



AV

Komparatistik

Jahrbuch
der Deutschen Gesellschaft
für Allgemeine und Vergleichende
Literaturwissenschaft

2017

Aus dem Inhalt: Joachim Harst, Christian Moser, Linda Simonis: Languages of Theory. Introduction • Maria Boletsi: Towards a Visual Middle Voice. Crisis, Dispossession, and Spectrality in Spain's Hologram Protest • Peter Brandes: Poetics of the Bed. Narrated Everydayness as Language of Theory • Annette Simonis: Stephen Greenblatt and the Making of a New Philology of Culture • Dagmar Reichardt: Creating Notions of Transculturality. The Work of Fernando Ortiz and his Impact on Europe • Michael Eggers: Topics of Theory and the Rhetoric of Bruno Latour • Nicolas Pethes: Philological Paperwork. The Question of Theory within a Praxeological Perspective on Literary Scholarship • Achim Geisenhanslüke: Philological Understanding in the Era After Theory • Joachim Harst: Borges: Philology as Poetry • Regine Strätling: The ›Love of words‹ and the Anti-Philological Stance in Roland Barthes' »S/Z« • Markus Winkler: Genealogy and Philology • Christian Moser: Language and Liability in Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Origin of Culture and Society (Goguet, Smith, Rousseau) • Linda Simonis: The Language of Commitment. The Oath and its Implications for Literary Theory • Kathrin Schödel: Political Speech Acts? Jacques Rancière's Theories and a Political Philology of Current Discourses of Migration • Helmut Pillau: »Ein großer weltlicher Staatsmann wider alle Wahrscheinlichkeiten.« Gertrud Kolmar und Jean-Clément Martin über Robespierre • Pauline Preisler: Die abstrakte Illustration. Paul Klees »Hoffmanneske Märchenszene« und E.T.A. Hoffmanns »Der Goldene Topf« • Nachruf, Rezensionen.

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von Joachim Harst, Christian Moser und Linda Simonis

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Achim Geisenhanslüke

Philological Understanding in the Era After Theory

1. After Theory?

„The golden age of cultural theory is long past“¹ – with this statement, Terry Eagleton begins his puzzling reflections on the era *After Theory* – that’s the title of his book, first published in 2001. If the invasion of literary and cultural theory has come to an end, as Eagleton suggests, theory will probably become a simple object of the history of ideas. But what theoretical implications accompany the discourse of a possible and even probable end of theory?

In this so-called era after theory, literary criticism quickly decided to take new steps: the Anglo-American tradition of *Cultural Studies* attempted to replace the theoretical impact of French theory with a more empirical approach to literary texts. At the same time, good old philology raised its hand to oppose the topographical turn of cultural studies as well as the deconstructive turn against all forms of presence. Under the title *Die Macht der Philologie*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht sought to establish the desire for real presence as the most urgent problem of contemporary critical thought. A new dispute seemed to arise between philology on the one hand and cultural studies on the other. However, the controversy of cultural studies and philology makes one thing clear: In the past years, the face of literary theory has definitely changed. Literary theory is no longer interested in the textual differences noted by deconstructive approaches but in the relation between text and context or the real presence that lurks behind the form of a text. While deconstruction simply acknowledged that language “thrusts but never scores. It always refers but never to the right referent,”² as Paul de Man used to say, the era after theory seems to be marked by a deep desire to find new modes of reference. If it is no longer textual difference that haunts literary theory, concepts other than textuality come to the fore: not only that of culture, but also the notion of discourse that Michel Foucault sought to establish as the starting point for a critical theory of the history of the humanities. One of the problems that has never been solved by Foucault is the relation between his theory of discourse and the tradition of philological understanding. For Foucault, philology is nothing more than a part of the historical discourse of the nineteenth century, an old-fashioned term that lacks any impact on contemporary problems. For this and other reasons, Foucault showed little interest in more recent models of philology. But maybe instead of subscribing too easily to the notion that we live in an era after theory, where problems of literary theory are replaced by concepts of discourse and culture that no longer pay any attention to literature, what is called for is an investigation of the impact of

1 Terry Eagleton. *After Theory*. New York: Basic Books, 2003, p. 1.

2 Paul de Man. *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 285.

philological understanding in the humanities, such as Werner Hamacher undertakes in his recent publications on the status of philology today.

2. Text and Discourse

The central term of Foucault's work has always been 'discourse.' The main object of philological understanding, by contrast, has always been the text. That is one of the reasons why philological understanding is characterized by a close affinity to hermeneutics: "Hermeneutik, die Lehre vom Verstehen und Auslegen von Texten,"³ as Peter Szondi writes in his reflections on the status of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. Not only is the shift from text to *écriture* and *trace* responsible for the gap between philological understanding and poststructuralist criticism. As Szondi suspected already in 1970, this shift would also become the signature of a new era of literary theory beyond hermeneutics. It is also the difference between the concept of text and discourse that is responsible for permanent misunderstandings between Foucault's archaeology of knowledge and hermeneutics.

The theoretical debates that opened up an abyss between hermeneutics and deconstruction in the seventies did not stop there but extended, for instance, to deconstruction and discourse analysis as well. While Derrida accused Foucault of wanting to "écrire une histoire de la folie *elle-même*"⁴, as if it was possible to give madness a voice of its own, Foucault responded to Derrida with a whole spectrum of reproaches: "réduction des pratiques discursives aux traces textuels; éliminations des événements qui s'y produisent pour ne retenir que des marges pour une lecture; inventions de voix derrière les textes pour n'avoir pas à analyser les modes d'implication du sujet dans les discours; assignation de l'originaire comme dit et non dit dans le texte pour ne pas replacer les pratiques discursives dans le champ des transformations où elles s'effectuent."⁵ In Foucault's critical eyes, deconstruction resembles hermeneutics much more than Derrida was willing to admit. Foucault doesn't see anything more in deconstruction than a "pédagogie qui enseigne à l'élève qu'il n'y a rien hors du texte, mais qu'en lui, en ses interstices, dans ses blancs et ses non-dits, règne la réserve de l'origine."⁶ For Foucault, the idea that there can't be any form of reference beyond the textual tracks of *différance* discredits Derrida in a way that precludes any dialogue between discourse analysis and deconstruction.

The severe critique of Derrida serves Foucault at the same time as a starting point for the theoretical legitimation of his own position. The idea of textual difference that inspired deconstruction is replaced in Foucault by the notion of 'événement discursif' as the basis of his investigation. But the problematic

3 Peter Szondi. *Schriften II*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1978, pp. 106-130, p. 106.

4 Jacques Derrida. *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967, p. 56.

5 Michel Foucault. *Dits et Ecrits 1954-1988*. Ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald. Vol. 2. 1970-1975. Paris: Gallimard, 1994, p. 267.

6 Ebd.

relation between discourse and literature, and, by extension, between discourse analysis and philological understanding remains. In *Les mots and les choses* as well as in *L'archéologie du savoir*, Foucault tends to privilege the 'sciences humaines' as his main object of study. But at the same time, he insists that his archaeology also extends to literature: "Les territoires archéologiques peuvent traverser des textes 'littéraires,' ou 'philosophiques' aussi bien que des textes scientifiques."⁷

The archaeology of literature that he has promised but never given, presupposes what Foucault places at the centre of his investigations, namely, discourse. It is not only the difference between literary and scientific texts that forms an obstacle to simply expanding the archaeology of knowledge to an archaeology of literature. The enormous difficulties Foucault faces in defining his own concept of discourse bears witness to a fundamental uncertainty concerning his own position of speaking, an uncertainty that leads less to a systematic argument than to the metaphor of "cet espace blanc d'où je parle, et qui prend forme lentement dans un discours que je sens si précaire, si incertain encore."⁸ Where a neat and sharp definition of discourse is expected, a blank space reigns: those who anticipate a systematic theory of discourse in Foucault's archaeology are in for disappointment.

The problems raised by Foucault's attempts to develop a coherent theory of discourse are therefore not limited to his general understanding of literature; they also pertain to his notion of discourse. Just as in cultural studies, the notion of discourse comes to replace that of texts as the centre of literary studies. And if Foucault suggests in his *L'archéologie du savoir* that discourse should be interpreted as "l'ensemble de tous les énoncés effectifs (qu'ils aient été parlés et écrits), dans leur dispersion d'événements,"⁹ he nevertheless exempts discourse from all aesthetic or poetic connotations. The idea that the archaeology of knowledge could extend to problems of literature is nothing but a promise Foucault has never kept, and this is one of the reasons why the reference to literary texts, widespread in his early writings, vanishes more and more in his later ones.¹⁰

The impact of Foucault's concept of discourse on literary theory therefore remains ambivalent. On the one hand, Foucault's writings establish a practice that puts an end to the mystification of literature's autonomy by integrating the poetic function of language into a wider context of historical and scientific knowledge. On the other hand, the archaeology of literature left unelaborated by Foucault would be unable to neglect the poetic function of literature and would have to confront the problem of philological understanding. Nor is it at all clear that an archaeology of literature that hopes to see more in literary texts than a mystification of a historic institution would be compatible with the theoretical premises of Foucault's concept of discourse. Between the historical analysis of discourse, which Foucault finds in *L'archéologie du savoir*, and

7 Michel Foucault. *L'archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969, p. 239.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

10 Cf. Klaus-Michael Bogdal. *Historische Diskursanalyse der Literatur. Theorie, Arbeitsfelder, Analysen, Vermittlung*. Opladen/Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999.

philological understanding lies, it would seem, a gap that Foucault himself was never able to bridge.

But at the same time, a total incompatibility between a historical analysis of discourse and a poetics of literature that engages in philological understanding is a fallacy. Foucault's own writings are full of hints that point to possible poetic expansions of his theory: from the early allusion to an ontology of literature to his plan for a history of infamous people, Foucault's archaeology touches upon aesthetic and poetic problems without making them explicit. An archaeology of literature therefore is faced with uniting two different views of literature: on the one hand, it would have to treat literature as a historical institution, as a relation of discourse and power; on the other hand, it would have to treat literature as an aesthetic singularity that resists translation into historical paradigms and opens itself up to philological understanding. The particularity of an approach to literature that is inspired by Foucault and yet seeks to be more than an application of discourse analysis to literature relies on this double view of literature as historical institution and aesthetic singularity, and therefore calls for a reconciliation of discourse analysis and philological understanding—a philological understanding revisited, one could say.

3. Philological Understanding Revisited

“In der Hermeneutik fragt die Wissenschaft nicht nach ihrem Gegenstand, sondern nach sich selber, danach, wie sie zur Erkenntnis ihres Gegenstands gelangt.”¹¹ When Peter Szondi began his reflections on philological understanding in 1962, he didn't doubt for a second that hermeneutics alone could offer the proper foundation for literary theory, a hermeneutics Szondi grasped as a form of reflection reaching back to the golden age of German Idealism, to Schleiermacher, Hegel and Hölderlin. Szondi's great problem remains the fact that the tradition of hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Heidegger failed to elaborate a convincing concept of literary hermeneutics, which in Szondi's eyes is also the reason why literary theory still has to search for philological understanding. 54 years later, it becomes increasingly evident that the notion of philological understanding Szondi sought cannot be provided by deconstruction either. When Paul de Man stated that “the turn to theory occurred as a return to philology, to an examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces,”¹² he opposed the structure of language to its meaning, as if they were two completely different things and not, like Saussure had already shown in his definition of the sign, two sides of the same thing. The priority of structure over meaning has led deconstructive philology—as a response and challenge to Szondi's notion of philological understanding—into a cul-de-sac. Even in the era after theory, Szondi's critical question remains unanswered: “warum nämlich die

11 Peter Szondi. *Schriften I*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1978, pp. 263-264.

12 Paul de Man. *The Resistance to Theory*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 24.

Literaturwissenschaft, die im *vollkommenen Verstehen einer Schrift* ihre Aufgabe sehen muß, die von Schleiermacher geforderte und in theologischen Vorlesungen auch entworfene Lehre nicht nur nicht weiterentwickelt hat, sondern sich den Problemen der Hermeneutik so gut wie ganz verschließt.”¹³

If literary theory since deconstruction has taken a step back from the problem of philological understanding as Szondi wanted to establish it, the new turn to philology that one observes in recent times has likewise failed to solve the problems Szondi raised. When Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht defines philology as “eine Konfiguration wissenschaftlicher Fertigkeiten, die der historischen Textpflege dienlich sein sollen,”¹⁴ he re-establishes a model of philology that closely resembles the historical philology Foucault justifiably located at the heart of the nineteenth century. Gumbrecht himself is aware that the emphasis on the power of philology expresses a desire for new forms of presence: “Ich habe den Eindruck, daß alle philologischen Tätigkeiten in jeweils unterschiedlicher Weise Wünsche nach Präsenz erzeugen, Wünsche nach einer physisch und räumlich vermittelten Beziehung zu den Dingen der Welt (zu denen auch Texte gehören)—und daß dieser Wunsch nach Präsenz in der Tat die Grundlage ist, auf der die Philologie Wirkungen der Greifbarkeit (und manchmal sogar der Realität von etwas Greifbarem) hervorrufen kann.”¹⁵ And even Gumbrecht must acknowledge that this wish is in a certain way ridiculous: “Ich weiß gar nicht so recht, wie ich es sagen soll, ohne mir—wenn ich aufrichtig sein soll—lächerlich vorzukommen: Aber nach einem halben Jahrhundert, in dem man dem Begriff ‘Erlebnis’ in Deutschland jegliche wissenschaftliche Dignität abgesprochen hat (und dieses halbe Jahrhundert umfaßt natürlich mehr als die gesamte Zeit meiner beruflichen Sozialisierung), ist es vielleicht an der Zeit, daß die Geisteswissenschaften auf eben diesen Begriff zurückkommen.”¹⁶ Gumbrecht’s more or less autobiographical reflections on the state of art of philology in the past 50 years seems to be governed by the sentimental wish to make a new home in the old buildings of philology as ‘historischer Textpflege,’ a home that the development of literary theory, as it’s developed since the rise of the rise of deconstruction and discourse analysis, has so eagerly demolished.

Other concepts of philology that have recently emerged are no more convincing. Ottmar Ette has attempted to establish ‘Lebenwissenschaft’ as a new foundation of philological understanding. But his central notion of ‘Lebenswissen,’ “daß ebenso ein Wissen über das Leben wie ein Wissen des Lebens von sich selbst, ebenso ein Wissen als wesentlicher Bestandteil des Lebens (und Überlebens) wie eine fundamentale Eigenschaft von Leben überhaupt, ebenso ein Wissen zum Leben wie ein Wissen im Leben mitgedacht sind,”¹⁷ seems far too

13 Peter Szondi. *Schriften I* (note 13), p. 263.

14 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. *Die Macht der Philologie. Über einen verborgenen Impuls im wissenschaftlichen Umgang mit Texten*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003, p. 11.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

17 Ottmar Ette. *ÜberLebenswissen. Die Aufgabe der Philologie*. Berlin: Kadmos, 2004, p. 12.

imprecise to offer a starting point for a new philology for the 21st century. Ette's desire for reconciliation between philology and cultural studies responds to the challenges of the era after theory with the hope of establishing "ein zirkuläres Abhängigkeitsverhältnis von Philologie und Kulturwissenschaft,"¹⁸ as Kai Bremer and Uwe Wirth have already pointed out. But Ette's concept of *Lebenswissen* leaves little room for philological understanding, in Szondi's sense, to serve as a common ground of literary theory.

The only recent attempt to propose a concept of philology that could solve the problems Szondi left for his *Nachwelt* is offered by Werner Hamacher. In his statements *Für die Philologie*, Hamacher understands philological understanding as the permanent provocation language, and specifically poetic language, poses for theory. "Philologie ist also zunächst die Erfahrung, der Sprache *ausgesetzt* und von ihr *proviziert* zu sein."¹⁹ For Hamacher, philology is not an academic discipline but the "Bewegung des Sprechens selbst"²⁰ and, since all institutional disciplines participate in this movement of speech, philology offers the only common ground for all humanities. Hamacher grasps philology in the literal sense as a *philia*, a kind of love that turns its attention towards language. Hamacher doesn't attempt to bridge whatever gaps might exist between philological understanding, deconstruction, discourse analysis and cultural studies, but intentionally/voluntarily deepens the abyss between them instead. He insists on the hermetic poets' such as Hölderlin's, Char's and Celan's provocations of literary theory, and on the power of poetic language's opposition to philological understanding, an understanding that has to include structural problems of non-understanding within all forms of reflection that don't acknowledge the fundamental position of philology as prior to any theory. For Hamacher, no reconciliation between philological understanding and other forms of critical thought (and areas of studies) is possible without acknowledgement of the priority of philology. "Einrücken in Horizonte und Horizontverschmelzungen sind der Tod der Sprache, nicht der Anfang."²¹ Hamacher ascribes both this entrance into and blending of horizons to traditional forms of hermeneutics and new forms of discourse analysis or cultural studies alike. The revision of philological understanding developed recently by thinkers as different as Gumbrecht, Ette and Hamacher ends in a confrontation between philology, on the one hand, and current forms of discourse analysis or cultural studies, on the other. Obviously, it is not easy to satisfy both the demands of philology and of theory after theory. In order to locate the type of critical experience of literature that could mediate between philology and discourse analysis, it might therefore be most helpful to return to Foucault's inherent need for a poetics that includes philological understanding.

18 Kai Bremer/Uwe Wirth. "Die philologische Frage. Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf die Theoriegeschichte der Philologie." *Texte zur modernen Philologie*. Ed. Kai Bremer and Uwe Wirth. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010, pp. 7-48, p. 28.

19 Werner Hamacher. *Für – die Philologie*. Frankfurt a. M.: Engeler, 2009, p. 32.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

4. Philological Understanding, Discourse Analysis and the History of Infamous People

Foucault's interest in literature changed between the years. In his early writings up to *Les mots et les choses*, literature functioned as a kind of "contre-discours"²² that served him at the same time as a model for his own archaeology of knowledge as a counter-history of the humanities.²³ But in the seventies, Foucault's interest in literature shifted to a more critical view of poetic texts as part of power's historic dispositives. By his later writings Foucault was unwilling to pay any attention to literature as a possible counter-discourse to other forms of knowledge.

Foucault's short article on *La vie des hommes infâmes* from 1977 is no exception to this. From the beginning on, Foucault clearly excludes literature from the history of infamy he seeks to elaborate. He even formally bans literature from the region of his own investigation: "J'ai donc banni tout ce qui pouvait être imagination ou littérature."²⁴ Literature here is no longer a type of subversive counter-discourse but merely offers pictures of "une fausse infamie"²⁵ that Foucault connects to figures like Gilles de Rais, Sade and Lacenaire.

Foucault's harsh rejection of literature as a valuable example of the historical experience of infamy is surprising. In *Les mots et les choses* and other early writings, for example, Foucault had considered Sade, whom he strictly bans in his article on infamy, as the starting point of a literature of transgression that continued in the twentieth century with authors like Bataille or Klossowski. What exactly is Foucault looking for when he speaks of infamous people? On the one hand, he is interested in "une légende des hommes obscurs,"²⁶ on the other hand, he limits his research to historical documents between 1660 and 1760, where he hopes to find "la rencontre avec le pouvoir"²⁷ as the decisive moment in the life of infamous people. It is not only the notion of "légende" that involuntarily moves in the direction of literature. When Foucault speaks of "le terme de 'nouvelle'" and of "étranges poèmes,"²⁸ he clearly shows that his history of infamous people has more to do with literature than he is willing to admit. And what is more: the simple rejection of literature as a valuable object of his investigations falls behind Foucault's own notion of infamy as an example of the historical ties between discourse, power, and the problem of subjectivation. If, in his legend of obscure people, Foucault is after a historical type of subjectivation that would be responsible for the birth of an immense possibility of discourse through forms

22 Michel Foucault. *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966, p. 59.

23 Cf. Achim Geisenhanslüke. *Foucault und die Literatur. Eine diskurskritische Untersuchung*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997.

24 Michel Foucault. *Dits et Écrits 1954-1988* (note 6). Vol. 3. 1976-1979, p. 239.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

like the *lettres de cachet*, and if he is after subjects *hors la loi* and a form of non-literature “à prendre sur elle la charge du scandale, de la transgression et de la révolte,”²⁹ then he could, of course, turn to a long literary history of infamy that stretches from Villon’s *Ballade des pendus* or Shakespeare’s Richard III to Sades *Les 120 journées* and Genet’s prison writings. And not only that: by approaching the history of infamous people through literature, Foucault could have found what he was looking for, namely the scandal, transgression and revolution responsible for the formation of a subject that refuses to be ruled by others and that seeks new modes of expression.

Foucault’s short history of infamous people therefore needs not only literature to elaborate the discursive systems of exclusion and to revolt against them. Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge and his genealogy of power is also in need of philological understanding, an understanding that would allow the poetic texts of the past to speak again. As Foucault’s history of infamy shows, a theory of discourse that wants to be a theory of power and a theory of the subject at the same time cannot neglect literature, and therefore has to integrate philological understanding into its approach to historical documents as well as poetic texts. When Werner Hamacher stated that philology resides in a provocation of language, he had in mind dense poetic texts in the rhetorical tradition of obscurity, such as the poetry of Hölderlin, Char and Celan. The writings of Sade, but also the work of Kleist or Kafka, represent a different form of provocation that philological understanding must confront. What both the archaeology of knowledge and philological understanding share is an interest in forms of language that participate in historical discourses and, however, at the same time resist the system of power that seeks to discipline the modern subject. Foucault’s archaeology of discourse, power and subjectivity requires philological understanding not as a theoretical and methodological complement but as a means to its own end.

5. Towards a Poetics of Literature

In the so-called era after theory, deconstruction and discourse analysis seem to have lost much of their charm. The new duo of philology and cultural studies has paid far more attention to the problem of reference and to the relation between texts and contexts or texts and other forms of knowledge than to a poetics of language or text. In this situation, literary theory can certainly not continue as if there had never been a cultural turn in the humanities. Nor is there any need to neglect the poetic function of language, either. A poetics of literature that merges elements of discourse analysis and philological understanding might serve as a common ground for a theory of literature that wants to do more than identify the historical or cultural contexts that determine literature. The task that such a poetics of literature has to accomplish is to mediate between discourse analysis’s perception of literature as a historical institution and philological understanding’s perception of literature as an aesthetic singularity. Its poetics

29 Ibid., p. 253.

therefore has to concentrate on the singularity of literature, but must comprehend this singularity at the same time as a result of discursive rules that literature did not itself create. If literary theory is a kind of reflection that attends not simply to its objects but to the possible modes of access to these objects, as Peter Szondi already stated in 1962, then a theory of literature can never come to an end but must accompany critical thought even in the era after theory. Otherwise, philological understanding risks falling back into the trap that Nietzsche described in his early fragments *Wir Philologen*: “Es ist eine traurige Geschichte, ich glaube, keine Wissenschaft ist so arm an Talenten. Es sind die Lahmen im Geiste, die in der Wortklauberei ihr Steckenpferd gefunden haben.”³⁰ To turn the sad story of philological “Wortklauberei” into the *gaya scienza* of critical theory is the necessary task even in the so-called era after theory.

30 Friedrich Nietzsche. “Wir Philologen.” *Texte zur modernen Philologie* (note 21), pp. 161-168, p. 164.