

TEXTS AND UNREFRACTED FACTS: PHILOLOGY, HERMENEUTICS AND SEMIOTICS

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There are no facts; only interpretations.

— Nietzsche

Interpretation can never be brought to an end, simply because there is nothing to interpret. There is nothing absolutely primary to be interpreted, since fundamentally everything is already interpretation; every sign is, in itself, not the thing susceptible to interpretation but the interpretation of other signs.

— Foucault

The title of their national professional association still gives American classicists the assurance that “philology” is their middle name. But within our ranks, there is diminishing agreement on the precise range of practices legitimately embraced by the term, and, outside our ranks in the world at large, it signifies, among the precious few who have ever heard it, a dead or dying thing. That was not always the case. Its parameters, less than a century ago, were proud indeed. In the *Encyclopedia Britannica* prior to its 1926 edition, the huge entry on philology began like this: “*Philology*: the generally accepted comprehensive name for the study of the word (Greek, *logos*) or languages; it designates that branch of knowledge which deals with human speech, and with all that speech discloses as to the nature and history of man.” By contrast, the article in the 1926 edition, carried up until the most recent revision of the *Britannica*, reads like an obituary: “*Philology*: a term now rarely used but once applied to the study of language and literature. It survives in the titles of a few learned journals that date to the 19th century. See *Linguistics*.”

The profound change expressed in the transition between those two texts grounds the urgency that led me to the present essay. It began with a simple and finite, perhaps naive goal: to observe the general character of and relationships among classical philology, hermeneutics and semiotics. It was going to start by asking what I once thought would be some not too intractable questions. *First*: Why has American classical philology

so relentlessly and, I must say, successfully resisted the inroads of current methodological concern arising out of ongoing philosophical reflection and interdisciplinary dialogue, a concern which has had such profound and in some cases divisive effects on all other literary fields, including scriptural studies, and even, though to a lesser extent, on historical studies? And why, amidst this general disregard, is semiotics a special object of revulsion — or is “revulsion” too strong a word for what might better be construed as a conspiracy of silence? If this ‘hold-out’ position in our discipline were deliberate, as I do not believe that it is — if, in other words, it were the product of informed reflection and open dialogue, it might now become even more stubbornly entrenched by experiencing something like exoner-ation in the current, not imperceptible shift in literary studies outside our discipline — paralleling those in politics, economics and cultural criticism — away from structural and post-structural perspectives and formats toward traditional claims for philosophical realism, humanism, ‘determinacy of meaning,’ normativeness of authorial intention, and the primacy of ob-jectivity found especially in the works of E. D. Hirsch, M. H. Abrams, and most recently Gerald Graff, whose book, *Literature Against Itself*, has been reviewed with symptomatic favor based more upon its opportune-ness than upon the quality of its argument *per se*.

A *second* and related question, posed to assist in answering the first: Why did classical philology, which was so intimately associated with hermeneutics in the early nineteenth century that at one stage they were virtually indistinguishable, find itself by the latter half of the century and right up to the present far removed from the development, concerns, and goals of hermeneutics? (One would have thought, parenthetically, that philology’s resistance to method — one thinks immediately of Housman’s and Wilamowitz’s diatribes against it¹ — should on the surface have at-tracted it to the fairly consistent anti-methodist tendency in hermeneutics.)

A *third* question: Why did a similar marriage and divorce occur, this time involving anthropology around the turn of the twentieth century with the work of Frazer and the so-called Cambridge School of anthro-pology? As soon, it appears, as anthropology begins to develop what it considers more rigorous standards and methodologies than those employed in the nineteenth century, or at least to become increasingly reflective about its epistemological perspectives and cultural assumptions, the clas-sical community parts company, later to rejoin the dialogue, but then only in France on anything like a regular and fully countenanced basis.

A *fourth* question, posed here with perhaps too undisguised rhetoric were I intent on maintaining any illusion of scientific objectivity: Why has

the discipline of classical studies, with a reverse alchemy both relentless and lunatic, seeking lead for gold, consistently favored the conversion of philosophy into the *history* of philosophy, rhetoric into the *history* of rhetoric, texts into the *history* of texts, mythic narratives into *historical* 'evidence'? And in translation (which is, after all, practical hermeneutics), why has it preferred, at least since the mid-nineteenth century, the literal and the prosaic? (Charting the course of any random passage of Homer from Chapman [1591] through Dryden [1693], Pope [1715], Cowper [1791] to Lang, Leaf and Myers [1883] is like ending a sumptuous feast with a dessert of thin gruel.)

I should perhaps make it clear that my first question, on the resistance of classical studies to current methodological discussion, has mainly to do with the American scene, not only because I can claim no intimate knowledge other than of it, but also because its resistance is acknowledged to be more entrenched. Part of the reason for this may well be that we American classicists, unlike our European counterparts, are physically removed from the stage where the latest scenes in the continuing history of epistemology and philosophical hermeneutics are being enacted, while our American colleagues in other European literary disciplines have at least this advantage on us, that their subject area includes a more or less continuous literary history right up to the present which parallels and frequently intersects the history of European philosophy. Furthermore, I should not wish to be misunderstood as asserting that there are no American classicists interested in or influenced by contemporary theoretical developments. Far from it. There is some first-rate work being done, some of it by people in this very volume. What I am talking about is rather the general character of the discipline, the way in which it is defined by the content and form of the curriculum in its graduate training,² by the character of its professional associations, by its longest established and most prestigious journals. On this last point, were one to page through the *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, the *American Journal of Philology*, and *Classical Philology* over, say, the last ten years, it might be assumed, for all their contents show, that there was little interest in philosophy after Plotinus, that there was little interest in anthropology after, say, 1920; that there was no need to reflect openly on the presuppositions and assumptions of one's method (or lack of method); that the whole complex of twentieth-century developments in philosophy of language, phenomenology, epistemology, and historical understanding had been disregarded as irrelevant to the practical determination of verbal meaning and the reconstruction of the past. The hermeneutist of the thirty-

fifth century, faced with these texts, might well wonder how the intellectual successors of Richard Bentley, at whose home John Evelyn, Christopher Wren, John Locke, and Isaac Newton met twice weekly, should give so consistent evidence of speaking to no one but members of their own profession.

Among many such indices of how narrowly the profession is defined is the fact that twenty years ago an American university press rejected a translation of Nietzsche's *Wir Philologen* on the grounds that it would antagonize the profession!

Before going on, I should like to point out that this whole subject of how the profession is defined in terms of its cognitive system, its privileged methodologies and subjects, the effect on it of external circumstances (political, economic, social) is a topic for an entire study, a topic at which the present essay, I am afraid, only occasionally nibbles. The 'sociology of knowledge' (as it is called) for our profession would investigate not only the knowledge which it develops, teaches, and disseminates, but also other types of knowledge which play a role in its functioning, in particular, 'political knowledge' in administration as well as 'common-sense' knowledge and what might be called "knowledge of the Other and the We" (Gurvitch 63). Such a study would surely find that knowledge as conceived and taught in the profession, as generally in the universities where it is lodged, remains partly esoteric, hermetic and traditional, and that, paradoxically, the very institutions expected to stimulate and advance these important types of knowledge often arrest its progress and retard or limit its diffusion, quite without any deliberate intention, but simply by their very functioning. We might also find in our profession something analogous to what Georges Gurvitch (64) points out about the larger context of the universities, namely that, if we consider the other types of knowledge involved in their internal life, such as political and common-sense knowledge, we note that they rarely correspond to the level of the knowledge being taught, and that "the professors who are rightly considered to be the most eminent scholars are not necessarily those whose authority is dominant . . . when questions of administration are under consideration." This would suggest that there is always likely to be a cautious attitude toward innovation in institutions devoted to knowledge in which the conceptual, the symbolic, the collective, and the rational predominate. The question would still remain, however, as to why our profession gives the appearance (probably corresponding to the reality) of being the most conservative in a constitutionally conservative institution — conservative in a way that in the eyes of some observers would sufficiently explain the otherwise curious survival of Classics against the

assaults of budgetary stringency in academic institutions, despite the premium these institutions and their supporting culture place (at least in their public rhetoric) on "relevance." It might be argued that by resisting or ignoring methodological reflection, the profession escapes internal disruption, "makes no waves," excites no fears of rebellion or revolution, tolerates no Marxists or few, renews and reiterates from year to year in quieter ways the canonization of Wilamowitz and the excommunication of Nietzsche. Is it that Classics resists semiotics because the latter inevitably makes ideology explicit? I shall return to that question later.

In an earlier article,³ I thought that I had a partial answer to my first question, at least so far as paedagogic matters were concerned. I suggested what I took to be the greatest source of suspicion or reserve among classicists when it comes to structuralism, semiotics, and the intellectual movements generated by them. That source of suspicion was the traditional position of classical studies in America, especially at the undergraduate level, near the center of a liberal arts education best characterized by its humanism. That humanism appeared to be undermined by the dissolution of the human subject inherent in structuralism. At both the paedagogic and scholarly level, even those prepared to be open-minded about structuralism (not to speak of the opportunists) tended to concentrate on examples of its clever virtuosity, its pyrotechnics, without adverting to its (at least superficially) anti-humanistic implications, best summed up in these statements of Lévi-Strauss:

Men do not think in myths; myths think in men without their knowing it.⁴

Sound humanism does not begin with oneself, but puts the world before life, life before man, and respect for others before self-interest.⁵

Starting from ethnographic experience, I have always aimed at drawing up an inventory of mental patterns, to reduce apparently arbitrary data to some kind of order, and to attain a level at which a kind of necessity becomes apparent, underlying the illusion of liberty If it were possible to prove . . . that the apparent arbitrariness of the mind, its supposed spontaneous flow of inspiration, and its seemingly uncontrolled inventiveness imply the existence of laws operating at a deeper level, we would inevi-

ably be forced to conclude that when the mind is left to commune with itself and no longer has to come to terms with objects, it is in a sense reduced to imitating itself as object; and that since the laws governing its operation are not fundamentally different from those it exhibits in its other functions, it shows itself to be of the nature of a thing among things.⁶

Parenthetically, we should note that along with the dissolution of the subject and of humanism goes a pair of critical terms dear to traditional humanistic literary criticism: *originality* and *creativity*. What, if anything, they could mean in a structuralist and post-structuralist context would require radical re-examination.⁷

If all this were not enough to chill the blood of traditional humanists, there was yet more to be apprehensive about. When all was said and done, Lévi-Strauss' ideas might be classified as really not so radical, but just another form of "lost-world" Rousseauvian romanticism — a tenacious mythic component of liberal academic thought, which views the world of "mythic man" as one in which every frustrated longing of the West is fulfilled and all its ills removed. But the grim logic of his position would be carried a step further by Jacques Derrida, who articulates the uncomfortable implications of a form of interpretation which "affirms free-play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology . . . has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and end of the game."⁸ What this "free-play" will produce in the vacuum of discredited humanistic values causes even Derrida, the chief architect of deconstructionism, to set himself in the company of those who "turn their eyes away in the face of the as yet unnameable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the non-species, in the formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity."⁹

If classicists were to be faulted for turning their back on a dialogue so fearfully oriented, how much more their colleagues in other disciplines who, with perilous detachment in their pursuit of it, appeared to be unconcerned about its disruptive effect on education and society. Furthermore, unless I was here being too generous in my judgment, some of the soberer minds in classical studies may have divined that structuralism, within classical ranks and without, was becoming *interpretation*, not on its own momentum, but with concepts derived from psychoanalysis and Marxism or

old New Criticism, with the re-insertion, sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle, of the 'world' and of 'history' into what was supposed to be a system sealed off from 'world' and 'history,' constituted out of differences and oppositions independently of the observer.¹⁰ So handled, structuralism gave all the appearance, at worst, of irresponsible trifling, and at best, of a fashionable overlay for existing critical practice.

The task still remains of overcoming this resistance in our discipline to the study of structure, of code, of *langue* in Saussure's terminology. The humanism and historicism which the discipline cultivates, not simply as points of pride, but as defining and inalienable characteristics, need not necessarily be sacrificed to the study of an ahistorical, synchronic system, which is unintended, virtual, anonymous, compulsory, unconscious. Some classicists give the impression of believing that such a study necessarily denies the efficacy or value of what they have traditionally tended to concentrate on and what Saussure calls *parole* — concrete, actual, conscious, intended, individual, literary utterance. It has not been easy to convince such people that there is something incomplete about the study of intentional language — Hirsch makes author's intended meaning the norm of correctness in interpretation — which is not preceded by an analysis of function and of system. Intention seeks means, means have to do with function, and function has to do with system. The analysis of what one wishes (or wished) to do with a thing must start, therefore, with an inventory of its virtual uses and limitations. The analysis of system, or the synchronic approach, is logically prior to a diachronic approach because systems are more intelligible than changes. Careful attention to system will, for example, keep us from assuming that what an author *effects* is necessarily what he *intends*. For he may misuse language against his designs. And, since language at the level of *langue* is exuberant, he may effect more than his limited intention.

The literary artifact, furthermore, insofar as it survives its original conditions, leads an unintended existence in an unpredictably altered state of its own language and literary materials (images, symbols, narrative effects, etc.). Poetic discourse (perhaps all discourse) has no privileged single meaning, but is polysemous. It deliberately exploits the radical ambiguity that lurks as a potentiality at the heart of all discourse. About this ambiguity and about the role of historical understanding in hermeneutical enquiry I should like to have had more room to speak. My main point here, however, is that it is the analysis of language insofar as it transcends an individual user's control, whether as prior impersonal code or as subsequent, surviving polysemous text, which needs to find a more comfortable place in contemporary classical studies, but which meets formidable obstacles in

certain of the discipline's entrenched positions: (1) its view of language as mere instrument, constituted wholly by an autonomous subject, in no sense constituting that subject; (2) its epistemologically naive realism, coupled with a view of language as a representation of things, not as a "closed" system, in which the meaning of a word results from its opposition to other lexical units within the system, with no uncontested relations to external, non-semiotic reality;¹¹ (3) its deep suspicion of 'unconscious meaning,' of meaning thought to underlie the literal one, and of the iconoclasm presumed to infect all hermeneutics and to demolish our conscious, unreflective, conventional view of reality the way that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud exhort us to do; (4) its further suspicion of the presumed impoverishment of meaning resulting from structural and semiotic approaches; (5) its belief in an 'objective' interpretation of the past, "achieved only by exclusive reliance on 'evidence,' unaware that in classics, as in life, the significance of isolated phenomena is accessible only to a unified interpretative vision which must have some positive source outside the phenomena themselves,"¹² — anything else being an *unconscious* importation of one's own presuppositions and prejudices; (6) the myth of "disinterested scholarship," in contrast to the view expressed by the anthropologist Rodney Needham, when he declares that "no humane discipline, however rigorous, should fail to evoke from students some sharp sense of the quandary of existence, and if it does not do this it is trivial scholarship and morally insignificant."¹³

In the search for reassurance that this state of the profession was not irreversible, I thought I might find some clue to its intellectual reclusiveness in the history of its development in the nineteenth century. At this time, I happened to be rereading Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* (entitled, in its English translation, *The Order of Things* — a title which Foucault prefers). For all the acknowledged shortcomings and overhasty generalizations of that book, I now believe that a history of classical studies, written along Foucault's line, will provide the only proper response to the questions I began by asking. This will not be a book like Sandys' or Wilamowitz's or Pfeiffer's *History of Classical Scholarship*, but an "archaeology of classical philology," matching Foucault's "archaeology of the human sciences" (his subtitle for *Les mots et les choses*) — an analysis of the set of rules of formation that determine the conditions of possibility for all that can be said within the discourse of a particular discipline at any given time. What Foucault purports to do is to present three types of knowledge — the knowledge of living beings (natural history/biology), the knowledge of the laws of language (general grammar/philology), and the knowledge of economic facts (analysis of wealth/political economics), in relation to the philosophi-

cal and epistemological discourse that was contemporary with them, during a period extending from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. What Foucault is after is a “positive unconscious” of knowledge, “a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse.” “Unknown to themselves,” Foucault claims, “the naturalists, economists, and grammarians [of the period in question] employed the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form their concepts, to build their theories. It is these rules of formation, which were never formulated in their own right, but are to be found only in widely differing theories, concepts, and objects of study, that I have tried to reveal, by isolating, as their specific locus, a level that I have called, somewhat arbitrarily perhaps, archaeological” (xi). Foucault’s focus of attention is the so-called “Classical” period beginning in the mid-seventeenth century and terminating with the eighteenth century, but this analysis is framed by his description of what he terms the underlying *episteme* of the Renaissance on the far side, as of the modern period on the near side (beginning, for Foucault, somewhere between 1790 and 1810 and lasting until 1950). The date 1950 is significant: just as the epistemic configurations of the Classical period were inaccessible to analysis until they began to crumble and yield to new ones, so, Foucault believes, we are able to analyze our own epistemic presuppositions because “the archaeological ground is once more moving under our feet” (xxiv).

Briefly stated — too briefly for a thesis as complex as Foucault’s — and limited here to the knowledge associated with language, this is how he characterizes the epistemic configurations of each of these periods.¹⁴ The Renaissance is seen as ruled by the role of *resemblance* in constructing and organizing knowledge. As Foucault puts it (17),

it was resemblance that largely guided exegesis and the interpretation of texts: it was resemblance that organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them. The universe was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man. Painting imitated space. And representation — whether in the service of pleasure or of knowledge — was posited as a form of repetition: the theatre of life or the mirror of nature, that was the claim made by all language, its manner of declaring its existence and of formulating its right of speech.

This system of resemblances was thought of as inscribed in the universe itself in the form of signs requiring decipherment or interpretation, whether these came from the observation of natural phenomena, magical practices, sacred scripture, or the writings of Greek and Roman antiquity. Foucault cites a Renaissance naturalist's treatise as an example of this consubstantial quality of knowledge. In Aldrovandi's *Historia serpentum et draconum*, the chapter "On the Serpent in General" is arranged under the following headings: Equivocation (which means the various meanings of the word *serpent*), synonyms and etymologies, differences, form and description, anatomy, nature and habits, temperament, coitus and generation, voice, movements, places, diet, physiognomy, antipathy, sympathy, modes of capture, death and wounds caused by the serpent, modes and signs of poisoning, remedies, epithets, denominations, prodigies and presages, monsters, mythology, gods to which it is dedicated, fables, allegories and mysteries, hieroglyphics, emblems and symbols, proverbs, coinage, miracles, riddles, devices, heraldic signs, historical facts, dreams, simulacra and statues, use in human diet, use in medicine, miscellaneous uses (Foucault 39).

Such a system of signs was understood essentially as the Stoics had expressed it, namely as a triune figure containing the signifier, the signified, and the "conjuncture" of resemblance that joined them together (to which, incidentally, Foucault improperly applies the Stoic term *τυγχάνων*). Language is not conceived of as a totality of independent signs but rather "an opaque mysterious thing . . . which combines here and there with the forms of the world and becomes interwoven with them: so much so that all these elements, taken together, form a network of marks in which each of them may play, and does in fact play, in relation to all of the others, the role of content or of sign, that of secret or of indicator" (34) — "an unbroken tissue of words and signs, of accounts and characters, of discourse and forms" (40).

We should note in passing that classical scholarship during this period largely takes the form of the collection and reproduction of past notes, virtually free of what we would call criticism, textual or literary.¹⁵

In the seventeenth century, the arrangement of signs becomes, in Foucault's view, binary, constituted by signifier and signified, but the link between them, which in the Renaissance had been real even if however hidden, is now considered arbitrary, a matter of *representation* rather than of resemblance. The world is no longer itself a language; language itself is separated from the world; and resemblance, once the source and guarantor of knowledge, becomes in the seventeenth century an occasion of error, a charming but unenlightened hodge-podge not yet arrived in the age of reason, of measurement, of order, of newly established empirical fields.

The question of the sign's arbitrary relation to the object represented is raised, along with the question of its separation from its presumed natural origin in spontaneous cries emitted by primitive man. A theory of derivation emerges to take account of the capacity of words to migrate from their original signification (the most obvious form of which is thought to be onomatopoeia), as well as to take account of their capacity to expand or contract meaning, to shift sounds, and even to disappear altogether.¹⁶

The end of this Classical age coincides with the decline of representation and the characterization of all empirical knowledge as an ordering of things by means of signs based upon identity and difference. This ordering governed the theories of language, of living beings, and of the exchange of wealth. What transforms the foundations of knowledge at the end of the eighteenth century as profoundly as they had been transformed at the outset of the Classical age? It is the concept of *History*. What the notion of Order was to Classical thought History becomes for modern thought: History, not in the sense of mere description of events, but as the fundamental arrangements of knowledge, involving notions of time, development, becoming, common to all the empirical sciences that arose at the end of the eighteenth century. The world is now seen to be composed, not of isolated elements related by identity and difference, but of *organic* structures, of internal relations between elements whose totality performs a function. This notion of function gives time a critical role, whereas for Classical thought it was conceived only as intervening from the outside in otherwise timeless structures. This is how Foucault describes this new dimension (219):

History . . . becomes divided, in accordance with an ambiguity that is probably impossible to control, into an empirical science of events and that radical mode of being that prescribes their destiny to all empirical beings, to those particular beings that we are. . . . In the nineteenth century, philosophy was to reside in the gap between history and History. . . . It will be Metaphysics, therefore, but only insofar as it is Memory, and it will necessarily lead back to the question of knowing what it means for thought to have a history. This question was to bear down on philosophy, heavily and tirelessly, from Hegel to Nietzsche and beyond.

In the study of language, the focal notion of the transformation from the analysis of general grammar to the new philology was *inflection*.

This notion was not new; until the end of the eighteenth century inflectional modifications were seen as a representational mechanism (for example, the letters *m*, *s*, *t*, in the endings of the Latin verb were considered to *represent* the first, second and third persons). With the collapse of representation, however, inflection becomes evidence in a new view of languages as no longer a single unchanging entity, but as a plurality of “living, changing organisms possessed of a history, a dark, internal structure” (Sheridan 67). The meaning of a word is seen as deriving from the particular history that determines its formation and alteration in the course of time and its function as one element of a complicated structure. Having lost its primal function as the medium in which signs originate and things can be known, language is seen as folding in upon itself, becoming one object of knowledge among others. But as the necessary medium of scientific discourse, it seemed to require purging of all its alien, subjective elements, of individual will and energy, to become free of error, uncertainty and supposition. Alongside this quest for linguistic objectivity came the search for a metalanguage independent of natural languages, a pure, symbolic logic.¹⁷ Language, having thus lost its classical transparency, returned to the mysterious density it enjoyed in the Renaissance (but without its intimate connection to reality); it became once again a problem, a barrier, demanding interpretation and exegesis. “The first book of *Das Kapital*,” Foucault says (298),

is an exegesis of ‘value’; all Nietzsche is an exegesis of a few Greek words; Freud, the exegesis of all those unspoken phrases that support and at the same time undermine our apparent discourse, our phantasies, our dreams, our bodies. Philology, as the analysis of what is said in the depths of discourse, has become the modern form of criticism. Where, at the end of the eighteenth century, it was a matter of fixing the frontiers of knowledge, it will now be one of seeking to destroy syntax, to shatter tyrannical modes of speech, to turn words around in order to perceive all that is being said through them and despite them.

In a nutshell, language reacquires its density, engendering two projects: one, the attempt to overcome that density (the scientific enterprise), and the other to explore it (philology, interpretation, criticism). And the very notion of ‘literature’ is born, or at least a radically new realization of what it is. “Literature,” says Foucault, “is the contestation of philology (of which it is nevertheless the twin figure): it leads language back from

grammar to the naked power of speech, and there it encounters the untamed, imperious being of words." In the nineteenth century, and particularly from the Romantics on, literature, says Foucault, "becomes detached from all the values that were able to keep it in general circulation during the Classical age (taste, pleasure, naturalness, truth), and creates within its own space everything that will ensure a ludic denial of them (the scandalous, the ugly, the impossible); it breaks with the whole definition of *genres* as forms adapted to an order of representations, and becomes merely a manifestation of a language which has no other law than that of affirming — in opposition to all other forms of discourse — its own precipitous existence" (300).

It is important to note that it was Nietzsche, a classical philologist, who first explicitly associated the task of philosophy with a radical reflection on language. To him, and behind him to the re-arrangement of knowledge in the collapse of representation a century and a half ago, we owe our ineradicable preoccupation with language — giving shape to the discussion which constitutes the present volume of *Arethusa* — forcing such questions as:

What is language? What is a sign? What is unspoken in the world, in our gestures, in the whole enigmatic heraldry of our behavior, our dreams, our sicknesses — does all that speak, and if so in what language and in obedience to what grammar? Is everything significant, and, if not, what is, and for whom, and in accordance with what rules? What relation is there between language and being, and is it really to being that language is always addressed — at least language that speaks truly? What, then, is this language that says nothing, is never silent, and is called 'literature'? (Foucault 306).

As I have suggested, we need a radical rewriting of the history of our own discipline against the background sketched by Foucault. Only then, if at all, shall we be in a position to understand what has shaped classical studies fairly consistently by opposition to the great changes in epistemic suppositions that have occurred since the Classical age, and which hardly seem reversible. The philosophical questions about language and about interpretation that come at the end of that process can be ignored only by massive repression or gross cynicism. I started this discussion with some sweeping, tentative, largely impressionistic remarks on the absence of our profession from the interdisciplinary forum in which these questions

are openly addressed. Would a close reading of the history of classical studies after Foucault's model support a hypothesis which sees our field as operating with the *episteme* of his Classical age, with a view of language as transparent representation, with a rationalism that would see itself threatened by Nietzsche's invitation to a radical reflection on language and, later, by an anthropology which would eventually accumulate empirical evidence calculated to undermine still further a viewpoint claiming its basis in universal reason and starting with the axiom that "the accidental truths of history can never become proofs of the necessary truths of reason" (Lessing in Palmer 38)? Would our Foucauldian reading of classical scholarship further disclose why, in the nineteenth-century bifurcation of history into empirical description of events on the one side, and, on the other, the epistemological question of what it means for thought to have a history, classical studies, doubtless in large part stimulated by the explosive growth of archaeology, would generally follow the primrose path of unrefracted fact.¹⁸ Foucault's analysis, incidentally, shows how the epistemic transformation between the Classical age and the modern moves through two distinct stages: the first, an endeavor to fit new concepts to the lingering system of representation; the second, the abandonment of representation altogether. Would it be too distorted a picture to represent classical studies as arrested somewhere between these two stages?

If this is a true representation, if our profession feels obliged to maintain a world view based upon a set of badly damaged assumptions, rather than to contemplate what I earlier referred to as the unstable vacuum left in the wake of discredited humanistic values, then we can, I think, begin to see why semiotics may be most inimical to the profession. For semiotics makes ideology explicit, may even be said to have this as its aim. (Indeed, it is for this reason that it should come as no surprise when, as not infrequently happens, semioticians incur the Marxist label, whether *they* call themselves that or not.) Semiotics, it seems to me, cannot avoid unmasking the process, to which language is ever open, of naturalizing what is historical and arbitrary, and of essentializing the contingent. Roland Barthes has been indefatigable in describing this process, as in this passage from *Système de la mode* (295):¹⁹

On the one hand, it seems that every society engages in an endless activity to penetrate the real with signification and constitute strongly and subtly organized semiological systems by converting things into signs, the sensible into the signifying; on the other hand, once these systems are

constituted (or more exactly, in the course of their constitution), men engage in an equal activity to mask their systematic nature, to reconvert the semantic relationship into a natural or rational one.

Umberto Eco also sees semiotics as designed to unmask this process. In his magisterial *Theory of Semiotics*, after defining ideology as “a message which starts with a factual description, and then tries to justify it theoretically, gradually being accepted by society through a process of overcoding” (290), he goes on to observe that semiotics or “a theory of codes (which looks so independent from the *actual* world, naming its states through signs), demonstrates its heuristic and practical power, for it reveals, by showing the hidden interconnections of a given cultural system, the ways in which the labor of sign production can respect or betray the complexity of such a cultural network, thereby adapting it to (or separating it from) *the human labor of transforming stages of the world*” (297, emphasis added). In the last sentence of his book he says: “Semiotics (in its double guise as a theory of codes and a theory of sign production) is also a form of *social criticism*, and therefore one among the many forms of *social practice*” (298).

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How shall I conclude these hasty notes. What ought we to expect of classical philology? What ought we to hope for it? The perspective of enlightenment representation is such a comfortable womb within which to dream the dream of order, and the harsh world of modern thought such a fearful thing to be born into, and if we philologists choose to enter it, we shall do so, like Hesiod’s iron-age infants, already gray at the temples. I am not even confident enough to say that the survival of the profession depends upon such a move. What I am concerned about is the character of the profession which survives. Is it too modest a proposal to suggest that, even if classical philology wishes to maintain the *status quo*, it at least be done, not blindly or unreflectively, or by a conspiracy of silence, or by the secret processes of editorial veto, but openly, in the arena of dialectic. The philosophical and methodological defenses (though I do not happen to agree with them) are at hand in Hirsch and Graff, and before them in the work of Emilio Betti. Had I more space at my disposal, I should like to have promoted in some detail an alignment with a strain of hermeneutics at once free of the naive realism in Hirsch and Graff (not to speak of the ob-

jectivistic illusions still cherished in our ranks), and of the harsh iconoclasm in Freudian, Marxist, and most deconstructionist thought.²⁰ I am speaking in particular of thinkers like Gadamer and Ricoeur, in whom semiotic system and historical understanding merit equal respect. That, in my view, is the gentlest strategy for getting rid of the bath water, but of salvaging the baby, even if the poor creature strikes us as, in Nietzsche's angry characterization of philology, "an abortion begotten on the goddess philosophy by an idiot or a cretin" (letter to Deussen, Oct. 10, 1868). When it comes to a choice between this "abortion" and Derrida's "monstrosity," I know not how others may choose, but I must try to save the only child I know, my brother and my rival, with whom I suppose I must wrestle, so that we both may grow in strength.

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NOTES

¹ Housman 3.1059 (= *Proceedings of the Classical Association* 18 [1922] 68): "A textual critic engaged upon his business . . . like a dog hunting for fleas." Compare, at greater length, Wilamowitz (cited by William Calder III in "Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff to Wolfgang Schadewaldt on the Classic," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 16 [1975] 452): "Why, this prized 'philological method'? There simply isn't any — any more than a method to catch fish. The whale is harpooned; the herring caught in a net; minnows are trapped; the salmon speared; trout caught on a fly. Where do you find *the* method to catch fish? And hunting? I suppose there is something like method there? Why, ladies and gentlemen, there is a difference between hunting lions and catching fleas!"

² The issue of the graduate curriculum in classical studies needs urgent study. For a view of the argument over the fit mix of theory and more traditional philological training in English graduate programs, see Culler 210-26.

³ "Myth and Other Languages: a Paedagogic Exercise," forthcoming in the *Classical World*.

⁴ 1969.12.

⁵ 1978.508.

⁶ 1969.10.

⁷ Peradotto 1979.

⁸ Derrida 264-65.

⁹ Derrida 265.

¹⁰ Sheridan 203.

¹¹ Roland Barthes (1974.7) has expressed the difference between the philological and the semiotic perspectives in terms of their respective attitudes to linguistic *connotation*:

Connotation has not had a good press. Some (the philologists, let us say), declaring every text to be univocal, possessing a true,

canonical meaning, banish the simultaneous, secondary meaning to the void of critical lucubrations. On the other hand, others (the semiologists, let us say) contest the hierarchy of denotated and connotated; language, they say, the raw material of denotation, with its dictionary and its syntax, is a system like any other; there is no reason to make this system the privileged one, to make it the locus and the norm of a primary, original meaning, the scale for all associated meanings; if we base denotation on truth, on objectivity, on law, it is because we are still in awe of the prestige of linguistics, which, until today, has been reducing language to the sentence and its lexical and syntactical components; now the endeavor of this hierarchy is a serious one: it is to return to the closure of Western discourse (scientific, critical, or philosophical), to its centralized organization, to arrange all the meanings of a text in a circle around the hearth of denotation (the hearth: center, guardian, refuge, light of truth).

¹² Silk and Stern (99), paraphrasing a portion of *Afterphilologie*, Erwin Rohde's defense (1872) of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* against Wilamowitz.

¹³ Needham 3.

¹⁴ In my reading of *The Order of Things* (as well as of Foucault's other works) I am heavily indebted to Alan Sheridan for the guidance he provides in his *Michel Foucault: the Will to Truth*. (Sheridan is the English translator of *Les mots et les choses* and other works of Foucault.) I have not found it easy to improve upon his clear and economical summaries of Foucault's dense exposition, which, here and there, I follow verbatim.

¹⁵ Pfeiffer 2.143.

¹⁶ Sheridan 56.

¹⁷ Sheridan 75.

¹⁸ Operational metaphors play a large role in determining the persuasive power of discourse within a discipline. In my experience, the metaphor of 'deconstruction' has a negative effect, on many classicists at least. I wonder if the metaphor of *refraction* might not be preferable. Until *refracted* (broken up, analyzed), the light without which we cannot see the world is invisible, an unperceived, unconscious medium. But refraction does not *destroy* what it 'breaks up.'

¹⁹ The translation is by Coward and Ellis (31).

²⁰ To repudiate a harsh iconoclasm, however, is not to abdicate critical suspicion or to reject Freud, Marx, and the deconstructionists out of hand. The balanced approach is suggested by Ricoeur (1977.285):

A simple inspection of discourse in its explicit intention, a simple interpretation through the game of question and answer, is no longer sufficient. Heideggerian deconstruction must now take on Nietzschean genealogy, Freudian psychoanalysis, the Marxist critique of ideology, that is, the weapons of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Armed in this way, the critique is capable of unmasking the *unthought* conjunction of *hidden* metaphysics and *worn-out* metaphor.

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