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Philologies of the Present for the Future

Abstract: Philologies of the past are always conducted from a moment in the present, though they do their best to efface this fact about themselves. What happens when philology is addressed *to* the present? There is a long unrecognized history of philology that was conducted off-site and off-label by writers who were marked on racial, ethnic, and disciplinary grounds as ineligible to practice philology in its conventional academic forms or else chose to opt out of these forms for similar reasons; they were thus obliged to produce a philology of their own present. Examining this troubled history of (counter)philology can lead to a more robust template for philologies of the future that students and scholars can carry out by becoming philologists of their own experiences in the present, given their experiences of ethnic, religious, or political inequality, while also becoming better philologists of the past.

Keywords: black theory, counterphilology, decolonization, discrimination, fascism, *nigra philologica*, philology

1 Introduction

Philology as it is conventionally understood is the study, typically the loving study (true to its etymology), of language as manifested through the study of texts, their meaning, transmission, classification, translation, and so on. Its origins in the West lie in classical Greece. It reached its full flower only in Hellenistic Alexandria and eventually found its way into Europe during the Renaissance. By the nineteenth century, philology branched out to cover all ancient and modern languages and literatures. Today it is the unspoken method that underlies every study of texts read as texts. But that is not all there is to philology, and this very developmental picture of "philology eternal" (*philologia perennis*), while canonical today, has much that is questionable about it, having itself been filtered through Western classicizing traditions. It is the story that philology most often tells about itself.[1]

In some quarters, philology is thought to have provided the foundation of the humanities *tout court*. That is the argument of James Turner's 2014 book *Philology:*

1 See the canonical account of Rudolf Pfeiffer (Pfeiffer 1961; 1968; 1976). The roots of this account reach back to the nineteenth century.

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The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities.[2] Turner supports his claim by yoking, correctly in my view, the study of language to the study of history and to historicism, the method developed in the nineteenth century that privileges historical perspectives as a guide to knowledge — a science of the past. Turner is right to claim that "historicism, with its insistence on comparison and genealogy, replicated itself in the DNA of the modern humanities".[3] And to the extent that the project of the humanities cannot be decoupled from the historical products of the language of peoples and their lives, it is no overstatement to claim that philology has a claim to having once been "the queen of the sciences."[4] The question now is whether that claim remains valid for us in the twenty-first century. Is philology still regnant? Will it be this a century from now? Recent events remind us what can happen to queens. Nonetheless, the genealogical argument, if true, cannot be easily swept aside. What was affects what is, and to this extent it is true that philology continues to be a part of the genetic makeup of the humanities today. And yet, objections to philology, both material (the loss of language learning) and ideological (the skepticism towards such knowledge), are threatening to unseat its significance. Can philology have a future at all? Much depends on how we understand philology.

Turner's argument is reassuringly sweeping, but I would say that his object, "philology," for all its breadth, is too narrowly defined, while his subtitle, "The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities," is misleading. The origins of philology are not quite as forgotten as he would have us believe. Erich Auerbach, often cited as the inventor of comparative literature (though his training was in Romance philology), relied on Vico's broad understanding of philology to reach a compelling definition that deserves our attention today. Neither Auerbach nor Vico play much of a role in Turner's book. Yet both have much to teach us about the resilience of philology, and especially its unlimited potential — not least its potential to overflow narrow academic boundaries. Both do so by reaching beyond the humanism that Turner's book sets out to defend, in part by excluding philosophical inquiry from his quest. But the origins of philology owe everything to philosophical inquiry in both the narrow and broad sense. Theagenes of Rhegium (*fl.* 520) was said to be the originator of philology (*grammatikē* and *hellēnismos*, understood as the study of the Greek language and of style).[5] But he also seems to

2 Turner 2014.

3 Turner 2014, x.

4 Pollock 2015, 2.

5 DK 8A1a (Schol. in Dion. Thrac.).

have read the *Iliad* as an allegory of the physical world.[6] Democritus' preserved titles indicate a healthy interest in Homeric interpretation. Metrodorus of Chios was a pupil of Anaxagoras and a Homeric allegorist. After the so-called Presocratics, the Sophists were the next contributors to literary philology, then Plato and Aristotle. In the Hellenistic period, a clash between the philosophical and grammatical students of Homer, once fused in the person of Theagenes (at least by reputation) and his fifth-century and fourth-century successors, came to a head with the philological war waged by Aristarchus of Samothrace, the Librarian of Alexandria and editor-in-chief of Homer, against Crates of Mallos, a philosophically-minded literary critic of Homer. Since that time, the battle lines have been drawn and redrawn, and Turner is only the latest entrant in this skirmish. The clash between these two fields of knowledge (philology and philosophy) is unfortunate. Philosophy is the love of wisdom, philology is the love of words. What is wisdom without words or words without wisdom? Empty, both Vico and Auerbach say. But let us pick up the story with Auerbach.

2 Auerbach and Vico

Auerbach's earliest recorded view of literary and cultural value appears in his dissertation from 1921: "the wealth of events in human life which unfold in earthly time constitutes a totality, a coherent development or meaningful whole, in which each individual event is embedded in a variety of ways and through which it can be interpreted".[7] He was careful to underscore the "infinite" character of these events in all their "wealth," but also the concrete "sensuousness of life" that they encompassed. He further noted that a perfect grasp of any such totality is forbidden. As a consequence, a scholar is thrown back upon some less than perfect means of intuiting the logic of events — call this feeling, intuition, or speculation. The inquirer, less a scientist than a human being who is moved by human requirements and is subject to all-too-human limitations, interprets, but "often unconsciously." And when she does, she is driven as much by "practical and ethical needs" as by scholarly ones.[8]

Philology is the name that Auerbach gives to such interpretive activity. It was Vico, the Neapolitan student of rhetoric and the author of *New Science* from

6 DK 8A2 (Schol. in Hom., *Il.* 20.67 [Porphyry]).

7 Auerbach 1921, 38; trans. mine.

8 "Vico and Herder" (1932) in Porter, ed. 2016, 11.

1725, who provided Auerbach with his model, and not his fellow Romance philologists. His contemporaries emphasized style and aesthetics in literary cultural products that floated free of time in the form of near-abstractions, hypostases, or timeless truths. And they did so partly in reaction to the dry positivism of nineteenth-century Romance philology. Perhaps one could call this a belated Romantic revolt against historicism, which truly was the undisputed queen of the sciences in the humanities even at the turn of the twentieth century. In sharp contrast, Auerbach at times appears to be conducting something more akin to historical sociology, though his studies went much deeper than this. He took philology beyond the love of words, literature, and style and directed it towards a broader goal, which is neatly summed up in his final book from 1958: "the systematic context of all human history ... is Vico's subject, which, in line with Vico's own terminology, *we may equally well call philology or philosophy*".[9] Such study "is concerned with only one thing — mankind".[10] And in his most famous article, "Philology of World Literature" ("*Philologie der Weltliteratur*," 1952), he coined a new phrase to cover the expanded activity of the new kind of scholar that he was envisaging: "*Weltphilologen*," "philologists of the world," and not "of the word."

Auerbach's coinage has an audacious ring to it. Philologists of the world do not practice world philology as this is understood today. Auerbach truly believed that his role was to offer something like a philosophical and ethical grasp of the human condition as this could be read out of literature, which is where he found "the reality of the world" (*die Weltwirklichkeit*) most poignantly expressed.[11] But he meant more than this, because earthly, this-worldly philology was for Auerbach a philology with direct implications for the present and not just the past. It is here that Auerbach opens up a promising avenue for a future philology, or rather for plural philologies of the future. But before looking ahead, we need to look back.

9 Auerbach 1965, 16; 1958, 16.

10 Auerbach 1965, 16; emphasis added.

11 "Philology of World Literature," in Porter, ed. 2016, 255; trans. modified.

3 From the Nuremburg Race Laws to Racism in Classical Philology

Philology in the modern era was never quite a harmless academic pursuit. Classical philology from the turn of the nineteenth century onward was founded on a conscious exclusion of the Semitic world — not only the ancient Hebrew world but the totality of Near Eastern civilizations.[12] Nevertheless, classical philology as this took root in Germany carried in its DNA a strain of anti-Semitism (despite its debts to the then nascent biblical philology) that carried over into its offspring philologies. Orientalism was only one of its features. As philology evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, it often helped to underwrite and legitimize national, colonial, and imperial aspirations, in the first instance by treating languages and their products as possessions to be had. Conducted in the language of the conquerors, philology became the arbiter of the languages of the conquered. It was indeed regnant in this formative period and until the middle of the nineteenth century, when history and the hard sciences usurped its place. After the second World War, the situation of philology drastically changed, in part as a response to the atrocities of the war and in part owing to a new self-reflexive turn that made the history of philology into one of philology's own objects. The books by Maurice Olender and Suzanne Marchand are two signal contributions to this change of focus.[13] In my own work, it was my confrontation with Nietzsche's philology and the context in which he was operating and against which he was reacting that made the darker aspects of this history vivid for me for the first time.[14] Not long afterward, I learned that Erich Auerbach, a German Jew, was a victim of this history even as his philology was an attempt to push back against it, long before he was forced into exile when the Nuremburg Race Laws took effect in 1935 and had to flee to Istanbul.[15] I came to appreciate that no study of Classics can be complete if it ignores its own historical conditions of possibility or remains blind to the residual traces of this history in its own conduct in the present.

12 Grafton 1981; 1999; Porter 2000, ch. 5; Kurtz 2019.

13 Olender 1989; Marchand 1996.

14 Porter 2000, esp. chs. 4 and 5.

15 Porter 2008; Porter, ed. 2016.

4 Philology and Colonialism

More recently, these residues have threatened to obscure the positive potentials of even a philology made conscious of its own past. Calls can be heard urging an exorcism of these pasts under the banner of decolonization. Sirad Ahmed's *Archaeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundation of the Humanities*, is a particularly radical version of this approach.[16] Ahmed believes that the very methods of philology, its historicism and its search for cultural origins through language, are tainted by their colonial legacy. In its zeal to collect and categorize foreign cultures, post-Enlightenment philology helped to produce the category of race itself. His prime exhibit is William Jones, a pioneer of comparative philology in Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit, whose research laid the groundwork for modern Indo-European studies. But Jones was also employed by the supreme court of the East India Company and, as Ahmed writes, "his studies occurred within a colonial context and were meant to serve colonial rule" (37).

The argument is powerful and not easily dismissed on purely factual grounds, though it is far from clear from Ahmed's own account that Jones was a witting participant in this colonial project, and in places he concedes that Jones was anything but this. What makes Ahmed's general argument compelling at first glance is not the implication of guilt by association. This is, I believe, its weakest claim. It is that the knowledge reaped under the British and later European empires mimicked the global, totalizing, and universalizing pretensions of colonial empire itself. If it is true that the very idea of literature is a Western colonial construct, that the (Goethean) idea of *Weltphilologie* was minted in the mid- to late eighteenth century in combination with these developments, that the historical turn in the human sciences was not only coincident with empire but also yoked to its empire *of* knowledge, power, and prestige, and that the resurgence of a "new philology" over the past few decades is a direct heir to these earlier processes — if all this is indeed the case, then those of us who are concerned with and about philology have some serious soul-searching to do. We might also do well to recall that Greek philology in the Periclean and then in the Alexandrian age was itself born of empire, privilege, cultural chauvinism, and other inequities. Surely, classical philology is heir not only to nineteenth-century imperialism but also to a

16 Ahmed 2018. Subsequent references to this work appear in parentheses.

much longer and largely ignored imperialist past. *Philologia perennis* or *imperium perenne*?[17]

In a different quarter of academia but at the same moment, another challenge to the foundations on which philology rests has been brewing. Racism is pervasive in our society, and classical studies are no exception. Whence the current calls for a deep reflection on and even a cleansing of residual traces of racism in Classics, despite the efforts made in "the 'diversity and equity industry,'" which, as scholars like Sasha-Mae Eccleston and Dan-el Padilla Peralta argue, tokenizes students and scholars of color, in effect monetizing their racial identities.[18] The colonial legacy here rears its ugly head again, even if this happens to some extent against the academy's best intentions. Some of the language these two scholars use resonates with Ahmed's critique. But the tenor of their call to arms has a different feel. To deny the truth of their experience of racism and their sheer "bewilderment" whenever they feel called out in the seminar room, in pubs at Oxford, and on the streets where they live, or whenever they are met with relative deafness in the profession and with "the demand to perform [their] indebtedness, in conjunction with the concussive force of gaslighting, racial terror, quotidian racism (sometimes called microaggressions) and other pressures," would be a mistake. I believe their sincerity when they say it is "vexing to hear so much metaphorical talk of chains and emancipation in reception-oriented criticism" (these are more than mere "micro-aggressions" for them) and when they notice the "even more vexing" pressure to "remove one's work from what was understood as lived experience, as if that detachment were the exclusive sign of intellectual rigor." Philologists at their best seek to recover the lived experience of those in the past. What about the lived experience of philologists in the present?

I am more partial to the anti-racist arguments of Eccleston and Padilla Peralta than to the anti-colonialist arguments of Ahmed, though they, too, urge a decolonization of Classics. For one thing, they are admirably speaking to the present, one they know all too well, and they are outlining a positive practice for the future. Not coincidentally, their arguments display a marked affinity with Auerbach's stated "practical and ethical" imperatives (their subtitle reads "*Ethos* and *Praxis*"). Their thinking is aligned with other recent critiques within the field that are seeking to shine a light on the particularities of classical study in North America, and especially in the United States, where racism, elitism, and other exclusionary pasts

17 See Porter 2011 on the imperialism that made possible and informed Hellenistic aesthetics. More work remains to be done in this arena and in other areas not covered by Ahmed, e.g., Malay traditions (Maier 1988 and Proudfoot 2003).

18 Eccleston and Peralta 2022.

have shaped the current state of the field. I am thinking of the work of Emily Greenwood, Patrice Rankine, Marthura Umachandran, and Lorna Hardwick. A more recent and decidedly more challenging approach, marrying Afro-pessimism and philology in constitutive "exile" — a novel *nigra philologica* — has been offered by David Marriott.[19]

The value of these contemporary approaches, undertaken as they mostly are by practicing classicists, lies in their reminder that philology needs to become even more self-aware, more cognizant of its own historical conditions of possibility, and more alert to these historical residues in its own operations in the present. While these scholars are mounting powerful counterphilological arguments from within their fields, they are dedicated to invigorating the discipline, and they have positive countersuggestions to show for it. These include recommending more expansive inclusion in the profession, diversified curricula, personal life-transformations in the name of field- and world-transformations and deep structural change, and a doubling down on philology as a "love of language" understood as a respect for the rich dialogism and "hybrid plurality" of language itself.[20] They also advocate for studies in the reception of classics, where what is revealed is the very real fluidity, instability, and political volatility of classical inheritances rather than their hopeless ideological contamination. A host of additional scholars of Classics, too many to name, are at the vanguard of attempts to remake the field so that it can be responsive to the current precarious environment that is affecting all of academia.

A perspective like Ahmed's is significant. I, too, believe we must confront the historical realities that condition our disciplines. But I am concerned that his method is flawed. It is backward-looking and not forward-looking. It remains as beholden to history and to historicism as the philology it impugns. It operates with the very tools (concepts and methods) that it wishes to discredit. And it is tone-deaf to the fact that many of the philologists whom it charges with colonial negligence were themselves resisting the circumstances in which they lived. At the end of the day, Ahmed risks throwing the baby of philology out with the bathwater of colonialism. Let me expand a bit on my hesitations about his study, less in the spirit of refutation than in that of correction. For I believe that its method, approach, and findings, combined together, produce a one-sided view of philology and its potentials.

19 Greenwood 2022; Rankine 2019; Umachandran 2022; Hardwick 2021; Marriott 2024, esp. 44–136.
20 Greenwood 2022, 193.

5 Babel in Ruins

Ahmed's premise is that philology was a colonial enterprise. Therefore, he reasons, all philology after its formative stages around the turn of the nineteenth century is tarnished by the tools of empire. The tarnishing runs deep, and it reaches into the very core of what philology takes to be its purpose. To assert this kind of claim, Ahmed must make assumptions about what the goal of philology was and is, and it is here that his argument overreaches itself. Ultimately, the problem is not simply that he misreads the history of modern philology. He also restricts the scope of what philology's powers are and historically have shown themselves to be.

It is only natural that Ahmed's argument should scant the full profile of modern philology. His conclusions are extrapolated from a single case study, that of William Jones. Ahmed cannot conceal the impressive accomplishments of Jones, "a late eighteenth-century British polymath," who "single-handedly translated the most influential works, arguably, of the Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit traditions." Nor can he conceal the idealistic aspirations that drove Jones's various projects:

> Displaying a mastery of Asian tongues even more improbable then, Sir William Jones published nuanced renderings of Hafiz in 1771, the *Mu'allaqāt* in 1782, and *Śakuntalā* 1789. Though spread across two decades, these translations were part of a unified project: Jones intended them to revolutionize European poetry, releasing it from the grip of *ancien régime* neoclassicism. Just as he had hoped, Romantic writers both inside and outside England located radically different aesthetics in the works he translated and turned to them as models for their own poetry. Goethe in particular immersed himself in these works before he formulated the idea of *Weltliteratur*. (1)

The problem for Ahmed is that

> before they became a part of Romanticism and world literature, these translations were the products of British colonial rule. Jones published each of them alongside philological studies that served the East India Company conquest of Bengal. These studies — including the first colonial grammar of an Asian language, codifications of both Muslim and Hindu law, and the discovery of the Indo-European language family — helped lay the groundwork for the philological revolution. In fact, they disseminated its cardinal principles: language pertains to history, not divine providence or the laws of nature; each language produces its own history; and the history disclosed by literature belongs to national peoples. (1–2)

It is here that the return to philology under the auspices of the so-called New Philology from the 1980s and 1990s inserts itself as Jones' rightful successor in Ahmed's genealogy. "The relationship between colonial rule and the philological revolution has been excised from disciplinary histories of the humanities," and

even postcolonial critics endorse the progressivist elements of Jones' enterprises (2). The situation is all the more deplorable, Ahmed believes, because of the indelible imprint that "the philological revolution" made on the humanities: it "precipitated an epistemic transformation so vast that it has, in fact, never ceased to define the humanities" (2). The force of this epistemic change "lay in its singular capacity to comprehend every language, literature, and legal tradition — and hence to provide Europeans transhistorical and suprageographic knowledge about the colonized (among much else)." As a result, "philology's centuries-old claim to be emancipatory is itself a colonial legacy" (2). Ahmed's study aims to return, not to philology, but to philology's "suppressed history" (2).

Ahmed is right to point out that European-based philology was part of a larger Enlightenment project of comprehending knowledge on an encyclopedic and universal scale. It is also true that the project aimed to investigate national histories through their linguistic products in the belief that languages encode history and give us access to varied pasts. But in Ahmed's eyes, the project backfired and ultimately failed. Instead of disclosing non-European peoples' histories, philology erased their histories. Texts served to disembed linguistic artifacts from the unwritten practices that had produced them and kept them afloat. Ripped from their contexts, the alleged windows onto history — authoritative texts — reified their objects. Fluid, transient, heterogeneous, and embodied realities were translated into mute, arrested, frozen, and immutable forms. And those forms were recruited into a totalizing project whose goal was to "reconstruct a global map of human history and hence to acquire total historical knowledge" (3). A cascade of new categories, never seen before, were invented: literature, world literature, national literatures, proto- and pre-histories (most notably, Proto-Indo-European), and historical and evolutionary schemes, culled for the most part from the elite ("literate and clerical") topsoil of non-European cultures (46). Owing to these foundations, which spell out the remit and dictate the very tools of philological inquiry, all study of language, literature, and the past in the postcolonial West is complicit in this history. "None of us are free, none of us to blame" (7). "We are [all] inheritors of a colonial legacy" (10).

Armed with a search warrant like this, Ahmed goes on to implicate a surprisingly long line of scholars in this colonial inheritance. Philologists and thinkers as diverse as Nietzsche, Gandhi, Nehru, Auerbach, and Edward Said are ensnared in the problematic that he lays out. All endorse, unwittingly, the colonialist philological project, whether owing to their Orientalism, their "commitments to realism and secular criticism" (39), their wish to conserve textual pasts, or their commitment to the value of historical inquiry.

The last charge is especially revealing. Ahmed writes that the "historical method inevitably reduces human activity and political praxis solely to what the written record can represent" (46). In theory, this may be true, though in practice it is anything but true. Philologists are typically the first to recognize that the written record is only one strand in the tangled skein of cultures and societies that comprise the object of their inquiries. But this still leaves wide open the question of exactly what it is that historical method erases and how anyone can tell exactly what this erasure was of. This is one of the Achilles' heels of Ahmed's critique. In seeking to recover what philology excludes, he is forced to imagine what can no longer be seen — not because it has been rendered invisible by historical methods, but because it has been buried by history itself. What is lost are those discursive "practices [that] shunned literary inscription and historical transmission," in particular the demotic practices of the illiterate and disempowered classes that "cannot ... be reconstructed historiographically" (12), and are now all but lost to history.

I say "all but," because here Ahmed runs into the problem that plagues so much of conventional philology too. To be able to claim a loss, one has to point to the clues that indicate the loss. And this is just what Ahmed does. F.A. Wolf ran into this problem with his study of Homer in 1795.[21] Ahmed takes the same path. Reading Jones's and more recent and more scholarly translations of early texts, he claims to be able to unearth "the discursive practices [that] these texts appropriate": "The rhetoric of nonnormative desire in Hafiz, nonstate sovereignty in the *Muʿallquāt*, and the prehistoric earth in *Śakuntalā* each contain the trace of languages that were not recorded and that consequently resist philological analysis" (46). But this is strange. If Ahmed is referring to practices that are not textually encoded, why does he believe that he can inspect them in their textualized counterparts? What does it mean to read something that is "not recorded"? It is one thing to say that colonial philology ignored objects that its own frameworks made invisible and quite another to say that the objects ignored never made it into the written record at all. Exactly what are the traces that Ahmed claims to be able to see?

The examples he provides beg the question he raises. In fact, they demonstrate the circularity of his approach, for each instance of a pre-colonial oral discursive practice that he points to already encodes, as if presciently, its own resistance to colonial textualization. Thus, in the Vedic *Śakuntalā*, "a truly ecological sensibility belonged neither to sacred groves nor to *adivasis* in general but rather to the *necessarily prehistorical refusal of all human appropriation* ... — except what was necessary for bare survival" (5). The italicized phrase is no longer a question of

21 Wolf's approach was more subtle but equally circular. Porter 2000, 75–76.

historical reconstruction. It is a piece of divination, and a highly Romantic one at that. "Without fetishizing literature at all, we could insist that something fundamental to it lies outside history and consequently cannot be approached philologically," Ahmed writes with a conviction that surprises (6). This is a reverse fetishism, a fetishism of ahistorical origins. If "to romanticize is to reify or idealize a historical entity" (13), here we see how *an ahistorical entity* is being reified and idealized. And yet, all this is being posited from within a historical framework as something that once existed before the modern imposition of historical time, hence as something that is simultaneously prehistorical and ahistorical.

Ahmed is frank about his method:

> My starting point is not history. I did not arrive at my description of these discursive practices by studying an empirical object (nor do my descriptions presume to explain any such object). I arrived at them instead by working back from the philological revolution through various non-Western legal and literary traditions in an effort to discern the traditional practices the new philology cannot see. These practices are, therefore, ideal from the beginning: they are *what I posit* to be the philological revolution's negative image. Only such an imaginative act can realize the new philology's ambition to recover the languages that prior philology had ignored. (13; emphasis added)

Has Ahmed escaped the historical paradigm that he is criticizing? Or is he not rather embodying it with his imaginative extensions? Clearly, he is retracing the steps of philology in his own way. Western philology, too, sought to recover prehistorical roots, primordial languages of desire, "the originary" (or "the earth"), Proto-Indo-European roots, and so on (44–45). If Jones sought "the recovery of Asian languages in their 'pure' forms as alternatives to European cultural and political decay" (61), how is Ahmed not replicating Jones's goals and approach? Ahmed is wise enough to confess his own complicity in this all-determining paradigm. "None of us are free, none of us to blame." And, as he notes, his own preferred method, which he calls "archaeology," is itself historical: "Archaeology is itself, of course, a mode of historical understanding. But in the chapters that follow, it turns historical method against itself" (45). In actual fact, Ahmed's own arguments are turned against themselves.

Standing back for a moment, I have three principal criticisms of Ahmed's approach, and these are interrelated. The first is that it is founded on a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. Classical philology, which I know best, did indeed display an anti-Judaic and anti-Semitic bent in its modern formation. But that surely does not make all subsequent philology anti-Judaic or anti-Semitic. The same is true of colonialism. Contemporary attempts in classical philology to decolonize and otherwise challenge the classical disciplines seek to deprivilege the very idea of Western classicism, and this is a good thing. But some of the best examples of classical

philology from the past sought to achieve a similar end, sometimes using historicist methods and at other times challenging them.

Second, modern philology is not an ideological monolith. The modern philological tradition in the West contains counterphilological tendencies of its own that Ahmed simply overlooks. If it is the case that "to end coloniality it is necessary to end the fictions of modernity" and "to illuminate the darker side of modernity," as Walter Mignolo, a leading voice in contemporary decolonial theory, writes, then Nietzsche, Said, and Auerbach certainly should be included in that critical project.[22]

Third, Ahmed's study operates with an unnecessarily narrow view of philology. Philology took no one form in the modern era. On the contrary, its practices have been remarkably elastic and in ways elude both the humanistically reductive approach of Turner and the aggressively decolonializing approach of Ahmed. The remainder of this essay will offer a quick synthesis of these three points. I want to close by returning first to Auerbach's expansive definition of philology, which he derived from Vico, and then to a handful of additional examples that extend the reach of philology in a similar spirit beyond the pale of its customary definition.

6 Philologies of the Present

Vico, more than any other figure, set Auerbach on the track of a much enhanced and broadened vision of philology. As Auerbach writes in the preface to his abridged German translation of Vico's *Scienza Nuova* from 1924, "Vico understands by philology everything that we label as the human sciences today: all of history in the narrower sense: sociology, national economy, history of religion, language, law, and art; and he demands that these empirical sciences should become one with philosophy".[23] As radical as the thought was at the time, this is not all that Auerbach took from Vico. Twelve years later, still working through Vico, who continued to serve as his mainstay throughout the entirety of his career, he published an essay titled "Vico and the Idea of Philology" (1936). The essay ends with a summation and a warning. Vico, Auerbach writes, grounded the idea of philology not in texts but in "a faith in what is common to all human beings":

22 Mignolo/Walsh 2018, 110; 111.

23 Auerbach 1924, 29.

> It is in this sense that we can understand philology as the epitome (*der Inbegriff*) of the science of the human, insofar as all humans are historical beings. Its very possibility consists in the assumption that people are able to understand one another and that there exists a world of and for humanity that is common to us all, to which we all belong, and thus to which we can all gain admission. *Without a belief in this world* there would be no science of the human race in history, and thus no philology.[24]

With the mention of "historical beings," Auerbach means that individuals, like all things in the world, have always been conditioned by their situation in time and place. He does not mean that they have always been aware of this fact or that they have necessarily understood the fundamental contingency of their lives in historical terms. There are different names for this kind of understanding: religion, superstition, myth, philosophy, morals, and even historiography all step in, each in their own way, to account for the contingency that comes with human existence. Auerbach continues, now in a darker tone, at the close of the essay:

> It bears remembering that Vico did not understand what he took to be common to all people (*das Gemeinsame-Menschliche*) as in any way a matter of education or progressive enlightenment (*durchaus nicht in einem gebildteten, aufgeklärten, und fortschrittlichen Sinn*). Rather, what all human beings hold in common is the entirety of historical reality, in all its greatness and its horror (*sondern in der ganzen, großen und schrecklichen Wirklicheit der Geschichte*). Not only did he see historical individuals in their totality; he also saw that he was himself a human being and that it made him human to understand them. But Vico did not create the human race in his own likeness; he did not see himself in the other. Rather, he saw the other in himself. He discovered himself, as a human, in history, and the long-buried forces of our common nature stood revealed to him. This was Vico's humanity, something far more profound — and far more perilous — than what we normally associate with the word. Nevertheless — or, perhaps, precisely for this reason — it was Vico who discovered our common humanity, and held it fast.[25]

Written as Auerbach was being stripped of his professional identity by the Nazis and published when he was living as an exile in Istanbul, the essay is a virtual philological *credo*, and the same is true of its conclusion. Statements like these tell us why it is wrong to issue platitudes about philology's complicity with Western oppression or its automatic enrollment in the project of Enlightenment progress, or about its unthinking servitude to an ideologically tainted historicism. 1936 was a moment of reckoning, and Auerbach was living through it as a witness and a victim. Like Vico, he recognized that at times, and probably more often than we

24 "Vico's Idea of Philology" ("*Vico und die Idee der Philologie*"), in Porter 2016, 35; emphasis added.

25 Ibid.; emphasis added. This was Auerbach's lasting position. See "The Philology of World Literature" (1952), in Porter 2016, 254.

care to admit, more darkness than light shines through human events. Such is the nature of historical reality and of our common humanity. Both harbor a potential for greatness and for horror. All of Auerbach's writings are imbued with the same *ethos* that makes his philology a *praxis* that is beholden to the circumstances in which it was produced. Philology is nothing less than the means by which these circumstances come to be registered and, if we are lucky, understood.

Two further instances of Auerbach's engaged scholarship from the same moment are worth singling out. The first is a much-cited essay from 1938 called "*Figura*," which examines supersessionist typological readings of the early and later Christian theologians. The second is the opening chapter to *Mimesis*, which turns on a comparison of Homer and the Hebrew Bible and was composed in 1941, as he underscores in the German original, published in 1946. The chapter explicitly takes aim at fascism in Germany. Indeed, the very focus on the Hebrew Bible and on one of its most disturbing scenes in the contemporary context, the sacrifice of Isaac (typologically identified as a figure for Christ's passion), made its inclusion in the book an act of civil disobedience. In a subtle but not quite inaudible level, Auerbach was confronting history as he was living through it and defying the powers that were controlling its fate.[26]

Auerbach is only one of countless examples of a kind of philology that stands miles apart from the garden variety that defines the discipline as it is usually understood and as both Turner and Ahmed define it too. It is an example of a philology that is conducted off-site and off-label by writers who were marked on racial, ethnic, and disciplinary grounds as ineligible to practice philology in its conventional academic forms, or else chose to opt out of these forms for similar reasons. Here I have in mind writers and thinkers as diverse as Benedict Spinoza in the seventeenth century, Jacob Bernays and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, and Sigmund Freud, Erich Auerbach, Simone Weil, Rachel Bespaloff, Horkheimer and Adorno, Victor Klemperer, and Hannah Arendt in the twentieth century, though this is only a partial list. In response to their times, these writers, a great many of whom not coincidentally happened to be Jewish, turned their focus from the past towards life in the present and the everyday. They produced philologies that worked otherwise, or as Emily Greenwood puts it, "otherhow."

By this "other" philology, I do not mean philology that is focused by the study of remote cultures through their linguistic products, but something else: a study undertaken by writers and scholars who are obliged to confront harsh and often unthinkable realities in the present that distort the realities of both the past and the present. Whether it was by inclination or by circumstance, the tendency of the

26 Auerbach 1938; 1946, ch. 1. For discussion, see Porter 2008; 2017.

writers just named was to produce untimely insights into conventional materials, for example, those prized by accepted theology or classicism (as in Bernays's bold revision of tragic catharsis),[27] or else into entirely unconventional materials, such as the language of the Third Reich, in a way that conventional academic philology was ill-equipped to do. In these cases, philology was itself forced into exile. In the process, the objects of philological study were themselves transformed. Self-evident facts suddenly became sites of potentially treacherous reading. Meaning was no longer a theoretical luxury. Lives and not only careers were in the balance. Philology, having run up against the hard limits of reality, acquired what might be called a "fourth dimension." Here I am supplementing a category that is missing from Sheldon Pollock's seminal essay, "Philology in Three Dimensions."[28] A few brief indications will help to illustrate the point.

Spinoza was branded a heretic for the way he reinterpreted the Hebrew Bible in a radically unorthodox fashion, thereby depriving the Holy Scripture of its status as revealed and sacred truth and demonstrating how it was a thoroughly human and deficient product. He turned philology against itself with the same assuredness as F.A. Wolf would later display when he deprived the Homeric poems of their pristine and hallowed authenticity, likewise deploying the latest arsenal of biblical philology. Spinoza was using philology to intervene in the Dutch Republic in which he lived in order to secure intellectual freedoms for its subjects.

Jacob Bernays was a Jew who was not allowed to teach at a German university. His own work ran from classical antiquity to Judaica to Spinoza's grammar of the Hebrew language to reflections on religion and modernity. His privately kept notebooks, or what has survived of them, are a treasure trove of reflections that provide a roadmap to his own counterphilological stances.[29] His philological interventions work along similar lines, albeit in a more muted fashion.[30]

Nietzsche practiced a counterphilology throughout the whole of his academic career, some of it in his more conventional-*looking* philology (it was anything but conventional), for instance, in his studies of Democritus, Diogenes Laertius, and Greek rhythm. He attacked the inadequacies of the profession of classicists for the narrowness of their focus and for their failure to acknowledge their own historicity as creatures of the present or their role as instruments rather than as agents of their culture. His critique of Orientalism in modern philology is easily overlooked,

27 See Porter 2015.

28 Pollock 2014.

29 Gründer 1988. On Bernays, see Glucker/Laks/Barre 1996, an important collection; further, Porter 2024.

30 See Porter 2015.

as is the fact that he designated Bernays "the most brilliant representative of a philology of the future" before he adopted the sobriquet for himself.[31] Once he left the university, he carried the same methods of critical philology with him. His proof texts were no longer Greek and Latin editions or scholarship. They were the phenomena of modern European culture, of which he made himself its leading and most provocative diagnostician.

Sigmund Freud produced a reading of Exodus that rivals Spinoza's in its attack on revealed Scripture in *Moses and Monotheism* (*Der Mann Moses*), which he published in 1939. To make his argument, Freud had to intrude on the preserve of biblical scholars, and he did so with the zeal of a rambunctious disruptor. Freud notoriously produced a heretical reading of Moses by making him into an Egyptian, not a Jew, and by rendering Judaism a reaction formation to the trauma of its original and originary dislocation. And yet, far from vilifying the Jewish religion, Freud in fact preserved its integrity by bringing to light its powerful inner fantasies and by depriving contemporary anti-Semitism of its putative object and its own phantasmatic claims to being *judenrein*, free of the Judaism it reviled. This is the original impetus of Freud's study, which represents both a philology of the Jewish uncanny, one that is anchored in the sheer persistence of Jews and Jewishness, despite their persecution over the millennia, and a counterphilology of the present rather than an archaeology of the past. The fact that he wrote the work during the Nazification of Austria and completed it in exile in England on the eve of World War II speaks volumes about the historical situatedness of his essay.

A year later, Victor Klemperer, a Romance philologist and a colleague of Auerbach's, was obliged to sit out the war in Dresden, to wear a yellow star, to live in a *Judenhaus* with his Aryan wife, and was prohibited from reading books of any kind, since these were considered contraband. Itching, nonetheless, to make something of his philological skills and to respond to his situation, he switched objects and turned his sights on the language of the Third Reich itself, as he heard it on loudspeakers, on the street, at parades, in the factory where he worked, and in the symbols and language of propaganda-filled posters and visual objects wherever he encountered them. The outcome was *LTI: Linguae Tertii Imperii*; *Notizbuch eines Philologen* (1947). Klemperer's starting point was the belief, which he shared, that the spirit of an epoch is expressed in its language:

> For just as it is customary to speak of the face of an age or of a country, so it is also usual to characterize the spirit of a particular epoch as its language. The Third Reich speaks with a terrible uniformity both in what it said at the time and in its legacy: through the unbounded

31 Letter of 2 June 1868. See Porter 2000, 15 and 273–286 for discussion.

> exhibitionism of its grandiose architecture and through its ruins, through its unique brand of soldier, the men of the SA and SS which it elevated to the status of ideal figures on myriad different and yet indistinguishable posters, and through its motorways and mass graves. All of this is the language of the Third Reich, and of course there will be mention of all these things in the following pages. But if you have practised your profession for decades, and practised it with great pleasure, then you are bound to have been shaped more by it than by anything else, and it was thus the language of the Third Reich, both literally and in a non-figurative, philological sense, which I clung to with absolute determination and which became my balancing pole across the monotony of every ten-hour shift in the factory, the horror of house searches, arrests, physical abuse, and so on.[32]

Auerbach, Weil, Bespaloff, Horkheimer, and Adorno all turned to Homer as a way of grappling with the horrors of the war that surrounded them. None of these had specialized training in classical philology. All five were forced into exile. And all five engaged in a philology that was *itself* exiled from its customary seats. They produced a kind of writing that is neither academic nor truly legible as literary "reception" as this is recognized in the academy today. Their works are instead examples of engaged writing that comes from authors whose lives were fully entangled in their personal and historical circumstances. They were practicing a philology of the present for the sake of the present and the future.[33]

Hannah Arendt is probably the least obvious example of philology of the present, the everyday, and in exile. But her reading of the transcripts of the Eichmann trial that was held in Jerusalem from April to December 1961, the opening of which she witnessed in person while on assignment for *The New Yorker* magazine, is a further extension of the philology that was practiced two decades earlier by Auerbach and his peers. All were intervening in their present moment, all were passing judgment on it, scrutinizing its idioms, and filing reports from the field. Most importantly, all were responding to historical realities that were scarred by acts of violence. All were learning to confront the potential for violence that history inevitably reveals, and never more poignantly and painfully than in the historical present in which it is felt. Arendt's book is subtitled "A Report on the Banality of Evil." Her object, however, is not evil *per se* but the shortcomings of justice when it attempts to take the measure of an unspeakable crime that assumes the appearance of an everyday reality for its perpetrators. Like Auerbach's Vico-inspired philology, her work is as much concerned with human communication as it is with the limits of human comprehension.

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32 Klemperer 2013, 10.

33 Bespaloff 1943; Novis 1940; 1941 (Weil's anagrammatic pseudonym was Émile Novis); Horkheimer and Adorno 1944 (first edition published in 1944).

Taking our cue from the efforts of each of these figures, we can learn how counterphilologies have the potential to challenge existing notions of what constitutes a text, its interpretation, and its ideological and cultural value, but also, more radically, what constitutes the proper object of philological study. Tapping into these alternatives is the way any practice of philology can ensure that it has a future beyond tomorrow. Classics can be a part of this future, but it does not have to be the whole of it.[34] Nevertheless, given its long history, classical philology has much to teach us today.[35] The hope here is that by examining this troubled history of philology we can arrive at a more robust template for philologies of the future, practices that students and scholars can carry out in their own lives by becoming philologists of their own experiences in the present, given their experiences of ethnic, religious, or political inequality, and then, possibly, also becoming better philologists of the past.

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34 Cf. Altschul 2010, esp. 163, a passage that resonates with Auerbach's call for a worldly philology: "A philology for the present requires an acceptance of its worldliness, of its functions and effects in the world today, and this means accepting that the questions we have inherited from the nineteenth century need not have the same value that they had at their inception."

35 Greenwood 2022, 192, is insightful: "The argument that we [classicists] *just* teach the languages, the literatures, the history, and the material remains of ancient Greece and Rome ... is historicism as a preemptive rhetorical gesture that is anti-historicist in shrugging off any responsibility for one's agency as scholar practitioner in the state of the discipline and its *modus operandi*." This is not to deny the relevance of historicity, for "philology is restless. It travels in the wake of the languages that are its subject, object, and medium, it travels as history moves, and it travels with theory" (187).

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