Introduction: Relating Philology, Practicing Humanism

MICHELLE R. WARREN

Toute présence—même ignorée—d'une culture particulière, même silencieuse, est un relais actif dans la Relation.

Any presence—even unknown—of a particular culture, even silent, is an active relay in Relation.

—Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*

Humanism . . . must excavate the silence, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility. . . .

—Edward Said, "The Return to Philology"

NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES OF PHILOLOGY ABOUND. MANY ASSOCIATE THE PRACTICE WITH THE PURSUIT OF ARCANE LINGUISTIC DETAIL, SEVERED from the interpretative questions that occupy mainstream criticism; philology is also thought to imply a positivist stance on history, easily co-opted for nationalist purposes. And yet philology—as a set of techniques for producing language histories and edited texts from all periods—underlies everyone's experience of readable texts. Its techniques, moreover, can critique origins and coherence as easily as they can construct them. I would like to suggest, then, that we all have much to gain by reconceptualizing philology.[1] In addition to language-based expertise, it can encompass a general attitude toward the constructedness of textuality in a transhistorical perspective. Decoupled from the study of particular historical periods (classical, medieval), philology can mediate between the most specialized procedures for producing texts and the broadest critical concerns, between words and their multifarious social situations. In this mode, philology rejuvenates its long-standing connections with culture and humanism, engaging some of the most vibrant conversations of contemporary criticism.

By way of illustration, I would like to turn to contemporary criticism itself—specifically, to Édouard Glissant and Edward Said. In the epigraphs above, both thinkers link their signal concepts—relation and humanism, respectively—to a silence that calls for exposure. For both, silences form integral parts of the audible cacophony

MICHELLE R. WARREN is professor of comparative literature at Dartmouth College. She is the author of *Creole Medievalism: Colonial France and Joseph Bédier's Middle Ages* (U of Minnesota P, forthcoming) and *History on the Edge: Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100–1300* (U of Minnesota P, 2000) and coeditor of *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern* (Palgrave, 2003) and *Arts of Calculation: Quantifying Thought in Early Modern Europe* (Palgrave, 2004).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of culture. To "relay" or "excavate" silence means finding ways to reconstruct what has been lost—prime philological terrain. Here philology's technical methods for recovering hidden features of languages and texts reach across time and space to challenge oppressive silencing and reveal missing archives.

Said links the humanist obligation to excavate silence directly to philology when he writes, elsewhere in "The Return to Philology," "A true philological reading is active; it involves getting inside the process of language already going on in words and making it disclose what may be hidden or incomplete or masked or distorted in any text we may have before us" (59). Philology, in other words, forms the linguistic dimension of humanism, defined later in the essay as an "oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place" (83). Throughout his essay Said underscores philology's heroic dimensions, a leitmotif of his later publications. Indeed, addressing the MLA as its president in 2000, he struck much the same chord as Albert Cook did when performing that function a hundred years earlier: both insist on philology's nobility, even its life-giving vitality, as fundamental to an admirable humanism.[2] Said's enduring prominence locates philology in an active debate over the broadest stakes of literary and cultural study at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In their humanist commitments to recovering memories and identities, Glissant and Said repeatedly discuss the formal discipline of philology. Said's career-long engagements with Erich Auerbach have been the subject of much discussion, which generally exposes the varied ways in which he made Auerbach's exile from Germany a symbol of worldly humanism.[3] Glissant's repeated references to Auerbach's contemporary and fellow German Romance philologist Ernst Robert Curtius, by contrast, have received relatively little attention. Curtius has been gradually receding from active critical discussion, even though his major book, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, was characterized as recently as 1990 as "an international monument that towers above the landscape of provincial literary studies" (Godman 599). Indeed, Curtius and Auerbach opposed each other in many ways, both personal and philosophical.[4] They share, however, many basic premises. Both understood philology in exceptionally broad terms (as the study of literature per se);[5] both constructed literary humanisms steeped in European high culture (stretching from antiquity to the twentieth century); both expressly used the cosmopolitan coherence they discerned in European literary history to counter aggressive nationalism (drawing attention to the fraught circumstances of their scholarly activities in the 1930s and 1940s). Said often aligns Curtius with Auerbach in broad characterizations of philological humanism and what he terms "philological hermeneutics."[6] Glissant's approach to Curtius, meanwhile, testifies to a dynamic understanding of historical relations, shaping powerful relays among philology, Eurocentrism, and humanism. In their respective philological engagements, Glissant and Said model a multidimensional scholarly conversation that links philology to the future of humanism and the humanities at large.

Glissant evokes Curtius's weighty *European Literature* ("un livre d'avant-dormir" 'a bedtime book' [*Cohée* 97]) regularly in his publications and lectures, as both counterpoint to and source of his ideal poetics. Curtius's book demonstrates the unity and consistency of European literature by identifying a set number of topoi, or commonplaces, derived from Latin literature and shared across the centuries into the modern period. For Glissant, then, Curtius easily serves to define a static European tradition disrupted by New World dynamism. In his influential *Le discours antillais*, Glissant defines the novel of the Americas in part by adopting and then transforming Curtius's topos of the landscape

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(Curtius, *Littérature*, ch. 10). Like Curtius, Glissant affirms that literature derives its identity from a "parole du paysage" 'discourse of landscape.' While European literature developed around the topos "de la source et du pré" 'of the spring and the meadow,' American literature interrupts this pastoral peace (*locus amoenus*) like a blast of wind ("du vent qui pousse et qui fait de l'ombre comme un grand arbre" 'wind that blows and makes shade like a large tree' [255]). From these sheltering shadows, Glissant draws out a vision of American modernity as rupture, contrasted with Europe's linearity and continuity. He situates himself, and Caribbean literature, firmly in opposition to the European landscape: "Je ne pratique pas l'économie du pré, je ne partage pas la tranquilité de la source" 'I do not practice the economy of the meadow, I do not share the tranquility of the fountain spring' (255). Elsewhere, Glissant contrasts the European meadow with images of jungle and brush, the spring with earthquakes and cyclones (*Cohée* 97; Glissant and Leupin 56), the measured rhythms of the European landscape ("la *mesure d'une mesure*") with a New World passion for "une *démesure de la démesure*" 'an *excess of excess*' (*Cohée* 97). In each of these scenes, Curtius's landscape topos holds the place of a European discourse displaced by the unpredictable processes of creolization.

Glissant's focus on landscape suggests a basic poetic engagement with Curtius—and the European Middle Ages.[7] Glissant takes up both at some length in *Traité du tout-monde*. Following chapters linking measure, medieval time, and long histories of diversity, Glissant elaborates implicitly on chapter 16 of Curtius's *European Literature* with a meditation entitled "Le livre du monde" 'The Book of the World.' The phrase echoes Curtius directly (*Littérature* 392–93), inscribing Glissant's poetics in the established topos of the "book" as symbol even as it transforms the image. Glissant locates in the book all that is "invariable"—contrasted with "l'infiniment mouvant" 'the infinite movement' of the Internet (160–61). Yet for Glissant the invariables work against the monolithic oppressions of sacralized or traditional images of the fixity associated with books (and with philology): "La poussée des invariants ne fonde pas un Absolu, elle établit Relation" 'The pressure of invariants does not found an Absolute; it establishes Relation.' Glissant's world book engages "démesure" 'excess' instead of squashing it (162). And only the book, not ephemeral forms like the Internet, preserves a poetic language capacious enough for a planetary imagination (163).

Contrasting quotidian "langue" 'speech' with durable "langage" 'language,' Glissant turns to Curtius as the author of one of the "livres épais" 'thick books' that "nous donnent le temps" 'give us time' for the imagination of such a language, a respite from erratic daily speech (164). What, he asks, does he seek in these books?

> Je devine que nous sommes là en état de médiumnité. Nous y quêtons peut-être avant tout les signes avant-coureurs de la totalité qui aujourd'hui nous sollicite. Nous demandons d'y repérer nos invariants, et comment ces textes en ont eu la prescience. Renforcer en nous, contre les aléas discontinues de la précieuse errance, le sens de la durée, la patience rêche du temps. C'est ce que j'appelle augurer de son propre langage. Oui. Voilà comment nous lisons ces gros livres. (164–65)
>
> I imagine that we are there like a medium. We seek there, perhaps above all else, harbingers of the totality that solicits us today. We ask to locate our invariants there and how these texts had foreknowledge of them. Against the discontinuous vagaries of precious wandering, reinforce in us the sense of duration, the rough patience of time. This is what I call foreshadowing one's own language. Yes. That is how we read these big books.

Here Glissant makes Curtius's book (along with the classical Chinese romance *Water Margin* and Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and*

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fall of the Roman Empire) a source for the kind of reflection needed to dream the world book of humanity's future. Glissant's totality (*tout-monde*) includes the invariables defined by the topoi of European literature, not as fixed points but rather as nodes in dynamic global relations, anchored in specific landscapes while claiming vast proportions. In using Curtius's book to think through the language of relation, Glissant conceptualizes a creolized philology—a method for editing a world book that would resist monolithic consolidation.

Glissant's mobile *relation* would seem the polar opposite of Curtius's vision of static European continuity. Yet for Glissant therein lies, precisely, the connection—the polarity that grounds a dialogue, the *locus amoenus* that morphs across the globe to encompass a dynamic totality. Glissant's double use of Curtius's book—as emblem of a homogeneous European tradition and as source for a language of relation—points toward the dualistic nature of philological analysis: it creates and dismantles coherence, stabilizes and undermines tradition, multiplies and singularizes, wanders and roots (what Glissant calls *errance* and *racine* [*Poétique* 27–28]). As philology oscillates between these poles, its techniques for fixing meanings and forms turn against the quest for single origins, continuous genealogies, smooth historical teleologies, coherent language systems, stable hierarchies, and so on. It transits among disparate historical moments, engaging both subjectivity and the ethics of public discourse.

A number of modifiers affixed to *philology* gesture toward this kind of approach: *antifoundational* (Culler), *counter-* (Porter, *Nietzsche* 17), *cultural* (Rubin), *disjunctive* (Robins), *ecstatic* (El Alami), *exilic* (Harpham 111), *extraterritorial* (Curthoys 155), *oppositional* (Porter, "Erich Auerbach" 121), *post-* (Warren, "Post-philology"), *postdisciplinary* (Sell), *recycled* (Knapp), *revitalized* (Curthoys 155), *skeptical* (Harpham 113), *thick* (Mallette 589), *worldly* (Armstrong 140). While these coinages derive from widely divergent premises, they all, consistent with Glissant's *totality* and *relation*, equip philology for a humanist future. They point toward the many ways in which philology cannot sustain the ethos of disinterested cohesion that surrounds it and so operates in the fraught domains of culture.[8]

The essays gathered in this cluster represent three weighty origin points in the European tradition that Curtius and Auerbach defined so influentially—and that Said and Glissant have redefined just as influentially. These essays also intersect with a humanist philology in the ways that they excavate and activate silence. In the case of the newest "oldest Romance lyric," literary language begins not with epics, hagiography, politics, or stone but with human intimacy, accident, and discarded fragments of perishable animal skin. Each essay foregrounds elements that seem hidden (incest, childbirth, the idea of the new), attending to belated sources, private experience, and transhistorical intertextuality. In these ways, they suggest the labors of making *Beowulf* English, the earliest lyrics French, and Dante Italian.

As a set of techniques for determining verbal forms, generic identities, and historical legacies, philology reveals itself here as anything but prehermeneutic. Instead of preceding interpretation, philology works through complex theoretical and cultural parameters. Simultaneously descriptive and creative, philology enacts culture at the microlinguistic level. By sustaining both historical specificity and transhistorical communication, it helps to distinguish between local idiosyncrasies and broader commonalities. In this way it can challenge basic assumptions about foundational texts (like *Beowulf* or *The Divine Comedy*), which so often play overdetermined roles in the theater of literary humanism. By unsettling seemingly secure foundations, philology can support the elaboration of more nimble humanisms.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Notes

All unattributed translations are mine.

1. I have made a fuller defense in "Post-philology"; see also related arguments in Holquist, "Forgetting," "Why We"; Knapp; and Frank.

2. Said, "Presidential Address." Similar statements recur in "Return" 58, 68.

3. E.g., Brennan; Mufti; Rubin; Hussein; Armstrong; Lindenberger 208–10; Apter; Harpham 110–17; Curthoys; Spanos 151–96. Auerbach was forced from his position at the University of Marburg in 1935; after teaching in Istanbul from 1936 to 1947, he spent the rest of his life in the United States (d. 1957).

4. On some of the complexities of their relationship: Auerbach, "Philology" 13–14, "Epilegomena"; Fitzgerald; Nichols 63–64; Ziolkowski 156–57; Green; Gumbrecht 25, 33–34. Curtius criticized Nationalist Socialism in the 1930s but remained in Germany with a university appointment throughout his life (d. 1956), prompting accusations of moral complacency (cf. Spitzer 431; Spender; more nuanced discussions are in Ziolkowski; Godman; Richards; Landauer; Porter, "Erich Auerbach").

5. Auerbach, *Literary Language* 6; Curtius, *European Literature* 383. See also their respective textbooks: Auerbach, *Introduction*, and Curtius, *Gessammelte*.

6. Said, "Introduction" xi, xiii, *Beginnings* 7, 20, 142, *World* 142, 154, 166, 250; both wrote from the "same driven fear" (*Culture* 47). Others have explicitly cast Curtius's Eurocentric medievalism as another kind of "worldly humanism" (cf. Godman 613; Dronke 1104–05; Hartman 376; Uhlig 43; Ziolkowski; Armstrong 137; Curthoys 171n18).

7. I discuss some of these connections in *Creole Medievalism*, ch. 5.

8. As James Porter notes in his analysis of Friedrich Nietzsche: "Philology does not uncover the past. It discovers the present in light of the past's endless futurity" (*Nietzsche* 14); "Nietzsche traces in silhouette the ways in which conventional philology erodes its own foundations from within" (17).

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.283 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2010.125.2.283 Published online by Cambridge University Press