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Afterword

Recent years have seen rising interest in the concept of philology. For a long time, the field remained rooted in the frameworks established by its nineteenth-century pioneers, but now it is moving in new and dynamic directions. The conference organised by the doctoral students of the IDK programme serves as a testament to this evolution. Seeking to broaden the scope of concepts and methods within philology, their conference centred on the term they most advocate: Connected Philology. Grounded in inclusivity and all-encompassing curiosity, this is the perspective that will shape the future of modern philology, challenging the divisions that once confined philological work within a set of Herderian language silos. Work that reaches across these ideologically entrenched disciplinary and intellectual boundaries is what attracts young students – as is demonstrated by the profoundly engaging introduction to this book. By transcending these divisions, philology becomes a crucial academic and intellectual tool for studies in the humanities and beyond. In fact, individual studies, such as those presented during the wonderful days in Munich in June of 2023 and published in this book, provide a rich and rewarding preview. However, the full picture of what the future holds for philology is yet to emerge.

To catch a glimpse of what is on the horizon, let us focus on one major shift that is already happening. We are observing its initial stages and can easily recognise its enormous productivity, but its full consequences remain uncertain. I refer to the introduction of digital tools, particularly AI, into the field. The novelties arising from this development – and they must be referred to as such, even if the first steps in this direction were taken decades ago – are significant and merit careful attention, going beyond the basic questions of *how* and *why*. There are significant push and pull forces that are worth contemplating and debating. And of course, we are not deciding whether or not, for instance, AI should be included in philological research, but rather, to what end, and within which parameters.

For the advantages of AI and other digital tools are simply obvious, and new generations will naturally employ these tools and perspectives as a direct extension of their cultural-technical daily life. With the widespread adoption of digitised intelligence (a term we often use, for want of a better one), philology follows a general cultural trend and development. The resulting interconnectedness – through media contact, increasingly efficient means of transporting both information and people, automatised translation and alignment of texts and textual corpora, etc. – will enable a much wider and truly global cross-referencing of cultural elements, working towards insights that have always been the aim of the humanities. What was painstaking and time-consuming work only decades ago may now be performed as advanced searches within seconds (once the necessary corpora, be they textual or otherwise, have been established). This shift not only means that the backlog of nice-to-have

studies may rapidly shrink, but that new, less obvious – and perhaps useless – questions may be posed and explored. Those few questions that then turn out to be ingenious and fruitful could yield results and even whole new fields of study that would have been impossible to establish – or even imagine – using traditional methods.

This universe of new approaches to textual corpora will further dismantle the boundaries that the old philologies struggled to overcome. In the past, students were typically trained within academic fields demarcated by a single language, often focusing on this one language throughout their entire academic curriculum, leaving studies requiring more than one language to group collaborations. There were, of course, exceptions – the brilliant multilingual scholars, the favoured bilingual studies of, say, Latin and Greek – but even obvious cases, such as Greek and Arabic for the study of premodern philosophy, or the languages required for Perso-Indian studies, took a long time to become established fields of research. Thanks to recent developments, we are now entering a golden age of multilingual and multicultural studies, facilitated by digital tools that will support easy alignment of texts for comparison (whether between versions, or between original and paraphrase/translation or allusions/quotations, etc.), offering well-grounded textual conjectures that the expert may judge, and scanning countless understudied (images of) manuscripts for hidden textual gems. We are all looking forward to the results.

That said, I feel it is important to offer some words of caution. Some implications of this process warrant careful consideration by education planners and practitioners, and by all involved in the field. There are concerning elements that should be addressed, not least to avoid overly simplistic conclusions, such as there being less need for qualified studies or language training. I believe that most of these worries boil down to one overarching question that concerns the ontology of texts. As texts become universally accessible in digitised form (for most new texts, this is the case from the moment of composition; for older texts, it is only a matter of time before they, too, become available), all texts will become accessible for searches, cross-referencing, and alignment. Everyone – from the curious school child to the dedicated philologist – will be able to ask an AI bot about any feature of these texts and in many cases they may not need to actually read the text, at least not in its entirety. We may all soon be reading snippets provided by search engines, delivering what we ordered. This brings us to the ontological question: What is a text? Is it a string of signs/words meant for sequential reading (silently or in more performative ways)? Or is it a repository of knowledge from which we harvest? We should, of course, simply insist that texts are – and have always been – both. However, if informed and reliable interpretations of texts can result from searches done by people who may well never have read any of the texts in question in its entirety, then the role of long reading in educational institutions may significantly diminish. Interpretation – good interpretation – will in many, but not all cases require a good reader. Yet if solid statements on interpretation, as well as “discoveries” and other surprising results, can also come out of pure engagement with AI, the appeal of sustained, continuous reading may decline. Unless

we shift the emphasis away from reading as a pathway to knowledge and safe interpretations and instead insist on reading as a personal and communal pleasure, as an access point to imaginative, and even meditative or metaphysical experience, basic philological training may come under increasing pressure.

Let me remind the reader that we live in an age in which even the youngest readers are clearly familiar with printed books, and some of us (including myself) began reading and writing in a world without personal computers. Within a few decades, both of these experiences may disappear. This development in itself is not inherently problematic – though some might lament it out of nostalgia. What truly matters is that the essence of reading – the way it envelops us in other worlds, develops our love of language(s), and endows us with a unique conceptual universe for grappling with profound questions – stays with us. In a sense, good authors are the first requirement. I need only remind everyone of what Harry Potter and the enormous industry of fan literature has done to engage millions of new young readers. But schools and universities must work to create connections between this engaged young readership and the necessary conditions for training the next generation of philologists. This means incorporating reading into all syllabi as vital moments of intellectual immersion. No intellectual field can thrive without it, and philology, in particular, must recognise its crucial role in advocating for this perspective, acting as careful guardian of texts (as in the title of Kaster's book), of linguistic tools, and of the many ways of using them. What philology has to offer in a world of AI searches may therefore be just these perspectives, not least within an environment of enthusiastic slow readers.

In this spirit, the present volume unveils the exciting possibilities of future scholarship. It presents the avid reader – and the future philologist – with rich and thought-provoking resources.

