offers a practical response.<sup>14</sup> Philology and world literature are also shaped by another division, namely that between historical periods, and for Auerbach ([1952] 1969: 6), “the task of philologists” lay in demonstrating that all human endeavor is shaped by its historical embeddedness. Indeed, Auerbach held that the primacy of historical context for the proper assessment of cultural products was the central insight that had shaped philology since Giambattista Vico (Auerbach 1936 [2018] and 1948).

Both philology and world literature are thus defined by the circulation of texts across historical across cultural divisions. Further, world literature is increasingly abandoning its focus on “literature,” since the vague notion of “texts” allows scholars of world literature to use laws, letters, catalogues, and chronicles to buttress their arguments (especially in the wake of New Historicism). World literature is hard at work in tearing down disciplinary walls in the humanities, and so is philology, meaning that it is only a matter of time before they come face to face. Though they began at opposite ends of the academic institution—as the new shoot of the literary branch and the dry-as-dust ancestor of literary criticism—they are currently converging on the same global, anti-disciplinary approach to historical texts. Of course, that does not make them identical. As Holquist (2011: 284) argues, they are often marked by a zoomed-in and zoomed-out approach to reading, respectively, as philology is traditionally focused on textual details and world literature on large-scale patterns of reception. As noted above, world literature often takes the editions and solutions of philology for granted, treating them as a stable ground on which to build comparisons, without acknowledging its all-important debt to philology. Rarely will scholars of world literature propose an emendation: even as they study the historical and cross-cultural variation of texts, the actual wording of those texts mostly remain fixed in their eyes. World literature also deals with crises of reading, but only in the more abstract sense of the word, as problems of interpretation and translation—not the restoring of lacunae or the surmising of hapax legomena. For all its breadth, world literature lacks the unique range of philological operations, which span all the way from emending the letter of a Roman law to studying the spirit of divinity in Assyrian rituals.

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<sup>14</sup> For Auerbach, “world literature” denoted an object and not a field of study, as it is only within the past twenty years that world literature has grown into a discipline in its own right. Nonetheless, Auerbach’s text registers a tension between philology and world literature that remains, *mutatis mutandis*, applicable to the present day. Auerbach asks how philologists, with their usual focus on specific historical contexts and detailed analyses, can deal with the rapid expansion of the world literary field. To Auerbach, there was a natural tension between the massive corpus of world literature and the specialized training of philologists; today, the tension is rather between two groups of scholars with different outlooks and backgrounds.

But, moving forward, the differences between philology and world literature may come to matter less, as they are brought closer together by a shared outlook: a focus on textual circulation and the problems it occasions, a global perspective, a historical and comparative approach, an interest in texts of many different kinds, a relative dearth of theoretical jargon, and a resistance to disciplinary siloing. Whether these similarities will lead to constructive cooperation or sibling rivalry remains to be seen.

#### 4. Conclusion

We can only hope that the ongoing shift towards a more comparative, global, self-reflective, and anti-disciplinary form of philology will allow the discipline to claw its way back from death's door. But if philology does succeed in regaining its global reach, it will be more important than ever to have a clear sense of what binds it together. That is why the definition of philology matters: it can serve as a focal point for an emergent cross-disciplinary revolution, without constraining it into the traditional form of a bounded discipline. Philology is still a discrete operation, but one that allows for just as many approaches as the kinds of text we read and the steps involved in reading them. Far more than a well-defined academic object, philology is what happens when a desire for texts encounters an obstacle. The tools needed to remove those obstacles have over the past three millennia been refined into a sophisticated practice that now bears the name philology. But for all its critical self-reflection, philology still carries the force and frustration of the scene depicted in *Scrutinizing Girl*: a wish to read what we cannot, and obstinacy in the face of failure.

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