

## NECROPHILIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Constanze Güthenke's Feeling and Classical Philology (Cambridge, 2020) prompts wider reflections on the balance between empathy and distance, and between personality and context in classical scholarship. This paper explores some implications of that line of enquiry.*

## KEYWORDS

*death, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, Bildung, individuality, seminar, eros*

Classical philology is not the only scholarly discipline to commune longingly with the dead. Philosophers routinely conjure the shades of Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, arguing with them as if they were the colleagues a few doors down, only much smarter. Literary scholars immerse themselves not only in the texts and biographies but also in the long-lost worlds of their chosen authors: Molière's Paris, Goethe's Weimar, Austen's Bath. Historians of course spend most of their waking hours rethinking past thoughts and recreating past experience, emerging reluctantly into the present only for meals and the occasional faculty meeting. Even the future-oriented scientists sometimes cast yearning glances backwards, avid for biographical anecdotes about the likes of Newton or Gauss or Darwin. To the exasperation of historians of scholarship and science, all of these disciplines envision their own histories as ersatz genealogies, in which the bonds of master and disciple replace those of kith and kin, and the filiation of ideas retraces the biographies of thinkers. Despite repeated efforts in both scholarship and science since the early nineteenth century to sunder life and works, all disciplines reconstruct their own histories as bloodlines and lifelines.

Why? Why superimpose the structure of the family tree on tangled collegial relationships that are at least as intra-generational (the horizontal cohort) as they are inter-generational (the vertical succession)? Why individualize what everyone acknowledges to be the collective achievement of science and scholarship, built by many hands over many generations? Above all, why turn an intricate history of ideas and practices, personalities and institutions into a stick-figure drama of heroes (those who anticipated what we think now) and villains (those who

didn't)? Decades of painstaking historical work documenting the empirical inadequacy of bloodline and lifeline models to explain how science and scholarship actually develop have yet to make the slightest dent in the way disciplines imagine their own histories. On the contrary: scientists regularly reproach historians of science for not writing enough biographies. Even philosophers, who are ordinarily the most allergic to any taint of the *ad personam* in argument and exegesis, would much prefer yet another biography of Kant to, say, a study of what eighteenth-century German philosophy might have looked like from a coeval perspective.

In her refreshing new study of German classical philology during its heyday in the long nineteenth century, Constanze Güthenke stops complaining and starts explaining this strange state of affairs. She takes as her explanandum what most historians of scholarship and science have dismissed as disciplinary mythology. With great tact, both in the sense of respect for her texts and their authors and also in the sense of an exquisite feel for the feelings of her title, she shows how German classical philologists struggled to unite a formidable array of objective techniques with an intense subjective *eros* for their subject matter, to wed their science and their art. She matches the biographical bias of the disciplinary history of classical philology with the biographical, individualizing bias of studies of Pindar and Plato, and shows that these studies were in turn the expression of an attempt to reanimate the beloved dead: the god antiquity incarnated in human form and resurrected, a very Protestant miracle wrought by *Wissenschaft* and empathy.

Because remains of Greco-Roman antiquity were fragmentary, an additional premise, at once epistemological, ontological, and emotional, was required to fill in the faint outlines of the lost beloved. Güthenke argues that the philologists conceived of their subject matters as coherent wholes — first and foremost, as coherent individuals, but also as coherent cultures that took on some of the traits of flesh-and-blood individuals, such as development through the phases of a human life. As Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff effused in the opening passage of his *Geschichte der Philologie* (1921):

Die Philologie [...] wird durch ihr Objekt bestimmt, die griechisch-römische Kultur in ihrem Wesen und allen Äußerungen ihres Lebens. Diese Kultur ist eine Einheit, mag sie sich auch an ihrem Anfang und ihrem Ende nicht scharf abgrenzen lassen. Die Aufgabe der Philologie ist, jenes vergangene Leben durch die Kraft der Wissenschaft wieder lebendig zu machen, das Lied des Dichters, die Gedanken des Philosophen und Gesetzgebers, die Heiligkeit des Gotteshauses und die

Gefühle der Gläubigen und Ungläubigen, das bunte Getriebe auf dem Markte und im Hafen, Land und Meer, und die Menschen in ihrer Arbeit und in ihrem Spiele.<sup>1</sup>

Only by assuming the organic unity of its subject matter could the science of classical philology (and it was in many ways the *Ur-Wissenschaft*) warrant the inference from surviving fragment to lost whole — and thereby bring back to life Wilamowitz's dazzling panorama of ancient thought and experience.

This premise was epistemological in that it justified inferences from part to whole; ontological in positing the existence of entities such as organic cultures or even individuals; and emotional in satisfying the you-are-there yearning to experience Greco-Roman antiquity, all of it, all at once. Wilamowitz's pageant of temples and marketplaces, poets and sailors, calls to mind paintings like Leo von Klenze's *Ansicht der Akropolis und des Areopag* (1846)<sup>2</sup> and other nineteenth-century artistic attempts to render the vision of the philologists vivid to the eye of the body as well as to that of the mind. (Not coincidentally, von Klenze's brother Clemens August Carl Klenze co-founded the *Societas philologica Göttingensis* together with Karl Lachmann when both were students in Göttingen. As Güthenke notes in passing (p. 164), philhellenism tended to run in families, aspiring professors marrying professors' daughters — Wilamowitz married Theodor Mommsen's daughter Maria — thereby spawning academic dynasties of sons-in-law.) In contrast to our current view of cultures as pastiches and individuals as fractured composites, all-too-many souls duking it out within a single breast, the German classical philologists promoted a holistic and synoptic approach.

For the historian of science, there is an eerily familiar ring to all this. But the names that fly to mind are not August Böckh or Wilamowitz, but rather those of the French comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier, the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (and his historical philologist brother Wilhelm), and their most celebrated intellectual heir, Charles Darwin. Cuvier's famous (attributed) dictum, "Show me the bone, and I will describe the animal," became the basis for spectacular reconstructions of extinct prehistoric beasts such as mammoths and dinosaurs from fossil shards excavated from the Paris basin.<sup>3</sup> Arguing

<sup>1</sup> Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Geschichte der Philologie* [1921], ed. Albert Henrichs (Stuttgart/Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> The painting is held by the Alte Pinakothek in Munich: <https://www.pinakothek.de/kunst/leo-von-klenze/ideale-ansicht-der-akropolis-und-des-areopag-athen>

<sup>3</sup> Georges Cuvier, *Recherches sur le ossemens fossils de quadrupèdes*, 4 vols. (Paris: Deterville, 1812); see also Gowan Dawson, *Show Me the Bone: Reconstructing*

from anatomical symmetry and tight integration of an organism's *Bauplan*, Cuvier inferred the vanished whole animal from a tooth or a femur. These were holistic assumptions not unlike those of the German classical philologists. Equally famous was Alexander von Humboldt's cultivation of the *Totaleindruck* in natural history: how topography, flora, fauna, climate, and geology combined into a physiognomic impression of the local landscape.<sup>4</sup> His brother Wilhelm sought the unifying "Persönlichkeit" of each of the world's languages and the insight it provided into the unique intellectual and emotional character of the people who spoke it. Languages were not arbitrary grab-bags of words bound by mere convention; they possessed an "organic life" of their own.<sup>5</sup> Darwin, who had immersed himself in Cuvier's paleontology, Alexander von Humboldt's rhapsodic natural history, and the tree diagrams of the historical philologists, preached that the fossil record was the fragmentary collection of fragments: only the naturalist's imagination, guided by the organicist principles of Cuvier and the theory of gradualist evolution, could fill in the missing links in the great chain of life.<sup>6</sup>

These cross-cutting resemblances of assumptions and methods among diverse disciplines were noted by contemporaries as well as by latter-day historians. Indeed, they became one model of what it was to become a genuine science in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. When Oxford Sanskritist Max Mueller, trained in Leipzig and Berlin, called for a new science of religion in 1873, he defended the project as of a piece with the most successful sciences of the age, chief among them paleontology and historical philology. Quoting Schelling and Hegel on the "individual genius of a people," Mueller insisted on the unity of culture and religion. It was precisely this unity that constituted the truth of religion: "in one sense every religion was a true religion, being the only religion which was possible at the time, which was compatible with the language, the thoughts, and the sentiments of each generation, which was

*Prehistoric Monsters in Nineteenth-Century Britain and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) for the popular and scientific sensation created by Cuvier's findings.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander von Humboldt, "Ideen zu einer Physiognomik der Gewächse," *Ansichten der Natur* [1808, 1826, 1849], ed. Hanno Beck (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1987), pp. 175–297, on p. 181.

<sup>5</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über den Einfluss des verschiedenen Charakters der Sprachen auf Literatur und Geistesbildung," in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), *Werke*, ed. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel, vol. 3, pp. 26–30, on p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* [1859], ed. Ernst Mayr (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 287–302.

appropriate to the age of the world.”<sup>7</sup> Mueller was admittedly in the thrall of the historical philology of Franz Bopp and Wilhelm von Humboldt, but his comparisons with other sciences employing kindred methods were elaborated at length by anglophone proponents of a science of religion who were more skeptical of such Germanic imports.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to widespread assumptions about the distinctive individuality and organic unity of subject matter, the then new-fangled Kantian vocabulary of objectivity and subjectivity was something of a German specialty and was rarely to be found in French or English until the latter half of the nineteenth century. But it was very much the language in which the brothers Humboldt expressed the same tensions between scientific methods and artistic intuition that Güthenke documents so well for the classical philologists. Alexander hoped that his colorful descriptions of nature in the tropics would provide the pleasure “welchen ein empfänglicher Sinn in der unmittelbaren Anschauung findet,” simultaneously engaging the imagination and contributing to scientific knowledge.<sup>9</sup> In *Kosmos*, he granted the subjective responses to nature a volume of their own, equal in length and dignity to the “reine Objektivität wissenschaftlicher Naturbeschreibung” of the first volume. The effects of the objective “Naturgemälde” on the emotions and the imagination and the “Erhöhung des reinen Naturgefühls” through literary description, landscape paintings, and even the then-fashionable panoramas would provide, so Alexander’s hope, the motivation to travel and study nature.<sup>10</sup>

Wilhelm was less explicit about the intrinsic aesthetic gratifications of research, but his warm appreciation of the beauties of Sanskrit grammar, which possessed “einer solchen Vortrefflichkeit und Vollständigkeit des Organismus,” or of how the “ganz wundervolles symbolische Gewebe verflochtene Harmonie” of a language approached the unity of a work of art, display the same pleasure in seeing wholes emerge from parts that delighted Alexander in landscape physiognomies.<sup>11</sup> For Wilhelm, the complementary play of objective and subjective took place in language

<sup>7</sup> F. Max Mueller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1873), p. 261.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Henry Jordan, *Comparative Religion: Its Genres and Growth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905), pp. 30–61.

<sup>9</sup> A. von Humboldt, *Ansichten der Natur*, pp. ix, xi.

<sup>10</sup> A. von Humboldt, *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* [1845–1862], ed. Ottmar Ette and Oliver Lubrich (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 2004), vol. 2, pp. 189, 234.

<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechtes” [1830–35] in *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, pp. 368–756, on p. 396.

itself. Only language could display the shared, objective world of observation and concepts and simultaneously reinforce the subjective feelings of interlocutors. This interplay of objectivity and subjectivity was the “am schönsten aber und seelenvollsten” expression of the individuality of a language.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the brothers Humboldt were steeped in exactly the kind of classical *Bildung* Güthenke describes so well as the seedbed of the longing for the lost beloved of Greco-Roman antiquity. But they were not alone in mapping the opposition of objectivity versus subjectivity onto that of science versus art. In an 1853 lecture on Goethe’s scientific work, the great physicist and physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz contrasted the abstract concepts of science with the “unmittelbaren geistigen Anschauung” of the artist. Goethe’s view of nature as *Kunstwerk* had served him well in his morphological studies in botany and anatomy but in Helmholtz’s opinion had betrayed him in his optical investigations.<sup>13</sup> Helmholtz worried Goethe like a terrier with a bone in subsequent lectures: how to resolve the seeming paradox of a genial career that combined both art and science, which Helmholtz and his contemporaries now conceived as two diametrically opposed ways of knowing?<sup>14</sup> Artistic and scientific proclivities once intertwined in the careers of Leonardo or Galileo or Linnaeus seemed increasingly immiscible by the mid nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Those who openly rebelled against such polar oppositions, including Ernst Haeckel among the scientists and Friedrich Nietzsche among the philologists, became outcasts from their respective disciplines.

My point in drawing attention to these comparisons is not to mount an argument of influence in either direction but simply to point out a common context for the categories, vocabulary, and tensions Güthenke analyzes so perceptively in the work of the German classical philologists. There is undoubtedly something highly specific about the love of the classical philologists for their subject matter: Darwin may have loved his beetles and barnacles, but never with anything like the passion Winckelmann or even Wilamowitz felt for the Greeks. You can be devoted

<sup>12</sup> W. von Humboldt, “Über den Nationalcharakter der Sprachen,” in *Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, pp. 64–81, on p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Hermann von Helmholtz, “Über Goethe’s naturwissenschaftliche Arbeiten” [1853], in Helmholtz, *Vorträge und Reden*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (Braunschweig: Friedrich Vieweg und Sohn, 1896), vol. 1, pp. 25–47, on p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Hermann von Helmholtz, “Goethe’s Vorahnungen kommender naturwissenschaftlicher Ideen” [1892], in *Vorträge und Reden*, vol. 2, pp. 335–61, on pp. 339–40.

<sup>15</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007), pp. 37, 246–7.

to earthworms or medusae or nebulae or even electromagnetic fields, but no one has ever fallen in love with them. Yet despite the obvious differences in degree of emotional intensity and, still more obviously, subject matter, there are striking commonalities in the way various nineteenth-century sciences, natural and human, reasoned, reflected, and felt about their objects of inquiry — and about inquiry itself. I have already alluded to shared assumptions about organic unity, shared ambivalence about artistic flashes of intuition, and shared oppositions between objectivity and subjectivity. There was also a shared cult of arduous research that bordered on obsession. Novels like Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) or Honoré de Balzac's *La recherche de l'absolu* (1834) dramatized the dangerous monomania of the scientist, which competes with and ultimately destroys his loved ones. More prosaically, the biographies, autobiographies, and family memoirs of nineteenth-century scholars and scientists document a *libido sciendi* that overwhelmed all other emotional ties. A shared emotional economy — or rather excess — undergirded all of the *Wissenschaften*. In its broad outlines, Güthenke's account holds for a larger learned community beyond the classical philologists.

Why this should be the case, especially in a period that also witnessed a self-conscious sharpening of the distinction between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften* in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, Helmholtz, and others, is a puzzle. Güthenke is surely right to insist on the peculiarly though not exclusively German flavor of concepts like *Bildung* and individuality and indeed objectivity and subjectivity, at least in the first half of the nineteenth century. But the Germans had no monopoly on philhellenism or on a school curriculum for elite young men that granted classics pride of place: English public schools and French *lycées* in this respect marched shoulder to shoulder with German *Gymnasia*. Even the scientists, who from the 1870s onward campaigned in all three countries for the introduction of more natural science and mathematics into school curricula, clung to older ideals of humanistic education. Not to know Greek or at least Latin was to surrender one's credentials as an educated man, the ultimate *déclassement*, even for a physicist like Helmholtz.

But anxiety about status could hardly have by itself generated the *Berufsethos* that drove so many nineteenth-century scholars and scientists to the brink of nervous collapse through over-work and infused their

correspondence (and their notoriously savage polemics)<sup>16</sup> with such warmth and such venom. Historians of science and scholarship have established the seminal role of the seminar in institutionalizing advanced training and research ideals in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German universities.<sup>17</sup> Pioneered by philologists and historians and soon imitated by physicists and chemists, the seminar was at once an apprenticeship in research techniques, whether *Quellenkritik* or precision measurement, and a socialization into the values of the discipline. Although we still know far too little about what actually happened in the seminar, it seems to have left a deep imprint upon the psyches as well as the subsequent publications of participants. Describing the initiation of the seminarians into research methods, classical philologist Hermann Diels also emphasized the strong personal bonds forged between teacher and students and among students: “Dabei soll ein gegenseitiges Nehmen und Geben zwischen Lehrer und Schülern stattfinden. Das belebt den Mut der Neophyten und schlingt unsichtbare Fäden des Vertrauens zwischen den Teilnehmern eines solchen Thiasos.”<sup>18</sup> Here Diels rang the changes on the Greek word *Thiasos*, a religious confraternity but also a troop of warriors, a Bacchic rite, or a festive gathering — a symposium.

In Diels’ description glints at least the beginning of an answer to the puzzles of why disciplines persist in narrating their histories in terms of bloodlines and lifelines and also why key aspects of Güthenke’s account can be generalized to disciplines beyond classical philology, despite the indisputable peculiarities of the latter. Since the late Middle Ages universities had self-consciously adopted the language of ersatz family relationships to strengthen the ties connecting master and student, university and alumni;<sup>19</sup> we still use the terms *Doktorvater* and *alma mater*. The seminar hijacked and sometimes even literalized (all those

<sup>16</sup> Glenn W. Most, “One Hundred Years of Fractiousness: Disciplining Polemics in Nineteenth-Century German Scholarship,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 127 (1997), pp. 349–61.

<sup>17</sup> R. Steven Turner, “Historicism, *Kritik*, and the Prussian Professoriate, 1790–1840,” in *Philologie et herméneutique au 19e siècle*, ed. M. Bollack and H. Wismann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 450–89; Kathryn Olesko, *Physics as a Calling: Discipline and Practice in the Königsberg Seminar for Physics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); William Clark, *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 173–9, 219–27.

<sup>18</sup> Hermann Diels, *Die Organisation der Wissenschaft* [1906] (Heidelberg: Spektrum, 1993), p. 654.

<sup>19</sup> Chiara Crisciani, “Teachers and Learners in Scholastic Medicine: Some Images and Metaphors,” *History of Universities* 15 (1997–99), pp. 75–101.



sons-in-law) family feeling, albeit in a weirdly all-male fashion. Sentiments of brotherly camaraderie (and fierce sibling rivalry), filial devotion (and Oedipal resentment), tribal loyalty (and pugnacity toward other tribes) were re-channeled into the collective project of research in the *thiasos*. Güthenke notes love and friendship among communities of scholars as recurring themes (pp. 69, 135 et *passim*). Often the intensity of commitment to the ersatz family of the seminar collided with commitment to real families, a conflict still all too familiar to scholars and scientists everywhere. Historian Leopold Ranke was incensed when the participants in his advanced research seminar, which met daily in his Berlin apartment, wanted to take Christmas Eve off to be with their families.<sup>20</sup> Writing approximately 150 years later, the British biologist Peter Medawar warned the spouses of scientists that “men or women who go to the extreme length of marrying a scientist should be clearly aware beforehand, before learning the hard way after, that their spouses are in the grip of a powerful obsession that is likely to take the first place in their lives outside the home, and probably inside too.”<sup>21</sup> We are heirs to the profoundly effective and affective socialization of the research seminar — and to the implicit bloodline model of family ties and descent that is the emotional key to its success.

The seminar recast values as well as loyalties in a disciplinary mold. Then as now those values were personalized: not only in the person of the teacher but also in the biographies of the discipline’s pantheon. Or rather in the biographical anecdotes, though these often pass for mere gossip. Historians of science and scholarship disdain the anecdotal lore, most of it apocryphal or at least unverified, that enlivens disciplinary history, without ever pausing to ask why there’s so much of it. Yes, it’s mythology, not history, but it’s powerful mythology, each anecdote attached to the name of a luminary in the discipline’s history and each a parable of how/how not to behave as a paid-up practitioner. Physicists tell stories about brilliant solutions scribbled on the back of a napkin during a beery night out; philosophers recount the Socratic one-liners that flummoxed the distinguished visiting colloquium speaker; historians revel in the elaborate note-taking techniques of the doyens of their field. There are also cautionary tales. Every graduate student in history hears about promising careers blighted by a faked footnote; their counterparts in the lab sciences are admonished with grim accounts of very senior figures

<sup>20</sup> Kaspar Eskildssen, “Leopold Ranke, la passion de la critique et le séminaire d’histoire,” in Christian Jacob, ed., *Lieux de savoir: Espaces et communautés* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007), pp. 462–82.

<sup>21</sup> P.B. Medawar, *Advice to a Young Scientist* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 22.

drummed out of the field in disgrace because of a fudged experiment. These anecdotes are not biographies, but every single one of them is attached to a real, often famous name in the field. In many ways, they make their point about disciplinary values more memorably than any full-dress biography could: like fables and jokes, they are short, punchy, and shorn of extraneous detail. No wonder individual lifelines, despite (or rather because of) the fact that they are mythologized, dominate disciplinary historiography, once again echoing the lore imbibed in the seminar.

At the conclusion to her thoughtful and thought-provoking book, Güthenke muses over an alternative model for doing classical philology: less empathy, more distance; less personality, more context; less *eros*, more *Freude*. Perhaps, she suggests, a cool admiration for the intricate mechanism of the life-like automaton, one of Hephaestus's marvels of the forge, might replace necrophilia for the beautiful lost beloved in a post-human age. "The reflections that finish this study are intended to ask whether there are ways instead to maintain distance without balancing it by a language of longing for reunification, revitalization, or closeness" (p. 196). Certainly, approaches emphasizing the pastness of the past and the explanatory power of context have borne fruit throughout the humanities, including classics, in the past twenty years, and we could all do with a *fröhliche Wissenschaft*. But I am not sanguine about getting rid of the *eros*, any more than I am about some other form of pedagogy replacing the seminar, that extraordinary engine of training and socialization. To lavish attention on arcana, whether the poems of Pindar or the flight paths of bees, for hours and months and years on end, is to saturate these objects with value and with affective meaning. Other images and metaphors may well replace those of resuscitating the dead beloved, but emotionally detached attention to our lifelong objects of inquiry will remain an oxymoron.

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