Philology and Its Histories
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How should one think about philology? Is it a subject that lends itself to or even demands philosophical treatment? And how do the general (and thus perhaps philosophical) matters about philology relate to the knotty singularities of reading a given or not-so-given text? Almost as long as the existence of the modern notion of philology there has been a discontinuous tradition of what we could call, after Friedrich Schlegel, “philosophy of philology,” some of whose figures would include: Vico, Schlegel, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, and Walter Benjamin. Each of these figures in their way saw the need for taking a step back from or beyond the workaday protocols of philology to think in a serious, sometimes rigorous way about what philology can and should do. Sooner or later they came to think that not only should one philosophize about philology, but that it may be that a certain philosophy or philosophizing has to be built into philology if it is to live up to what Schlegel calls the “ideal” of philology. I shall try to trace some threads of this tradition in the not wholly arbitrarily chosen trio of Friedrich Schlegel, Walter Benjamin, and Paul de Man.
NUMEROUS THINGS contributed to the sense in the 1790s in Western Europe and particularly in “Germany” (which did not yet exist as such) that the foundations of traditional understanding had been shaken to the core: the French Revolution (according to Schlegel, famously, one of the three great “tendencies” of the age along with the seemingly less earth-shattering “events” of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister and Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre) was at once the symptom and the cause of many upheavals in social practices, with massive consequences for the rethinking of a whole spectrum of theoretical and political assumptions; Winckelmann’s History of Ancient Art had effected something of a revolution of its own in its spectacular three-pronged attempt to do justice to the history, theory, and experience of ancient art (Egyptian, Etruscan, Roman but mainly Greek); and in the republic of letters in Enlightenment Europe, the effects of the “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns” had deepened, such that the stakes were no longer simply deciding who was better, the Ancients or Moderns, or whether or not or how to imitate one’s ancient predecessors. Now it seemed necessary to narrate the immense trajectory or trajectories of history from the beginning of recorded history to now—and to make sense of them. For his part, Schlegel will appear to rethink just about everything regarding texts and history, from “minor” issues (Schlegel asks himself “what exactly is a syllable?”) to the most fundamental matters of literature and philosophy (“But what actually is reading?”).  

Many of the possibly eternal verities no longer seemed so veritable: taken together the French revolution and the Kantian critical philosophy (a new “Copernican revolution,” as Kant phrased it) combined to create something of a tabula rasa for the subject of the subject: epistemologically, politically, and just about every other way, all bets were off. It would be surprising if there were not manifold consequences for the rethinking of language, texts, and their historical understanding. Is it an accident that philosophical hermeneutics comes into its own as a discipline just at this time?

Friedrich Schlegel writes at a peculiarly fertile, perhaps even tumultuous moment in the history of philology, broadly understood, on the cusp of what would soon be acknowledged as “scientific philology” in the sense

1. References to the fragments grouped as “On Philology” (“Zur Philologie”) are from Schlegel 1981, henceforth KFSA. References will be given by volume, page and fragment number. “Was ist wohl eine Sylbe?—Versuch einer Deduktion derselben” (KFSA 16.34, #148); “Aber was ist denn überhaupt Lesen? Offenbar etwas Philologisches” (KFSA 16.67, #74).

2. And then there was also the matter of writers writing for a new strange thing called the “reading public” (Coleridge called it a “monster”), with which the Schlegel brothers (Friedrich and the less flashy but deeply learned August Wilhelm) had to reckon in their efforts as intellectual “journalists” and translators.
of *Wissenschaft* (organized, systematic, methodology-based knowledge). Depending on how exactly one dates it, this once new philology becomes consolidated just before, during, or just after Schlegel’s time. Some would track its inception to the likes, at least in Germany, of Wolf (as Nietzsche does) or Eichhorn; others would hold off on calling it “scientific” philology until the era of Jakob Grimm and Bopp. The premier objects of this emergent philology were the texts of Greco-Roman antiquity, the Bible, and to a lesser extent—as for William Jones, as well as for Friedrich Schlegel and “company,” sometimes literally the East India company—the newly discovered (for the modern West) texts of ancient India.

Schlegel often writes in fragmentary fashion, deliberately so, it being a credo of his that the alternatives of being systematic and not systematic are equally deadly. The texture of his thinking oscillates between the totalizing fantasies of a Coleridge and the gnomic pithiness of a Nietzsche. What he writes often has the character of a hypothesis or an experiment or an improvisation, a series of tentative investigations tried out in private and even in public, even if this or that fragment can sound like the most absolute pronouncement, as if fixed in stone. It is not for nothing that one of the best recent readings of Schlegel thinks through his writing on poetry and chemistry in the same, protracted breath.

Most of Schlegel’s explicit thoughts on philology, clustered around 1797, remain in sketchy form, in what appear to be notes for an unfinished essay. One of the working titles for the project was “Philosophy of Philology.”

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3. On the history of philology in this period, see for an analysis that is more wide-ranging and international than its title suggests, Aarsleff 1983. Aarsleff (154ff.) discusses Schlegel and his text *Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*. (He is sharply critical of Schlegel’s text and its largely uncritical reception. Indeed, the text seems more admirable for venturing into the territory of Sanskrit and ancient Indian culture than for its philological achievements.) In the account of language in Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses*, the watershed between epistemes comes sometime in Schlegel’s time, say, between Rousseau and Bopp. Schlegel himself ascribes the beginning of “progressive” (modern?) philology to Winckelmann, understanding philology in a typically broad sense. Schlegel studied briefly in Göttingen, a relative “hotbed” for philological practice at the time.

In the matter of dating the beginning of philology, one usually tries to distinguish between more or less learned antiquarianism and “scientific (*wissenschaftlich*)” textual studies and usually philology is reserved for the latter. There is some consensus that for the modern West, it begins in Germany at the end of the eighteenth or beginning of the nineteenth century. For a somewhat different account, see Pfeiffer 1976 on the rich history of philology/proto-philology before the late eighteenth century.

4. See *Athenaeum* Fragment 403: “A real review should be the solution of a critical equation, the result and description of a philological experiment and a literary investigation.”


6. Among the few analyses of this text by Schlegel (fortunately, helpful ones) are Patsch 1966 and Michel 1982, especially Chapter II, section 2: 35–42. The pioneering edition and brief study of these fragments is the still useful Körner 1928.
Interpreting this text about interpretation is no easy matter, because it is not so clear what sort of weight Schlegel gives to each of these lapidary notes. Very little appears in the form of an argument: the text, if it even is one, consists of sometimes linked, sometimes disjunctive assertions, together with questions to himself (or us?), as well as notes whose status is hard to ascertain. Some of the claims registered in these notes co-exist uneasily with others and some are downright contradictory when confronted with theses expressed elsewhere in this same cluster. One thing will be asserted in one fragment and the next, distinct fragment will begin “Nein!” Or within one and the same fragment an assertion will be ventured, only to have it qualified or contradicted by an “or rather . . . ” as if part of what is important is the process or sequence of thinking one thing and then another.

Moreover, and perhaps most tellingly, it is almost as if the formulations regarding the relations of the key terms “philology,” “hermeneutics,” “critique,” and “philosophy” are manipulated like a Rubik’s cube to see what permutations and combinations work best, to see what “clicks.” Some of these are literally or otherwise in the form of equations or along the lines of “X is nothing other than Y” and “Y is nothing other than Z,” “X is Z,” and so on. Thus Schlegel will say:

“Philology is itself nothing other than critique.”

or

“Is hermeneutics not also a kind of critique?”

or

“Philology is philosophy.”

This last formula or equation (Schlegel often uses mathematical symbols and indices, as unusual in such non-“scientific” texts about philology as they are in psychoanalytic writing other than Lacan’s) is listed as one of the “five” “paradoxa.” But we are alas only told what some of the other four are, left to wonder for ourselves and not helped out by the fact that so many of Schlegel’s dicta have the ring of paradox. Schlegel revels in writing that is in keeping with the root sense of paradox, something apart from the doxa, the common or received opinions on states of affairs. He is nothing if not provocative.

The Schlegelian philologist, as becomes clear from these fragments and elsewhere, is in league with both the poet and the philosopher. Schlegel

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7. “Die Philologie ist selbst nichts andres als die Kritik” (KFSA 16.72, #53).
sometimes appeals to philology as the discourse of the love of words (one
thing its etymology possibly suggests) and as such there is no particular
difference between the poet and the philologist. Schlegel will sometimes
even use the word philology as if it simply refers to what he calls ancient
literature, reserving the word “Literatur” for something closer to what we
might call modern literature. This seems to confuse, retroactively, a kind of
study of texts with the (literary or nonanalytic) texts themselves; but what
seems paramount for Schlegel, in some lights, is the relation to words and
texts rather than the genre of text one is writing in or about.

With equal plausibility, for Schlegel, the logos of philology could mean
“reason” as much as “word,” “story” or “discourse,” and perhaps it is the
sense of reason that intimates to Schlegel the proximity, even the identity,
of philology and philosophy. As we have seen, in one of his characteristic
propositions, Schlegel says in so few words: “Philology is philosophy,” one
of the five “paradoxa” that seem to be (among) the organizing principles or
at least central pronouncements of the essay that was to come. Alternately
Schlegel would say (I translate from his shorthand): “Philosophy minus
philology equals nothing” (“φσ—φλ = 0”). Even if one has a rather lofty
idea of philology, it’s a very strong claim to say that philosophy without
philology is nothing, and thus not even the philosophy it pretends to be.

Does Schlegel mean philosophy without the love of words is nothing? Or
that philosophy without a certain self-consciousness is nothing, without,
that is, reflection in and on the language of philosophy? Likely, it is both:
Schlegel tends to assume a subjective enthusiasm for the reader if the text is
really to be understood, which he then wants supplemented by some reflec
tion on the process of understanding itself.

These fragments come from a period in which Schlegel had been much
taken with Fichte’s philosophy, with its commitment to (and faith in) the
virtually self-guaranteeing activity of self-positing that characterizes the
(free) subject. (One might understand Schlegel’s only somewhat later pre-
occupation with the self-reflexive dynamics of irony as a version, with a
twist, of this project.) It seems clear that for philosophy a turn inward to

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10. See also Athenaeum Fragment 404, which reads as something of a digest of many of the
points made in the fragments on philology from 1797.

11. On the massive importance and complicated character of Schlegel’s distinction between an-
cient and modern, see, among others, Jauss 1970.

12. KFSA 16.72, #124.

13. Schlegel is hardly the only one to have a sense of the affinity of philology and philosophy. His
fellow “Romantic” Novalis could say in so few words: “Philology and philosophy are one” (Novalis
1993: 165).
think about its own procedures, its language in a strict and broad sense, should be an integral protocol, not something that may or may not take place. The very first of the Athenaeum fragments (which rarely garners much consideration) reads as follows: “About no object do they philosophize less than about philosophy.” Strikingly, the “they” is not specified here: does Schlegel mean philosophers or anyone who thinks philosophically? In any event, Schlegel’s inaugural Athenaeum fragment laments the conspicuous absence of philosophy’s philosophizing about itself, its lack of self-reflection.

If philosophy without philology is nothing, something like the symmetrical reverse is true because the “philologist must be a philosopher.” Why might this be so? Because philology, in Schlegel’s eyes, not only has to think (doesn’t every intellectual discourse?), it has to be reflexive and self-conscious. Schlegel often refers to his own ruminations in these notes on the subject as “philology of philology,” philology to the second power. Not every actual work of philology need be reflexive in quite this way—certainly not all of Schlegel’s philological essays are so “meta-philological”—but it does need to be reflective and self-conscious and to this extent is it like the discourse of philosophy (self-conscious, if it is to earn its salt as philosophy) as well the discourse of literature or what Schlegel sometimes calls Poesie. For Schlegel, the work of art too is also, at least to judge from its paradigmatic instances, self-conscious. When Schlegel comes to theorize about criticism or critique (Kritik) most pointedly, Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister surfaces as the privileged text: “… it turns out to be one of those books which carries its own judgment within it, and spares the critic his labor. Indeed not only does it judge itself, it also describes itself.” To be sure, not every novel (much less, every work of art) is so explicitly self-reflexive as Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister, with all of its manifest theatricality, from puppet plays to a sustained engagement with Hamlet. These meta-artistic moments are said to be “not so much criticism as high poetry,” thus dissolving the putative

14. KFSA 2.3, #1.
15. KFSA 16.35, #8.
16. Schlegel will become one of the premier theorists—and practitioners—of irony, a process that is potentially relentlessly self-reflexive, more so in his hands than some others. For an authoritative general account of irony in Schlegel, see Behler 1993, especially 141–153. For a more pointed but searching essay on the pervasive idea and ramifications of irony in Schlegel, see de Man 1996. Schlegel defines irony as a “permanent parabasis,” a paradoxical formulation that makes of interruption, usually by definition occasional and punctual, a constant feature or at least a constant threat.
17. Thus Schlegel’s contemporaneous (1797) On the Study of Greek Poetry (Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie) is by no means as self-reflective as the notes toward the “Philosophy of Philology,” though even the title already indicates that it is about the study of Greek poetry, not just “a” study of that poetry.
difference between the reflective (analytical?) and the poetic. Philology can be of a piece with its object of study.

And if the philologist, as Schlegel says, “should as such philosophize,” this is partly because the literary work that is his or her object is always already philosophical—or at least proto-philosophical—and critical from the outset. It is, as Benjamin phrases it in his extended study of Schlegel, a “medium of reflection.”¹⁹ That the philologist needs to be something of a philosopher in the face of the proto-philosophical work of art can be a humbling prospect for the would-be or wannabe philologist, even before we face the prospect of Schlegel’s claim in the Athenaeum fragments that “one has to be born for philology, just as for poetry or philosophy.” Who short of a Curtius or an Auerbach would have the temerity to claim that? We usually think of philology as a rather more artisanal, pragmatic undertaking than is poetry or philosophy.

If, however, born to it or not, one were to become a philologist, one would never be, as it were, out of a job or, more precisely, at a loss for work. Schlegel tells us that the “completed, absolute Philology would cease to be philology”: it would “annihilate itself.” The odds of this happening—of philology annihilating itself by completing itself—are slim to nil since we are also assured by Schlegel and his contemporaries and friends, such as Schleiermacher, that interpretation, as well as translation in the broad and narrow senses, is an “infinite task.” Schlegel invokes just this term to characterize what is entailed in translation: “Every interpretation is an indeterminate, infinite task” (Jede Uebersetzung [sic] ist eine unbestimmte unendliche Aufgabe).²⁰ To make matters worse, Schlegel remarks, “Whether translations are possible: no one has concerned themselves with that.” (Ob Uebersetzungen möglich seyn darum hat sich niemand bekümmert).²¹ The very status and possibility of translation is thrown into question, even as elsewhere in this same series of remarks Schlegel “knows” that his era is a “true epoch in the art of translation” (KFSA 5.64) for which his brother’s translations of Shakespeare are a primary example.²²

A good deal of the polemical animus in Schlegel’s inchoate essay on philology is directed against Kant and Kantians: aspects of this attack hit the target, others glance off. Schlegel maintains, for example: “It strikes one immediately how ridiculous is would be if a real Kantian were to seize on philology. There needs to be much greater insistence on the historicism that

See especially part, 2 section 1.

²⁰. KFSA 5.16 #18.
²¹. KFSA 5.60, #18.
²². KFSA 16.64, #50.
is necessary for philology. On the spirit, against the letter.” Schlegel seems to presume that the real Kantian would be the Kant(ian) of the critical and/or transcendental philosophy, overlooking, if understandably, given the prominence of the three Critiques, the fact that Kant in his early work, in his miscellaneous essays, and in dozens of his lectures, could be as empirical as the next intellectual. Still, there is a powerful insistence in Kant on timeless truths, even when it comes to hermeneutic matters. Thus what counts in the reading of the Bible is not what the human or even divine authors would have meant in their time; rather, Kant simply reads the text for what might correspond to the (timeless) truths arrived at by reason. This too is a matter of spirit over letter, though Schlegel’s appeal to spirit goes under the banner of historicism, insofar as what is entailed in historical understanding often means not taking the text at face value, or what appears to a later reader as its literal sense.

One of Schlegel’s isolated aphorisms in these notes towards a philosophy of philology reads: “There is a hermeneutic imperative” (Es gibt einen hermeneutischen Imperativ). This sounds vaguely like some dictum Kant might have uttered—a categorical imperative if there ever was one—but did not. In contrast to the hypothetical Kantian philologist, Schlegel argues for a rigorously and relentlessly historicized understanding. “Everything must be subordinated to history,” Schlegel proclaims. After all, the impetus for philology seems to emerge, in the first instance, from a need to understand texts from a time and place decidedly different from that of the interpreter, most notably across the chasm between ancient and modern, a gulf that has to be bridged and may not be able to be bridged.

Thus the philologist has to be philosopher, critic, and historian. And every reader has to be something of a philologist because the simple act of reading demands something along the lines of what would be philology in the formal, more organized sense. That reading and philology in principle lead or should lead to philosophy, history (or historicizing), and critique (or criticism) means that the process is relentless, as infinite as it is inexorable. That is: if reading is to be reading, if philology is to be philology.

24. KFSA 16.68, #10.
25. Numerous fragments posit, by turns, the necessity and impossibility of bridging this gulf. Moreover, the study of the ancients is no mere hermeneutic task, since being modern is partly predicated on understanding the ancient Greeks. It goes without saying that in addition to the historical chasm between ancient and modern, one also often has to cross linguistic and national or geographic boundaries.
IN TURNING FROM Schlegel to Benjamin, we are hardly turning at all, since the line from Schlegel to Walter Benjamin could scarcely be more direct. At a decisive moment in his early thinking, when he was embarking on his dissertation (the doctoral dissertation, not the later, failed Habilitation on the German Baroque Trauerspiel), Benjamin began to explore the parameters of philology in relation to aesthetics, trying to take account of and respond to the various challenges of what he designated as the domains of commentary and critique. He begins this with his early essay on Hölderlin of 1916 or so, an essay never published in his lifetime, and the preoccupation continued through the great essay on Goethe’s Elective Affinities composed between 1919 and 1922. Philology as a topic and even as a vocation emerges explicitly in some letters to Gershom Scholem in 1921. Here Benjamin notes, in rather unusual terms, how he has “given some thought to philology” and how he “was always aware of its seductive side.”

He goes on to circumscribe what he means by philology, a discipline one might think of as already rather circumscribed:

I define philology, not as the science or history of language, but as the history of terminology at its deepest level. In doing this, a most puzzling concept of time and very puzzling phenomena must surely be taken in to consideration. If I am not mistaken, I have an idea of what you are getting at, without being able to elaborate on it, when you suggest that philology is close to history viewed as a chronicle. The chronicle is fundamentally interpolated history. Philological interpolation in chronicles simply reveals in its form the intention of its content, since its content interpolates history. (176; emphasis in original)

The apparent delimitation—a history only of terminology—seems very quickly, for Benjamin, to lead to history much more broadly conceived and various of its narrative modes, by virtue of the fact that one would have to come to terms with terms over time. Those who know Benjamin’s enigmatic, powerful “Theses on the Philosophy of History” will recognize here some of the key categories of that work (especially that of the “chronicle”) drafted some two decades earlier, and thus long before the soi-disant conversion to a certain or uncertain Marxism. (Some of these same categories are crucial to other works of the 1930s such as “The Storyteller” essay about Leskov and the long essay on the historical materialism of Eduard Fuchs.) The form of the chronicle preoccupies Benjamin because it stands as a mode that tends

not to distinguish between great and small, recording all manner of things, significant or insignificant, for its deferred reading and even redemption at a later day, at some small or ultimate version of the Last Judgment.

This insistence on the desirability of philology is never really left behind, not even in what turned out to be the last years of his life. When Benjamin, in the 1930s, was devoting a good deal of his energy to fighting fascism, he saw his massive, unfinished (perhaps unfinishable) book on Baudelaire and the Arcades as at least indirectly related to that struggle, and part and parcel of his political thinking. But the status of philology in all this was rather fraught, as became clear in the exchanges between Benjamin and Adorno about the former’s work on Baudelaire. Having eagerly awaited Benjamin’s long-in-the-works work, Adorno, on first reading it, could not conceal his disappointment with what Benjamin had produced, charging it especially with an inattention to mediation in its shuttling, perhaps lurching, from the macro- and micro-economic to the sphere of cultural production as it was exemplified in Baudelaire’s poems. In responding to and sometimes countering Adorno’s various charges, Benjamin wrote back the following on December 9, 1938:

When you speak of a “wide-eyed presentation of the bare facts,” you are characterizing the genuinely philological stance. This had to be embedded in the construction as such and not only for the sake of results. The nondifferentiation between magic and positivism must in fact be liquidated, as you so aptly formulated it. In other words, the author’s philological interpretation must be *sublated* in Hegelian fashion by dialectical materialists; that is to say, negated, preserved and raised to a higher level. Philology is the examination of a text, which, proceeding on the basis of details, magically fixates the reader on the text. What Faust took home in black on white is closely related to Grimm’s reverence for small things. They have in common that magical element which is reserved for philosophy to exorcise, reserved here for the concluding part.

The allusion to Goethe’s *Faust* conjures up the episode where a student says, “Denn was man schwarz auf weiss besitzt, kann man getrost nach Hause tragen” (“What one has in black on white, one can take home with confidence [literally, ‘consoled’]”), a saying that, when spoken in the presence of Mephistopheles, comes across as distinctly naïve. But this taking-the-text-at-its-word seems to be part of the necessary wide-eyedness of philology, even if it constitutes only one aspect of the philological posture. The other reference to the great philologist Jakob Grimm is perhaps apocryphal; nonetheless, he
invokes it at least twice; one other place he does so is in his essay “Rigorous Study of Art” where he praises this attention to (even) insignificant things as “the spirit of true philology.” 27 Nothing, in principle, escapes philology and in this it resembles, once again, the chronicle, a mode of history that avoids weighing matters in a balance of great and small. Everything remains to be read, and to be read again, later, differently.

In his response to Adorno, what Benjamin summons up with one hand—the magic of philology’s fixation on the text—is spirited away with the other, the more or less tight fist of dialectical materialism. Yet we might not be wrong in thinking Benjamin wants to have it both ways, especially if we understand the emphasis on “sublated” (aufgehoben) as indicating preservation. In any event, Benjamin goes on to assuage Adorno on the score of a certain (kind of) philology’s eventual disappearance:

> The appearance of closed facticity which attaches to a philosophical investigation and places the investigator under its spell, fades to the extent that the object is construed in an historical perspective. The base lines of this construction converge in our own historical experience.

Benjamin’s rejoinder is perhaps somewhat disingenuous, momentarily overstating philology’s disappearance to appease Adorno. Indeed, the strong emphasis on the constructive character of what counts as historical knowledge in the present, namely, that it has as much to do with the present moment as with given moments of the past, should be compatible with a permanent need for philology to respond to the demands of two historical moments, one past and one present. Philology’s “infinite task” is hardly lessened, much less done away with, by the requirements of this newly conceived historical materialism.

We witness in Benjamin’s letters to Adorno the linkage of philology to the outlines of Benjamin’s now familiar but still challenging theory of historical understanding. If there is still any lingering doubt about the import of philology for Benjamin’s (especially later) thinking, one should pause over this remarkable, lapidary pronouncement in the drafts to his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” which is also to say the theoretical underpinnings of the Arcades project, namely: “The historical method is a philological one.” 28 Such a resonant and not-so-self-evident dictum virtually requires us to inquire into what is at stake, in Benjamin’s hands, in this thing called

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philology. The larger passage from which Benjamin’s pronouncement comes clarifies what is at stake in his claim and why he might make it:

If one wants to consider history as a text, then what a recent author says of literary texts would apply to it. The past has deposited in it images, which one could compare to those captured by a light-sensitive plate. “Only the future has developer at its disposal which is strong enough to allow the image to appear in all its details. Some pages of Marivaux or Rousseau suggest a secret sense, which the contemporary reader could not have deciphered completely.” The historical method is a philological one, whose foundation is the book of the world. “Read what was never written,” says Hofmannsthal. The reader to be thought of here is the true historian.29

If for Schlegel and a good many philologists one of the principal tasks is to cross the gulf to the past from the present, Benjamin posits a rather different model whereby the very movement of history can make a text more legible at a date long removed from the moment of its inscription or first publication. This is not an overt or covert argument for “presentism” (as is abundantly clear from the attention to historical detail in the Arcades project especially). That historical knowledge (including most of what is commonly understood as philology) necessarily involves and is only rendered possible in and through the conjunction of two moments, past and present, is spelled out in one of the passages proximate to the “Theses on the Concept of History”:

Historical articulation of the past means: to recognize in the past that which comes together in the constellation of one and the same moment. Historical knowledge is uniquely and solely possible in the historical moment. Cognition in the historical moment, however, is always cognition of a moment. Insofar as the past gathers itself together in a moment—in a dialectical image—it enters into the involuntary memory of mankind.30

Historical knowledge occurs only as a relation of one moment to another (and not to some large or small, more or less causally articulated “chain of events”), which is one reason why the models of reading and citation come to be paradigmatic for Benjamin’s understanding of history. The French revolutionaries cite the Roman revolution (Thesis XIV); they do not tell a grand, continuous narrative that connects them to their forebears.

It is not just that our knowledge of history is mediated by reading and citation: it is structured as they are, as the encounter of a (more or less) determinate present with a (more or less) determinate past, or of one act of language with another, or of an act of language with something other than language. To speak of historical method as philological risks having it sound academic or antiquarian or worse, rather as if speaking of history in terms of reading and citation might risk “reducing” history to a text. Charges like these pose no particular challenge to or for Benjamin, since there could be no trivialization or reduction involved when language and text are the models, since both for Benjamin are historical through and through, and must be addressed with all due attention, not least in political terms. There is in actuality no such thing as pure language, even if now and then Benjamin explicitly invokes such a model to think about language and history.

This history which demands a philological reading is, to take Benjamin’s scattered writings as a (quasi-)whole, structured in the same way as critique, language, and translation. Each, as Benjamin elaborates them, is structured in terms of a relation between two moments, the earlier of which somehow calls for the latter, entailing a logic and a rhetoric of fulfillment, of which Benjamin’s “weak messianic power” that inhabits each moment of the past is only the most celebrated and extreme version.

Still, it is striking that philology is proposed as the general model for all historical investigation, given what is entailed, for Benjamin, in the twin guises of history (as historia rerum gestarum or historiography and as res gestae or action): history’s paradigmatic event is the revolution, when things come to a standstill, typically, in a citation of a past revolutionary moment and with an opening to a radically uncertain future, as Benjamin proposes, following closely the opening pages of Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire. Benjamin can imagine philology as the model for history because, for him, reading is always a matter of the confrontation of one moment to another. Long before Lyotard’s account of postmodernism, Benjamin argued vehemently against the regime of totalizing grand narratives, especially those of inexorable freedom and progress, to focus rather on the moments of knowing and known, reading and what is read.

In the early, great and still not well-enough-known essay on Goethe’s Elective Affinities, Benjamin spells out one reason why the demands of reading and thus philology are always changing:

Critique seeks the truth content of a work of art; commentary, its material content. The relation between the two is determined by that basic law of literature according to which the more significant the work, the more
inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content. If, therefore, the works that prove enduring are precisely those whose truth is most deeply sunken in their material content, then in the course of this duration, the concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world. With this, however, to judge by appearances, the material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of the work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains to the same extent hidden as the material content comes to the fore. More and more, therefore, the interpretation of what is striking and curious—that is, the material content—becomes a prerequisite for any later critic. One may compare him to a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more powerful script which refers to that text. As the paleographer would have to begin by reading the latter script, the critic would have to begin with commentary. And with one stroke, an invaluable criterion of judgment springs out for him; only now can he raise the basic critical question of whether the semblance/luster [Schein] of the truth content is due to the material content, or the life of the material content to the truth content. For as they set themselves apart from each other in the work, they decide on its immortality. In this sense the history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical distance increases their power. If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas for the former, wood and ashes remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced.\(^{31}\)

One would not normally think it is the task of philology to determine the truth content of a literary text. Usually it takes the form of a commentary that “simply” tries to establish what the text is saying and to provide explanations for anything that is not clear on the surface of the text (allusions, quotations, references, relation to a pertinent context). In the *Elective Affinities* essay Benjamin provides what he calls critique in what looks like commentary. That is partly because of the peculiar and (over time) changing relation between the truth content and material. Necessarily conjoined at the moment of a work of art’s production, the two become disarticulated

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with passing time. The progressive rendering strange—or stranger—of the realia of the subject matter (or Sachgehalt) means that the re-articulation of the material content with the truth content is constantly changing and thus the demands of reading are always different. Reading and thus philology is in a kind of permanent crisis, if that is not too oxymoronic a way to phrase it. Or at least it has to reinvent the actual task of reading at every given historical moment.

The ever-changing task of reading, for Benjamin, entails what he calls critique, a notion worked out in the most elaborate fashion in his dissertation, Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik (translated as The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism). There Benjamin drew on Friedrich Schlegel’s exemplary reading of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister to formulate a far-reaching theory of the work of art as both entailing its own critique (in advance, so to speak) and necessitating a critique external to the work, a strangely necessary supplement to what seems like the autonomous work of art. Benjamin extended Schlegel’s notion of critique by conceiving of the work as that which gazes at the reader or spectator and in turn demands that its gaze be met. This already means that it makes little or no sense to consign a work of art simply to the moment of its production, as Adorno would later underscore. The reflection that is critique is required again and again of and by the work, in principle, and simply is not able to be limited to one and only one historical moment. Critique, then, is nothing if not historical, a kind of intellectual event that responds partly to the demands of the moment; but it is perhaps not historical in the same sense as implied by the conceptual framework of “historicism,” about which the historically-minded Benjamin had nothing good to say. Philology has to be sublated but by a historical materialism that not only takes its cue from philology but does to and for history what philology does to and for the text.

AT THE CHRONOLOGICAL end of the announced trajectory we come across the perhaps surprising programmatic invocation of the term “philology” by Paul de Man in his short polemical piece from 1982 entitled “The Return to Philology.” The most immediate provocation to his text was a short essay by Walter Jackson Bate, then still an influential professor at Harvard, lamenting the decline of literary studies in the American (or perhaps North American) academy. The fault was laid at the door of what was then and now
loosely called “theory”—and theory, from this point of view, was nothing if not loose. “Theory” in these contexts almost always meant the (post) structuralist thought of the likes of Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze—and even worse, their progeny. The main perpetrator of “theory” in Bate’s piece was Jacques Derrida, called by Bate a “puckish Parisian,” it being no accident that the source of theory was foreign and, as a kind of bonus, French, as if Bates were rehearsing Edmund Burke’s diatribe against what he—Burke—called “upstart theory” emanating from the French revolutionaries a little over two hundred years ago.\(^{34}\)

De Man replied by suggesting that the discomfort felt by Bate and legions of like-minded critics could be not be traced—or not simply, only traced—to the newly demonized thing called “theory” but rather—or at least also—to what he perhaps oddly termed philology—by which he meant a kind of analysis that focuses in the first instance on “the way meaning is conveyed rather than the meaning itself” (my emphasis).\(^{35}\) This distinction corresponds to the division, in de Man’s lexicon but not only his, between the two relatively autonomous practices of poetics and hermeneutics. That the two are in some sense and at the end of the day inextricable does not mean there are not important differences in principle and in practice between the two, especially if hermeneutics proceeds as if poetics were neither necessary nor crucial. The relation between poetics and hermeneutics is hardly straightforward and however inextricable they are, they are not necessarily compatible.

But one thing is clear for de Man: poetics comes first. The attention to how meaning is conveyed is granted a methodological and even a conceptual priority. One must, in the first instance, try to read the text as a text, which means at least provisionally bracketing questions of meaning as such. De Man glosses his polemical point by tracing his own genealogy and that of numerous more or less prominent literary critics in America to one locus of origin in Harvard’s legendary HUM 6 course (and thus as close to home as could be for Walter Jackson Bate) and most particularly to one of its renowned instructors: Reuben Brower. Brower’s fastidious, close readings, which took poetry as their main object and tended to read prose and drama in a manner more usually associated with poetry, could well seem a far cry from the variously extravagant or virulent strains of imported poststructuralism but for de Man they do something at least potentially radical and disruptive simply by attending to what texts actually say and do.\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) On the relation to French theory in Burke’s thought, see Chandler 1984 and Simpson 1993.

\(^{35}\) de Man 1986.

\(^{36}\) A sense of the Brower “school” (not actually a school) can be gleaned from the excellent col-
De Man describes the parameters of teaching and learning with Brower at Harvard as follows:

Students, as they began to write on the writings of others, were not to say anything that was not derived from the text they were considering. They were not to make any statements that they could not support by a specific use of language that actually occurred in the text. They were asked, in other words, to begin by reading texts closely as texts and not to move at once into the general context of human experience or history. Much more humbly or modestly, they were to start out from the bafflement that such *singular* turns of tone, phrase, and figure were bound to produce in readers attentive enough to notice them and honest enough not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas that often passes, in literary instruction, for humanistic knowledge.\(^{37}\)

The note of singularity sounded here is a recurrent one in de Man’s late work.\(^{38}\) It is importantly elaborated on in the essay entitled “The Resistance to Theory,” where one thing that resists theory is the stubborn singularity of the literary text, despite the way the text is traversed by any number of not-so-singular things: grammar, genre and its conventions, figures of speech, and the like. Literary theory, unlike theoretical work in the natural sciences (but, interestingly, like political theory, according to de Man) is characterized by its inexorable ties to the example, an example that in its singularity or quasi-singularity is at the same time counterexemplary because not fully generalizable. For most scientific purposes, any and every leaf from any maple tree could be equally “good” as an example of a maple leaf. Even literary *theory*, to say nothing of literary criticism, has to dwell with and in the example, the example that turns out to be something less or other than fully exemplary, that is, not able to stand in for all other pertinent examples: a certain singularity abides, even if in some respects it can indeed also function as an example. (One thing teaching literature teaches is that not every example is equally “good.”)

If de Man, contrary to popular belief, tended to practice philology (as he would insist—though sometimes he will call it “rhetorical reading”), what does this philology look like? At some charged moments, the task of phi-
lology (or reading, which amounts to virtually the same thing) consists in figuring out what, in the most literal way, the text is saying. De Man will several times, in his reading of Kant, Hegel, Hölderlin, or Rousseau, at some preliminary point in his analyses pause to ask in what he somewhat coyly calls “the most naïve,” the “most literal fashion” what the text says. This might seem like a rather humble, straightforward task, nothing really to write home about. Yet determining just what the text says often entails a lot of (difficult) things, starting with reading through a thicket of misapprehensions, varying institutionalized, by benighted or misguided critics of the best and less than the best intentions. Sometimes the filter is the “screen of received ideas” invoked in the passage on Brower above, sometimes bad periodization, or an unwarranted notion of the homogeneity of a period or an author’s corpus—which produces nothing but pseudo-historicism in the guise of history. (Often a critic or student will begin with a certain reductive notion of “Romanticism,” say, then submit a putatively “Romantic” poem to analysis only to find—quelle surprise—that it is indeed “Romantic.”) A number of de Man’s analyses, especially the late essays collected in the volume *Aesthetic Ideology*, read Hegel and Kant against the grain of their readers, Hegelians and Kantians. A good many of them could also be called Schillerians, Schiller having crystallized better than anyone, in de Man’s view, the unquestioned and unquestioning ideology of the aesthetic (in Schiller’s case: the aesthetic as the locus of resolution for social and political tensions). The tangled web of mediations entailed in reading Kant and Hegel gets in the way of our comprehending just what is being said even when it appears, on the face of it, to be perfectly straightforward. Thus, for example, when Kant in his third Critique says apropos the possible sublimity of oceans: “. . . one must consider the ocean merely as the poets do [wie die Dichter es tun], in accordance with what its appearance shows [was der Augenschein zeigt], for instance, when it is considered in periods of calm, as a clear watery mirror bounded only by the heavens, but also when it is turbulent, an abyss threatening to devour everything, and yet still be able to find it sublime.” The phrase de Man seizes on is one that is indeed easy to skip over perhaps because it seems to go so directly against what has become common sense. If the model for poetic here is “was der Augenschein zeigt”—how it strikes the eye or how it appears—that seems to run counter to our collective sense of the poet as creative and his or her productions as vitally metaphorical or fresh in their perceptions—not just in registering in a flat, literal way what

39. It is not as though de Man’s or anyone else’s readings are somehow unmediated; rather, some ungrounded mediations can be exposed to lack textual evidence.
appears to the eye. What could be less creative, what could be less imagina-
tive? And yet generations of critics of Kant will enlist him in paeansto the
creative imagination, without pausing over a passage that is plainly there in
the text and, on the face of it, posing no hermeneutic problem. A certain set
of received notions or an ideology of the aesthetic seems to get in the way
of our registering just what Kant is saying, as here, that the proposed model
for poetry is one of automatic perception.

On the other hand, when the text seems to demand it, allegorical read-
ing, not simple citation of a passage to be understood literally, is the order
of the day.\(^40\) Thus in his reading of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*, when de Man con-
fronts a seemingly pedestrian statement by Hegel: “Im Sklaven fängt die
Prosa an” (“Prose begins in the slave,”) his sense of the Hegelian corpus
seems to require or at least suggest that the proposition that what appears to
say something as simple as “Aesop was the first prose writer” turns out, on
reflection, to be linked with the permanent potential of the slave to become
master of the master (because, as outlined in the famous master–slave dialec-
tic from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the seemingly autonomous master
turns out to be dependent on the slave for his identity as master), which
is also to say, of the subordinate to overcome the dominant. Prose, which
seems, in aesthetic terms, initially so subordinate to poetry, turns out to be
the very discursive mode that poetry must give way to, as art in its highest
determination—and poetry for Hegel is the highest of the arts—has to give
way in the end to philosophical prose, to the discourse in which the logos
recognizes itself in the medium most commensurate with it.\(^41\)

Whether flatly literal or sweepingly allegorical, the text says and does what
it says and does: the task of reading is to figure that out by first attending to
how meaning means, by attention especially to the poetics of the text, the
mechanisms and machinations of the rhetorical movements or performance
of the text, which includes but is not at all limited to what J. L. Austin
terms performative language. Attending to what happens in a text sometimes
means recognizing that the movements and meanings of a text can scarcely
all be chalked up to or understood in terms of authorial intention.\(^42\) Thus in
de Man’s reading of Kleist’s essay “On the Marionette Theater,” a text about

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\(^40\) And yet simple citation is not necessarily so simple. De Man said in one of his last seminars:
“Penser, c’est trouver la bonne citation.” (“Thinking is finding a good quotation.”)

\(^41\) Raymond Geuss, in his response in *Critical Inquiry* to de Man’s essay on Hegel (Geuss 1983),
protested de Man’s allegorical reading of Hegel as un-Hegelian, though one could easily understand
Hegel’s relentlessly spiritualizing discourse as demanding allegorical interpretation, rather as the Pau-
line letters promote the spirit over the letter.

\(^42\) That Hegel’s overt statements about allegory express a rather dim, dismissive view of it is
beside the point when one can show how the text makes (good) sense allegorically.
the perils and even the possible paralysis of self-consciousness when trying to perform, as, say, to dance gracefully (a text that ends up with one character suggesting that the only way to get back to paradise is to eat of the apple again, i.e., to heighten self-consciousness), de Man shows how the use of the word or even the syllable *Fall* (“Fall” in German partly overlaps with “fall” in English) in its various configurations (as *Sündenfall*, *Rückfall*, *Einfall* and *Beifall*) has a subsemantic life of its own that exceeds and disrupts the presumed intention of the author, even in so precise and sovereign a writer as Kleist.

What happens in the text is an event, though a text, especially a text that is a work of art, is an odd kind of event, one that repeats itself, repeatedly, like “a broken record.” To attend to the movements and machinations of the text is necessarily to attend to something historical, even if the critic is not so concerned to link (as in some of de Man’s readings) what happens in the text to what happens outside it. The repetitive event of the literary text both dates and un-dates itself: it marks itself as historical—no text is written in some timeless and universal language—but by the same token it cannot be contained by its putative moment of production, even if we thought we could isolate it. This stance of de Man’s, more implicit than not, seems to me close to the spirit of Adorno’s thinking on the historicity of the work of art:

> The relation to the art of the past, as well as the barriers to its apperception, have their locus in the contemporary condition of consciousness as positively or negatively transcended; the rest is nothing more than empty erudition. . . . The opposite of a genuine relation to the historical substance of artworks—their essential content—is their rash subsumption to history, their assignment to a historical moment.

Adorno’s claims in the larger passage from which I am quoting are derived in no small measure from Walter Benjamin, whose mark on Adorno’s and de Man’s thinking is profound. Both Adorno and Benjamin are generally thought, and not without reason, to do more justice to the demands of history than is de Man. Doubtless the texture of Benjamin’s and Adorno’s writings is more infused with history than is de Man’s; but the gulf between them is narrower than is normally acknowledged. Even if de Man can set out some theoretical principles about the (philological) understanding and

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43. See de Man 1984.
analysis of literature—such as the priority of poetics—the priority of attending to how meaning is conveyed in advance of its interpretation proper, the singular and thus historical event of the text entails the reinvention of philology over and over again.

It is in response to the historical and not-simply-historical event of the text that the somewhat disparate figures of Schlegel, Benjamin, and de Man turn to philology and beyond that to philosophical reflection on philology to ground their readings in and on the uncertain ground of language. They respond to the “seductive side of philology” for its promise and the possibility to help resolve what cannot quite be resolved ultimately, confronting, paradoxically, a kind of permanent crisis, yet not without having achieved along the way any number of local advances in interpretation as well as an acute sense of the stakes of reading. Seduced but not abandoned.