

# *Nikolaus Wegmann* Philology—An Update

*For Georg Stanitzek on his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday*

*The mere existence of philology  
depends on the book.  
(Rudolf Pfeiffer)*

My talk is a disciplinary talk.<sup>1</sup> It addresses our field as such. It seeks to provide a framework for further contributions and discussions. But in our case—our topic being philology—this prescription is especially audacious. One can even doubt whether the genre of the disciplinary talk has any application here. Where is there a vantage point on this battlefield, from which one could survey, like a commanding officer, the well-ordered armies below? Where old and new are clearly distinct? Where there is innovation and progress? All this, at least this is my impression, is missing here. An observer who is looking for clear lines of demarcation will be disappointed. In the field of philology, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get a clear lay of the land.

## *I.*

It is tempting to say that this has always been the case. And with good reason. Over the many centuries of philology's existence, from antiquity to the present day, philology, as an epistemological complex, has been enriched again and again with new and additional forms and practices of knowledge. The competencies and research fields claimed for philology have always increased in number, the definitions, in turn, have become more comprehensive and complex. Philology—so it

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<sup>1</sup> The idea for this text was the result of an invitation by the doctoral students at the Columbia University German Department in New York for their conference: *The Future of Philology. 11th Annual Columbia University German Graduate Conference*, February 24, 2012. This essay retains the lecture format. My thanks to Hannah Hunter-Parker, Timothy Attanucci, and Alice Christensen for their assistance with translation from German.

appears—is many things. Let us hear all this firsthand. The following is from the year 1578:

Philology is therefore the investigation and study of the words as well as of what is notable and memorable in the authors' works and especially knowledge of Antiquity. In addition, the explication of sentences, the commentary of poems, apophthegmata, proverbs, fables, histories, exempla, engagement with chronology, history, famous wars, great men, the nature of living things, with issues of economy and similar matters that may not be obvious to everyone. Then also the description of property, rivers, mountains, landscapes, cities, and whatever is described in every respectable geography is given. Also concerned are the institutions, customs, and culture of peoples and tribes, the ways of the ancients, the authorities, the judicial forms, the religious rituals, the things of farming, of the city, of the house, of public life

– I will cut short here and come to the closing topos: “to register all this in the works of the good authors is the task of the philologist.”<sup>2</sup>

With their simple additive logic, such catalogs and lists are standard. And this form of collection remains expandable. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which philology was booming as a discipline, as a *disciplined* field of study, Friedrich Nietzsche, a philologist himself, called it a *multi-columned* construct that was only “held together by the name philology.”<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche employs an ambivalent neologism—*vielspältig*, multi-columned—to indicate that philology's traditional heterogeneity comprises things that are not only diverse, but ultimately incongruous.

The situation is so muddled not only because philology has such a long tradition. It also has to do with the extraordinary success of philology, or rather: this success is often of the kind that one does not even recognize it as a victory for philology itself. Even the newest trends in our field—when you look closer—are often reprises of philological methods. Just one example: of all things, deconstruction, usually celebrated or heavily criticized as the triumph of theory. Paul de Man,

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<sup>2</sup> Caspar Hofmanus, *De barbarie imminente* [...] (Frankfurt/M., 1578), as quoted in Nikolaus Wegmann, “Was heißt einen klassischen Text lesen?” in *Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Germanistik im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jürgen Fohrmann and Wilhelm Voßkamp (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 1994), 349.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “Homer und die klassische Philologie: Ein Vortrag,” in *Schriften der letzten Leipziger und ersten Basler Zeit: 1868-1869*, ed. Carl Koch and Karl Schlechta (Munich: dtv, 1994), 285.

in an article published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1982—a year before his death—hailed deconstruction as a “Return to Philology.”<sup>4</sup> Up to that point the relationship between philology and theory was defined by a rich polemical tradition: “Those who don’t know, do theory.” At least since Karl Lachmann, this was the philologist’s polemical slogan.<sup>5</sup> For its part, the theory faction was quite sure of itself as well: the theorist is the smart guy—whereas the philologist, because he is incapable of abstraction, wastes his time with trifles and pedantry, and also tends politically towards tradition and the establishment. The future, one was certain since the late 1960s, belonged to theory. Yet considering de Man’s public provocation/turn-around, one is reminded of the tale of the Tortoise and the Hare, or even its German variant—*The Hare and the Hedgehog*, a *Grimm-Märchen*—as a parable. The race between the hare and the hedgehog would be the competition between self-assured theory and underestimated philology.

Happening upon the hedgehog, the hare makes fun of his crooked legs; in response, the hedgehog challenges the hare to a race. Later, when the race starts, the hedgehog only runs a few steps from the starting line, but he has placed his wife, who looks exactly like him, at the other end of the field, near the finish line. As the hare, sure of victory, storms towards the finish, the hedgehog’s wife stands up and yells to the hare: “I’m already here!” For the hare, his defeat is incomprehensible, he demands revenge and then runs 73 races, all with the same result. During the 74<sup>th</sup> race—you see that the narrator of this tale is counting exactly—he falls down in exhaustion and dies.

So the story goes;<sup>6</sup> the theory faction would prefer not to go along with this narrative, to be sure. But it is indisputable that “theory” doesn’t dominate in the way that it did in the 1970s and 1980s. All the same: unlike the hare of the fable, theory hasn’t run itself to death.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul de Man, “The Return to Philology,” in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> On this point, see: Nikolaus Wegmann, “Wer von der Sache nichts versteht, macht Theorie: Zur Curiositas der Literaturwissenschaft,” in *Literaturwissenschaft und Wissenschaftsforschung: DFG-Symposium 1998*, ed. Jörg Schönert (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> The story was recorded in 1843 by the Brothers Grimm as No. 187 in the fifth edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. See: *Wikipedia*, keyword “Der Hase und der Igel,” accessed August 21, 2013, [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der\\_Hase\\_und\\_der\\_Igel](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Hase_und_der_Igel).

Instead, theory has become part and parcel of philology. Its role, however, remains uncertain and unstable. Thus it seems impossible that philology, with its essential proximity to its own material, will be overrun by theory, with its tendency to abstraction.<sup>7</sup>

In its constant, nearly universal success, philology is a complete parallel version of our field. Philology oversteps the bounds of usual categories and partial definitions. Whether literary history or textual criticism, whether literary criticism or media-cultural history, almost everything goes back to philology. To put it crudely: it's got philology in there, whatever the label says.

A final reason for the muddled situation of philology. This polymorphism that tolerates the wildest combinations is not just a trademark of philology. It also characterizes the current state of our discipline and many others. Our field—let's call it German Studies (or *Germanistische Literaturwissenschaft*) has branched out widely in the last decades. One can hardly keep track of the countless specializations, the many borrowings from neighboring disciplines. Not to speak of *control* over this constantly expanding plurality. On the contrary, the self-understanding of the discipline itself has become "pluralist." Each scholar is allowed to tailor his or her own concepts with specific epistemological intentions in mind, as long as he or she, as Niklas Luhmann writes, as an observer of the existing field, "allows others the freedom to do the same in their own way." The longer this situation holds, the more possibilities open up within the field that allow the individual scholar to pursue further his or her own understanding of research and science, the more, to quote Luhmann again, "inflationary" the field itself becomes. More methods, theories and practices begin to circulate than originality and achievement—the traditional "gold standards"—can "cover."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> One can imagine a history of philology as a series of attempted takeovers. This would not be a tale of heroic self-assertions, however, but rather one of incorporation and transformation—right up to a philology that could be described as a unity of the distinction between technical knowledge and theory.

<sup>8</sup> Does this thesis hold for philology only, or also for textual criticism more broadly? It's certainly true that edition philology organized itself for a long time as a rigorous science, with the promise of objective improvement and progress. Here too, though, dogma has come to be viewed critically. Editions are no longer compiled only in the service of a more perfect knowledge, but as

Does all this apply as well, one must ask, to our intervention on behalf of philology? Are we also only a part of this general inflationary expansion of themes and interests? This argument takes aim less at some kind of self-criticism than at the question of philology's peculiar success. The usual ebb and flow of themes and methods, the schema of booms and busts, doesn't work here. Philology is characterized much more by a special—because persistent—business cycle. For Rudolf Pfeiffer and his *History of Classical Scholarship*, this was so obvious that he spoke of a *philologia perennis*, an “everlasting” philology. He saw philology as “one continuous undertaking,”<sup>9</sup> handed down from generation to generation since Callimachus. That is, as is often said, attractive and not without evidence.<sup>10</sup> But one also senses the self-satisfaction of the classical philologist; he has transferred the mythical eternal of the classics to philological knowledge. For Pfeiffer, an alternative—an end of philology—was unthinkable; it was always in the present tense—always “lively”<sup>11</sup>—and as a philologist, he simply continues to work where his predecessors already were. In short: *philologia perennis* was more a kind of high praise than a problem that demands research.

Not so for Roland Barthes. For him there are phenomena in the history of culture that withdraw from the economy of rising and falling demand—and despite, or perhaps exactly because of this, succeed. His example is the Romantic songs of one Franz Schubert. For these special cases in the history of knowledge and art—and I include philology here—one doesn't have to fight, since they have little to do with “a misunderstood or little-known art for whose resurrection we must

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contributions to literary communication. These days, editions are made for readers, for the lay audience, not for other editors.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). As cited in Ingo Gildenhard, “*Philologia Perennis?* Classical Scholarship and Functional Differentiation,” in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 46 (2003), 161.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> For Pfeiffer, *philologia perennis* was the “lively context of knowledge” [“der lebendige Zusammenhang des Wissens”], Rudolf Pfeiffer, *Geschichte der klassischen Philologie* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1970), 10.

militate.”<sup>12</sup> Such phenomena are, to quote Barthes once more, “neither fashionable nor frankly out of fashion: we might call it simply untimely [*inactuel*],”<sup>13</sup> but “without being repressed, marginal without being eccentric.”<sup>14</sup>

Untimeliness is not easily understood; Barthes makes this much clear. Upon observation of events in history, there are phenomena that are “always anachronistic”—without being passé. And as if this irritation were not enough, this untimeliness seems to go hand in hand with an unusual and wide acceptance in society. Romantic songs—like philology—are not only a part of high or expert culture. And this certainly applies in the case of philology. It bridges, as Thomas Steinfeld has shown in his book-length essay *Philologie als Lebensform* (2004),<sup>15</sup> the standard knowledge gaps between experts and non-experts. Philological processes are also part of everyday culture—for example, the case of fans of Pop music and their passion for making lists, for collecting, for admiration. Philology is in use there too, where, to return to Barthes, no “difficult or subtle reading criteria are at work.”<sup>16</sup>

## II.

It is one thing to determine the lay of the land. But how should one enter into the labyrinth that one finds there? One could, so the first idea, try to establish order. With trust in the capabilities of the history of science, one can bet on intervention, that means, one sifts through the past—and retains from the “multi-columned” philology only what meets the highest standard of scientific rigor. I myself have tried this strategy. At the time, we wanted to write a history of German philology as a history of scientific rigor (*Verwissenschaftlichung*). But it is exactly this guiding vision that has lost its persuasive power. The days when

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<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Romantic Song,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press 1985), 286.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Steinfeld, *Der leidenschaftliche Buchhalter: Philologie als Lebensform*. (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Barthes, “The Romantic Song.”

one dreamed of transforming philology into a “science of literature,” *Literatur-Wissenschaft*, a discipline that would *not* be fundamentally different from physics or psychology, are over.

For at least two reasons: first, the “hard” history of science, dedicated to the universality of the scientific system, has itself become a marginal phenomenon. Second, the idea that the academic engagement with literature should be a “science” is a German *Sonderweg*. In the United States, and not only here, it has always been something else.<sup>17</sup> Disciplinarity—as we know—is defined differently here: as Literary Criticism, as Literary Scholarship, or one does not even try to give a definition and speaks only of “Literature”—the difference between the object and the academic engagement with it is not formulated.

My impression is that the history of science has become less dogmatic; it itself has learned from the case of “philology.” The thought that philology has its own epistemological idiosyncrasies is no longer taboo. Even if this idiosyncrasy is difficult to conceptualize—or leads one to paradoxical formulations. For example, philology is described as the otherwise impossible unity of the difference between science and education (*Wissenschaft* and *Bildung*). Philology—and only philology—should be able to bring two contradictory goals together: “scientific” or “scholarly” research and the “educational” promotion of literature. The muddled landscape of philology that we have discussed is here no longer a deficit, but part of philology’s character. Philology is no “new” or “modern” discipline, but rather an *ancient form of knowledge* that has

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<sup>17</sup> See: John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.,” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 13 (1937). According to Ransom, the reading of literature should be professionalized, but not transformed into an “exact science”: “Scientific: but I do not think we need be afraid that criticism, trying to be a sort of science, will inevitably fail and give up in despair, or else fail without realizing it and enjoy some hollow and pretentious career. It will never be a very exact science, or even a nearly exact one. But neither will psychology, if that term continues to refer to psychic rather than physical phenomena; nor will sociology, as Pareto, quite contrary to his intention, appears to have furnished us with evidence for believing; nor even will economics. It does not matter whether we call them sciences or just systematic studies; the total effort of each to be effective must be consolidated and kept going. The studies which I have mentioned have immeasurably improved in understanding since they were taken over by the universities, and the same career looks possible for criticism.” (587-88)

lasted to the present day. Heinz Schlaffer writes in his history of the relationship between *Poetry and Knowledge* (1990)<sup>18</sup> that philology could no longer be invented today “as it is.” Precisely, but this is not a reason to give it up—and try to replace it with something supposedly better. Much more interesting is the question of how an ancient form of knowledge has survived—and above all, how we can still learn from this traditional epistemology today.<sup>19</sup>

### III.

It is at the very least *improbable* that ancient forms of knowledge should survive, that something which was invented once upon a time would still be valid. After all, social structure and the canon of forms of knowledge are interdependent. Philology rightfully belongs to the Early Modern period rather than, for example, to the 20<sup>th</sup> century or to the present day. Scholars have discussed this phenomenon—philology is only a prominent example—as “the drag-effect of the past” (*nachschleppende Vergangenheit*) or “cultural recurrence.”<sup>20</sup> What is past is not over, but is brought along even after the structure of society has changed and become historical. For our question, a hint from Umberto Eco is particularly instructive. Eco too observes this phenomenon of a past that does not end, and he understands it as the expression of a “philological flexibility.” Here is the complete quote:

A paradoxical aspect of our contemporary taste consists in the fact that our age appears to be an age of the rapid consumption of forms [...] in

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<sup>18</sup> Heinz Schlaffer, *Poesie und Wissen: Die Entstehung des ästhetischen Bewußtseins und der philologischen Erkenntnis* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), 185.

<sup>19</sup> Here is the thesis: the criteria for evaluating the reality of philology are its use and applications. Innovation and philology do not have to be mutually exclusive.

<sup>20</sup> Udo H. A. Schwarz, *Das Modische: Zur Struktur sozialen Wandels der Moderne*. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1982), 8. Schwarz uses the expression “the drag-effect of the past” (“*nachschleppende Vergangenheit*”), coined by the German sociologist Dieter Claessens; he takes the expression “cultural recurrence” from Karlheinz Stierle.



reality, our age is one of the historical periods in which forms are reused with the greatest rapidity and outlast their apparent decline.<sup>21</sup>

I would suggest that this description is applicable to the long life of philology as well. The decisive question is now only how one conceives of this reuse, this taking-up of ancient forms. What kind of operation is at work? Eco gives directions here as well. For Eco, the procedure is reading—he speaks of codes of reading that are necessary for the preservation of ancient forms. Eco distinguishes between two codes of reading. First, he speaks of “precise keys”—with these the reuse of the ancient is possible in a way that is faithful to the original. Indeed, a branch of research operates according to this pattern, for example, it looks for a classic work of philology, reconstructs it letter for letter, and then begins to work with the freshly unearthed original thought therein. Eco also describes a second, different method of reading ancient forms. There are, Eco writes, also messages from the past that no longer apply to us today and that should be, I quote, “read with free or deviant keys.”<sup>22</sup> This second type or method of reading, according to which one may read unconventionally, freely and thus also in search of surprises and innovation—this type seems more interesting. In my opinion, though, it all depends on the clever combination of both procedures. What is more, this form of double reading

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<sup>21</sup> “Ein paradoxer Aspekt unseres Zeitgeschmacks besteht darin, daß unsere Zeit eine Zeit rapiden Verbrauchs von Formen zu sein scheint [...], in Wirklichkeit aber eine der Geschichtsperioden ist, in welcher die Formen mit größter Schnelligkeit wieder aufgegriffen werden und ihren scheinbaren Verfall überdauern.” Umberto Eco, *Einführung in die Semiotik* (Munich: Fink, 1994 [1972]), 318. (German translation of *La struttura assente*. No English translation exists.) Some discussion of Eco’s philological reflections on time can be found in Udo Schwarz, *Das Modische*, 8ff. For Eco, “philology is equivalent to the desire to preserve of the ancient.” He is critical of the contemporary (in 1972) practice of reclaiming forms (see section III, 319ff.). Our rediscoveries and reclamations, according to Eco, are played out only on the very surface, and do not reach the “cultural foundation-system.” He searches instead for enrichment codes (!) and further states that an encounter with a given form should be seen as a “major operation of ‘Pop.’” And the object (ancient form) should not be seen as the “victim,” but instead as a “stimulus”—the “communication of possible operations” (322); Eco argues for the invention of new codes, not for the “mere” rediscovery of old codes, “keys,” or processes.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

was worked out within philology a long time ago, indeed, it is almost a *synonym for the philological mode of operation*. Classic works, according to philological common sense, should be read precisely in this way: once for redundancy, so that it becomes clear in the reading that the work in question is a specific work that is now being read *once again*. On the other hand, the classic work only comes to life, only becomes current again if it is subject to variation—but this license to variation only works if one can be sure that with each repeated reading one is still dealing with the same particular work.

My suggestion is to apply now this very procedure to philology itself. The only difference is that instead of reading individual classic works, I suggest that we read a form of “classical knowledge.” This reading of philology would thus be a reflexive application of philology on itself: by reading philology “classically,” we confirm first of all its origins in the past—and, secondly, we actualize it through “free and deviant” readings with an eye to the present. In accordance with this procedure, philology need not be updated as a whole. Considering its “multi-columned” unity, this would not even be possible anyway—and certainly not meaningful. This “classifying”<sup>23</sup> reading begins instead with a selection of what should be read out of the huge reserve of philological knowledge. My selection—and it should be clear that a reading is now the next step—starts with Friedrich Schlegel. The theme of this reading, however, is not the whole Schlegel, but rather an idiosyncrasy ascribed to him.

#### IV.

As always, whenever reading itself is at issue, there can be no fixed rules. Reading is always tied to a singular, specific reading. Reading is an operation that cannot be theorized as such. That said, what follows is a miscellany: a brief, minor reading. It also makes use of the second license that belongs to the philological genre of miscellanea: it is a reading that mixes—things, themes, authors, periods—by intention.

My miscellany comments on a single sentence by Rudolf Pfeiffer: “The mere existence of philology,” Pfeiffer writes in his history of

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. [Friedrich Schlegel et al.], “Fragmente,” in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (Munich: Schönigh, 1974), 2:173.

classical philology, “depends on the book.”<sup>24</sup> In this articulation, the sentence lays claim to universal applicability. And yet it is only a maxim, an aphoristic dictum—everything depends on the context of a concrete example, *in which the aphorism can first unfold*. How does the relationship between the book and philology look—this is my point of departure—in the case of the philologist and author Friedrich Schlegel? Schlegel is a good choice because he thinks in media-historical terms. Novalis’s maxim, “Everything that has to do with books is philological,” could have just as easily been from him.<sup>25</sup> As a philologist, Schlegel is interested in the medial processes of philological practice, in reading and writing themselves.—In brief: when Schlegel speaks of the book, then he almost always means book-making, book-writing and book-reading—and not the book as a quasi-natural object. The reality of the book lies in the media-technical and communicative operations in which it is used.

#### V.

When one thinks of Friedrich Schlegel, one does not imagine an author of thick tomes, comprehensive works and theoretical systems.<sup>26</sup> Despite his novel *Lucinde*, despite his notion of “progressive universal Poetry.” All this is common knowledge, but our attention is often drawn even more to those things that we have always known—but not known how to appreciate. The author Friedrich Schlegel did not so much write books, as fill notebooks. There were presumably more than a hundred such notebooks, the individual entries number in the thousands. Even today, not all of the notebooks that have been preserved are published. Schlegel was an incessant writer, a literary worker, one who worked with his notebook in hand. This medial context of his work should make us curious.

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<sup>24</sup> Pfeiffer, *Geschichte der klassischen Philologie*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Novalis, “Teplitzer Fragmente,” in *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. Hans-Joachim Mähl and Richard Samuel (Munich/Vienna: Carl Hanser, 1978), 2:388.

<sup>26</sup> The following is an expanded version of an editorial written together with Ulrich Breuer for the journal *Athenäum: Jahrbuch der Friedrich Schlegel Gesellschaft*. See: Ulrich Breuer and Nikolaus Wegmann, “Editorial,” *Athenäum* 21 (2011).

Scholars have long seen Schlegel's writing process from a biographical perspective. Schlegel could not have done otherwise, one reads. The notebook is a question of character, almost a character flaw. After his first meeting with Schlegel, Friedrich August Wolf remarked that this is a man who wants to go beyond "assured success."<sup>27</sup> Is that the reservation one would expect from an older generation with regard to an ambitious young cohort? But only thirteen years separate Wolf (born 1759) from Schlegel (born 1772). That does not constitute a generation gap. What is at stake here?

Wolf's first impression has persevered to this day. If Wolf's comment sounds like the diagnosis of a psychological disposition, one would explain the same phenomenon today by pointing to the conditions under which Schlegel lived. Without a tenured professorship, Schlegel was constantly looking for a place to stay. His is a career marked by precarious touring, a career on the road: from Leipzig, Dresden, Jena, Berlin to Paris, Cologne and Vienna. Considering these circumstances his use of the notebooks seems merely convenient, something like a traveling typewriter or a mnemonic device.

Yet notes and notebooks are more. "Our writing instruments have a hand in our thoughts," writes Nietzsche on his use of a typewriter in a letter to Peter Gast in 1882.<sup>28</sup> What appears as an unmediated expression and thought exists in fact only as a practice with the support of media. Notes and notebooks are therefore—once plugged into this formula—the primary writing procedure for Friedrich Schlegel. They are not first drafts of thoughts for a work that will later, finally be written to completion. And they are also not, say because their author failed to complete a work with them, "mere" notes. The notebook is rather a medial practice with its own idiosyncrasy. Yet how does Schlegel justify his choice for the notebook? Do our genres, or media forms, also have a hand in our thoughts?

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<sup>27</sup> Siegfried Reiter, "F. A. Wolf and Fr. Schlegel: Mit einem ungedruckten Brief," *Euphorion* 23 (1921): 230.

<sup>28</sup> As famously quoted in Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon Film Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986), 293.

## VI.

This question eludes quick answers. Even the attempt at empirical textual criticism presents enormous difficulties. There are not only countless entries. The individual notes themselves are multifaceted. Excerpts, ideas, lists, sketches, epiphanies, short essays, improvisations, fragments, or aphorisms: one finds it all in these notebooks. All genres seem equally welcome. They appear in no particular order and without headings or titles. An individual entry, moreover, may make use of multiple forms at the same time. Without hesitation an excerpt may become an idea sketch, and an aphorism may follow up directly on an idea therein. But what does that even mean, “to follow up” or “to connect to” (*anschließen*), where a fixed structure of argument is purposefully missing?

Non-systematized complexity is typical for Schlegel’s method of keeping a notebook. And he is not alone in this respect. The notebook is not a Schlegelian idiosyncrasy. Schopenhauer had one, so did Fontane, Kafka and Gernhardt. They all—and many others—kept a notebook. Just to give a sense of scale for this writing instrument: Robert Gernhardt had 675 individual notebooks. Considering the prominence of the authors, the sheer mass of entries and the intensity with which notebooks have been and are written, it is astounding that this writing format has remained a marginal phenomenon for so long. It is even more interesting to consider why this is changing now.

At first glance, one might presume that it is simply time for the notebooks to have their turn. Where great and significant authors are concerned, everything is considered part of the (expanded) work. Even what is supposedly ephemeral and fleeting, that is the note, the sketch and even the excerpt. A second motivation is the contemporary boom in media studies. The notebook profits here as well. What was long considered only a writing aid, is now highly valued, analogous to the manuscript or the incunabulum, as a unique form of storage medium.

There is however another reason for this recent interest in notebooks: the book is no longer the indisputable measure of contemporary reading and writing practices. Careers are still made, so one hears, only with books. Yet the privileged position of the book is fading. In the digital world, more fleeting and more open kinds of writing are standard. Even in science and scholarship there has been a shift in this direction. Complete books and comprehensive articles still exist. But

who still reads entire books? And according to statistics, the average article has next to no readers.

That sounds like a radical break with the past, but perhaps familiar notions are merely being revealed as the illusions that they are. For already circa 1800, at least in the intellectual circles around Schlegel and Novalis, the pretty image of the good book and its loyal readers was no (longer) convincing. Maximal expertise, universal validity, and a long life—all predicates of the book—were exactly not the slogan that would satisfy the ambition of these intellectuals. Friedrich Schlegel would rather indulge in hyperbole than consider that one could thoroughly investigate a topic. Writing ambiguously about the format of the monograph, Schlegel has a terrifying idea: “I would have to write a *book* if I wanted to *exhaust* everything.”<sup>29</sup> (Schlegel thus deliberately confuses thorough investigation with *exhaustive* investigation.) No author, moreover, can get around the problem of the reader. “The reader,” writes Novalis with a sharp eye to medial conditions, “sets the *accent* arbitrarily—he really can do what he wants with a book.”<sup>30</sup>

The noble book that has a sovereign command over its objects and its readers is thus only a fiction. But what are the alternatives? As an author, Schlegel laid his mark on tireless progression, on a writing that focuses on the movement of writing and thinking, not the definitive result. From the constant movement should emerge new thoughts and surprising ideas, countless in number and with a high degree of certainty that they will appear. In this poetic program, the notebook steps up as *the* writing format for innovation. Here you can write intermittently and in sketches, here you can test out what works. You can let the ink flow: the medial format notebook provides the appropriate occasion.

The effort of writing aims at the operation of establishing continuity itself (*anschließen*). The writer does not look for the one perfect connection, however, because it fits into a scheme or is universally understandable. The true art of making connections always keeps the

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<sup>29</sup> “Ueberhaupt müßte ich ein *Buch schreiben*, wenn ich Alles erschöpfen wollte.” Friedrich Schlegel to August Wilhelm Schlegel, October 31, 1797. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (Munich: Schönögnh 1985), 24:30.

<sup>30</sup> “Der Leser [...] setzt den *Accent* willkürlich—er macht eigentlich aus einem Buche, was er will.” Novalis, “Teplitzer Fragmente,” 399.

writing open for further and always different continuations. Schlegel's notebooks are a constant challenge to himself to continue writing experimentally, and a departure from the pedantic routines of a sure thing. For Schlegel, assured success is actually not success at all.

### VII.

The notebook acquires its medial profile from its opposition to a kind of writing that avoids risk in favor of predictable success, but that therefore must accept the loss of originality and intensity. Schlegel is thus part of what could be called a classic controversy. Wolf's impression of him also repeats the pro and contra of this debate. Wolf only offers a hint of farsighted wisdom, though. Others have sharpened the distinction between a writer's risk-aversion and risk-affinity to an Either-Or. For example: Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. In the 1960s and '70s, he viciously attacked academicism and its affinity for the "secure text." Texts that adapt themselves to the "insanity and terror of the disciplinary bog of paperwork"<sup>31</sup> are sterile and dull. They don't amount to anything. Brinkmann demands consequently and thus predictably the very opposite: "Give up what is certain."<sup>32</sup> For him, this is not a simple resolution, not an idea that you first have and then repeat as a motto. This imperative can itself only be written—achieved through writing—in the tireless forward movement beyond the obvious: "Why stop here? Why stop anywhere?"<sup>33</sup>

Once you have an eye for this controversy, more examples easily surface: "Beware of understanding that comes too quickly"<sup>34</sup> is Luhmann's motto in this regard. He as well opts for unsettling self-questioning, for keeping questions open and moving forward as the guiding principle of his process. And Steve Jobs reclaims the poetics of risk with the phrase: "Stay foolish"—which German media have

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<sup>31</sup> Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, "Der Film in Worten," in *ACID: Neue amerikanische Szene*, ed. Rolf Dieter Brinkmann and Ralf Rainer Rygulla. 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (Frankfurt/M.: Zweitausendeins, 1981 [1969]), 390. Cf. Georg Stanitzek, *Essay—BRD* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2011), 170-172.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395.

<sup>34</sup> The construction of theory in systems theory is treated comprehensively and impressively in Maren Lehmann, *Theorie in Skizzen* (Berlin: Merve, 2011).

appropriately translated as “Bleibt tollkühn,” “Stay foolhardy.”<sup>35</sup> Yet how can one remain foolhardy over time, when foolhardiness is only possible as a moment, never as a routine? Is this paradox unavoidable?

It is easy to praise risk. *For* Schlegel’s boldness, *against* the boredom of business as usual. Why shouldn’t the scientist and scholar live “wildly and dangerously” too? Such talk is kitsch, a romanticized version of writing. “Secure texts” are—once separated from the polemic—the daily bread of scholarly text production. Much of it follows what is established and recognized. Qualifying texts—dissertations and habilitations—are printed that are also written in view of institutional success. Texts that consolidate and filter assured knowledge are not less legitimate, nor are highly-specialized articles for the smallest circle of experts. Even the “reading” article that does not actually read in a new or original way, has its place if it can demonstrate fascination and engagement. Only after all this comes the deviation.

One can only deviate from something that is already there—and that has already been accepted as established. One can, for example, take Schlegel’s *Notes on Philology* as the model, and like Werner Hamacher, publish one’s own *95 Theses on Philology*. Hamacher put his aphorisms and notions online—this is a second point—and published them as a *roughbook* outside the standard scholarly avenues, and so addressed a different readership with his text.<sup>36</sup> With this clearly different publication strategy, the question of the public as influential limit of writing is raised: Isn’t the public in some way the final benchmark and reference point for writing? In the act of writing, according to a widely held conception, one thinks simply of some public—and in the act of squinting to see that public, the operation of connecting and joining is disciplined: only that which *fits* can be considered as a continuation as the thought that led to writing in the first place—in the end, the public must be able to connect to what is written. This general expectation was well known to Friedrich Schlegel, of course. He was, after all, the publisher and editor of the *Athenäum*, a journal—and

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<sup>35</sup>Steven Jobs: “‘You’ve got to find what you love,’ Jobs says. Commencement address, Stanford, June 12, 2005.” <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>.

<sup>36</sup>Werner Hamacher, *95 Thesen zur Philologie*. First appeared as a series in *roughblog*, then published (with significant changes) as *roughbook 008* (Basel: Engeler 2010).



journals, even if they are produced by unemployed intellectuals, still need buyers, need sales. And yet Schlegel fends off this usual expectation as an imposition, as a naive understanding of writing and media: “Some speak of the public as if it were someone with whom he had eaten in the Leipzig fair in the Hotel de Saxe. Who is this public? ‘Public’ is nothing at all, it is instead a thought, a postulate, like ‘Church.’”<sup>37</sup> And even if one writes for a small circle, only for each other: the writing itself, for Schlegel, has priority. The public is first and foremost *a function of writing*: “And meanwhile,” according to Schlegel and his call for writing as an incessant process of writing more, onward, into the future—“and meanwhile, a public might arise.”<sup>38</sup>

And the reader? Should he let himself into this text, despite the fact—or preceisely because—they do not immediately connect to scholarly communication? How much attention must he invest? Will he be caught, in the end, in the idiosyncrasies of an over-ambitious author? The reader will decide for himself, where he places the accent in his reading; after all, not all forms of connecting with the text are the same. One has to test out what works and how much effort the text is worth. And naturally *not all connections lead to scholarship*.

Now we are finally on difficult terrain. No general rules are in sight. Maybe one can only gauge, in a new way, the difference between a secure text and a risky text. How much security and how much risk? This would allow, too, for a judgment about the Where and How of the act of connection. This is not a plea for one side or another. Only the recommendation to make use of the differentiation of a secure text and a risky text as a complete, and bivalent, difference. This makes it easier to move from one side to the other—and to retrace one’s steps again, when possible, whether as author or reader. Instead of a dogmatic taking of sides, one could, with Schlegel and his *media philology*, stop and remain open to whatever comes, what might fit and what does not.

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<sup>37</sup> Schlegel, Friedrich, “Kritische Fragmente,” in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (Munich: Schönigh, 1974), 2:150. Cf. Alfred Schlagdenhauffen, “Die Grundzüge des Athenäum,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 88 (1969), Special Issue *Friedrich Schlegel und die Romantik*, 26.

<sup>38</sup> [Schlegel et al.], “Fragmente,” 212. Cf. Schlagdenhauffen, “Grundzüge,” 26.

*VIII.*

Can we turn this around and use it in our discipline? Make a suggestion that is guided by this Schlegel miscellany? What is sought is a form of scholarly communication that takes up the difference between certainty and risk and introduces this within the “community of scholars.” The *topoi* are ready for use: against the mere mainstream, for intelligent deviations, against the smooth-edged language of declarations, for independent judgments. But this remains a simple Either-Or, unless this difference is carried over into a communicative process. It should remain open to a large potential number of participants and allow the discrepancy between certainty and risk to take effect reliably as an operation. Scholarly debate can do exactly that.<sup>39</sup> In debate, two or more parties deviate clearly from each other, but in spite of differing viewpoints, their respective positions connect to each other, either as contradiction or agreement. Once begun, the debate provokes contributions that exceed what each individual scholar may think. The tension involved in unifying risk and security brings about an intensity of thought—and this is unquestionably beneficial.

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<sup>39</sup> Here I take up a point made by Christian Benne during discussion.

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