

## From *Philologie* to *Weltliterature*

*Philologie* in German (English philology; French *philologie*; Latin *philologia* ‘love of word’) is defined as the study of language in its historical context. It is considered a part of historical linguistics which traces the development and etymology of words in a language and across languages. John Peile defines philology as follows:

It is the science which teaches us what language is. The philologist deals with the words which make up a language, not merely to learn their meaning, but to find out their history. He pulls them to pieces, just as a botanist dissects flowers, in order that he may discover the parts of which each word is composed and the relation of those parts to each other: then he takes another and yet another language and deals with each in the same way: then by comparing the results he ascertains what is common to these different languages and what is peculiar to one or more: lastly, he tries to find out what the causes are which operate on all these languages, in order that he may understand that unceasing change and development which we may call, figuratively, the life of language. (Peile 1988, 5)

In his book, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Ferdinand de Saussure offers a comprehensive definition of philology.

Language is not the unique object of philology. The task of philology is above all to establish, interpret, and comment upon texts. This just concern leads philology to concern itself with literary history, customs, institutions, etc. . . . Everywhere it makes use of its own method, which is textual criticism. (qut. in Watkins 1990, 21)

Sheldon Pollock (born 1948), a professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, has proposed a new interdisciplinary definition of philology in “Future Philology?” which integrates insights from various disciplines, such as philosophy, aesthetics, and history.

What I offer instead as a rough-and-ready working definition at the same time embodies a kind of program, even a challenge: philology is, or should be, the discipline of making sense of texts. It is not the theory of language—that’s linguistics— or the theory of meaning or truth—that’s philosophy—but the theory of textuality as well as the history of textualized meaning. If philosophy

is thought critically reflecting upon itself, as Kant put it, then philology may be seen as the critical self-reflection of language. (Pollock 2009, 934)

Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), the famous German philologist and the author of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (German original 1946, English translation 1953), is considered the founder of comparative literature. In his influential article “*Philologie der Weltliteratur*” he emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary relations of history, culture and literature. “What we are we have become in the course of or history, and it is only in history that we can remain what we are, and develop” (Auerbach 1969, 2).

*Es ist Zeit sich wel chen das wort Weltliteratur , in Gethescher Weise aut das Gegenwartige zufragen, und das von Zukunft zu Erwartende de bezogen, noch haben kann. Unsere Erde, die die welt der Wdtliteratur ist, wird kleiner und verliert an Mannigfaltigkeit. Weltliteratur aber bezieht sich nicht einfach auf das Gemeinsame und Menschliche uberhaupt, sondern auf dieses als wechselseitige Befruchtung des Mannigfaltigen. Die felix culpa des Auseinanderfallens der Menschheit in eine Fulle von Kulturen it ihre Voraussetzung.* (Auerbach 1952, 34)

It is time to ask what meaning the word *Weltliteratur* can still have if we relate it, as Goethe did, both to the past and to the future. Our earth, the domain of *Weltliteratur*, is growing smaller and losing its diversity. Yet *Weltliteratur* does not merely refer to what is generically common and human; rather it considers humanity to be the product of fruitful intercourse between its members. The presupposition of *Weltliteratur* is a *felix culpa*: mankind’s division into many cultures. (Auerbach 1969, 2)

James Porter (born 1954), a professor of Rhetoric at California University at Berkeley, contends that for Auerbach history is not just a sequence of events. For him the job of a historian is to discover “the logic inherent in those events. ...the wealth of events in human life which unfold in earthly time constitutes a totality, a coherent development or meaningful of the whole, in which each individual event is embedded in a variety of way, and through which it can be interpreted” (Porter 2013, xv). This definition of philology reminds the reader of the nature of comparative literature which assumes literature a universal phenomenon.

Philology is the name that Auerbach, following Vico, gives to all such interpretive activity. It was in redirecting the thrust of his field that Auerbach’s originality lay, not in his characterization of historical inquiry *per se*, which if anything was a fairly well developed (if not universally accepted) view in much of the German academy at the time, in the wake of Hegel, Dilthey, Croce, and Troeltsch, though not in Romance philology. On the contrary, Auerbach’s

mentors and peers—Karl Vossler, Victor Klemperer, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, and Eugen Lerch—sought to understand the meaning of culture through language and literature, often treating these latter as self-standing aesthetic phenomena that were best grasped through immediate intuition—an enterprise that tended to sunder art from reality, and both from history. Where they pressed philology in the direction of stylistics and aesthetics in reaction to the dry positivism of nineteenth-century Romance philology, Auerbach at times appeared to be conducting something more akin to historical sociology, which rendered his nomenclature all the more idiosyncratic. What he has in mind with “philology” is an endeavor that goes well beyond the conventional meaning of the term “*Weltliteratur*”. (Porter 2013, xvi)

David Damrosch (born 1953), professor of comparative literature at Harvard University, in his article “Auerbach in Exile” believes that Auerbach’s exile during the WWI in Istanbul had an immense influence on his literary theory and his concept of humanism which is the core of comparative literature.

Writing his great book in Istanbul, Auerbach both responded to his exile and refused to submit to it. But he was wrong as to the nature of this exile: his problem was not that he was cut off from earthly life like Alcofrybas, Farinata, Quixote, the Proustian narrator, all of whom in varying ways recover this loss through memory, stories, interpretation. Auerbach’s exile is the reverse: far more irrevocably wedded to his present age than he would wish to be, he lives in exile from the past, from the worlds of his beloved texts, which cannot finally provide an Olympian refuge from the dual tyrannies of time and of political pressures. (Damrosch 1995, 115)

*Weltliteratur* for Auerbach, as a pioneer of comparative literature, was more than an amalgam of masterpieces of world literature. The essence of intercultural philology, leads to a new paradigm of literature which goes beyond national literatures and embraces literature as a global human shared experience.

Auerbach’s problem was not that he knew too little, about Dante or even about the Bible; he knew too much about his own times, and that knowledge, so often repressed, continually returned to shift the course of his argument away from the free play of the material in itself. Though Auerbach takes up Homer and the Bible without any prefatory remarks, he does begin with an epigraph, from Marvell: “Had we but world enough and time . . .” His wish was granted only too well: there is, in Auerbach’s terms, all too much world within his book, all too much of his own time. Thanks to the work of Said and others, we are now willing to advance an openly worldly criticism, and we can see more directly than could Auerbach and his early readers the

extent of the shaping force of our own moment, our own needs. This shaping force can enrich our work, as it has enriched Mimesis more than Auerbach himself desired, but it can also impoverish it, if we simply recreate past works in our own image, or reject out of hand any that we cannot readily bend to our will. The best corrective to such a narrowing of our outlook may well be to recover Auerbach's breadth and generosity of perspective, too often foreshortened through a focus on a single period or a few favorite theorists. *Mimesis* may now, finally, begin to find its true readers. (Damrosch 116)

Using a comparative and intercultural approach to philology and literature, Auerbach has endorsed and paved the way for the emergence of comparative literature as an academic discipline.

*Nonnulla pars inventionis est nosse quid quaeras.*

[A part of any discovery is to know what you are looking for.]

Augustine ,Quaest ,in *Hept.*, *Prooem*

### **Acknowledgment**

A part of this Editorial was presented as a keynote lecture at TELLSI 21st and LDP 6th International Conference at Shahid Chamran University at Ahvaz, Iran, Feb. 5-7, 2024. The author gratefully acknowledges permission to here re-use this material.

**Editor-in-Chief**

**Alireza Anushiravani**

## Works Cited

- Auerbach, Erich (1969). "The Philology of World Literature." Translated by Maire Said and Edward Said. *The Centennial Review*, 13:1, pp. 1-17.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23738133>. Accessed: 25-02-2016 18:35 UTC
- Auerbach, Erich (1952). "Philologie der Weltliteratur." *From The Selected Works of Rebecca Ruth Gould*, pp. 39-50.  
 Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/r\\_gould/46/](https://works.bepress.com/r_gould/46/)
- Damrosch, David (1995). "Auerbach in Exile." *Comparative Literature*, 47: 2, pp. 97-117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1771290>.  
 Accessed: 23-03-2015 19:00 UTC
- Peile, John (1988). *Philology*. Edited by John Richard Green. New York: A. Appleton and Company.
- Pollock, Sheldon. (Winter 2009). *Future philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World*. Reviewed In *The Fate of Disciplines*. Edited by James Chandler and Arnold I. Davidson. *Critical Inquiry*, 35:4, pp. 931–961.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/599594>. Accessed: 16/02/2013 12:10
- Porter, James I. (2013). "Introduction." In *Time, History, and Literature: Selected Essays of Erich Auerbach*. Translated by Jane O. Newman. Edited by James I. Porter. Princeton University Press.
- Watkins, Calvert (1990). "What is Philology?" *Comparative Literature Studies*, 27:1, 1990, pp. 21-25. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40246724>

