

The Return to Philology and the Future of Literary Criticism: Reading the Temporality of Literature in Auerbach, Benjamin, and Dante

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Poetry makes nothing happen: it survives.

--W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

W. H. Auden's widely quoted assertion in his elegy for W. B. Yeats has occasioned much commentary, both contesting and confirming its slogan-like claim for poetry's impotence, but few commentators have followed Auden's thought beyond the wide-mouthed colon that follows its famous negation.¹ Auden's line not only registers resignation to poetry's powerlessness, but also affirms its ability to survive as "a way of happening, a mouth" even after the poet's death, when "the words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living." Literary works may make nothing happen and leave "the history of man materially unchanged," but they also change materially during their survival in history not only in the bodies of readers, but also in hands of their authors (Auden 2002, 7). A reading beyond the colon in the two major critical editions of his poems reveals that Auden was undecided about the modalities of poetry's survival. Does it survive "In the valley of its *saying* where executives / Would never want to tamper," as in *The English Auden*, or "In the valley of its *making* where executives / Would never want to tamper," as in the American edition? (emphasis added).² Rather than attempt to account for Auden's possible intentions in changing "saying" to "making," I take these variants as two poles for a possible future of literary criticism, which would explore how a work's "sayings," that is, its transformations at the hands not only of its author but also of its scribes, editors, and translators, might help critics to understand better its "making," that is, its poetics. The history of a work's survival, I argue, can help us understand its form.

¹ "A colon, says Karl Kraus opens its mouth wide: woe to the writer who does not fill it with something nourishing" (Adorno 1991, 91). For a review of some different readings of the first half of the line, see Robinson (2002, 53-55).

² The history of Auden's own poem makes the point. First published in the March 8, 1939 issue of *The New Republic*, the poem originally consisted of only two sections, but, a few months later, Auden added as an intermediate section the stanza containing the famous hemistich quoted above. The revised version first "appeared in *The London Mercury* in April 1939 and in his next book of poems, *Another Time*, in 1940" (Mendelson 1999, 12) and is published in *The English Auden*. The later version of the poem, which was first published in the 1958 *W. H. Auden: A Selection by the Author*, changes "saying" to "making," and omits three stanzas from the third section (Mendelson 1991), is published in the American edition.

Literary Survival

While the survival of the literary work may be a consoling thought for one poet mourning another's death, it constitutes a major problem for a historicist like Karl Marx, who struggles with the issue in one of his notebooks:

Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish? But the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model. (1973, 111)

The *Iliad's* continued existence challenges Marx's historicist understanding of the relationship between art and society ("that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development"), because it continues to exist even after its moment of composition and functions "as a norm and as an unattainable model."³ Critics have historicized Marx's own experience of "artistic pleasure" either by emphasizing "the social and ideological forces at work in reception" or by claiming that the history of such appreciation could come to an end with a new discovery about the original meanings of these works, but neither of these responses account for the transhistorical existence of the literary work that is at the center of Marx's problem.⁴ Historical readings can explain how the *Iliad* of the rhapsodes is different from the *Iliad* of the printing machine, but they explain little about the work that they both manifest.⁵

The survival of the literary work and its multiple texts has not had much impact on the practice of literary criticism. In a chapter on the "mode of existence of the literary work of art," for example, René Wellek attempts to naturalize this survival with a biological analogy but has to appeal in the subsequent sentence to another image to complete his thought. He writes:

³ Marx's own solution to the problem is no more satisfying. He argues that because the Greeks represent "the historic childhood of humanity," they "exercise an eternal charm" (111). Marx seems unsatisfied with this double appeal to both eternity and history, however, because the manuscript breaks off at this point (Demetz 1967, 71), but he does seem to recognize that the problem requires a new conception of time. The literary work thus disrupts not only a too rigid historicist understanding of cultural production, but also Marx's own composition. Marx's note undergoes the very process of transformation that it describes in its own transmission, since modern editions smooth over the manuscript's interruption by making it the end of the hypothetical Introduction to the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. The remarks appear at the end of Notebook M which Marx began August 23, 1857. They were published posthumously in 1903 in German and in English translation in 1904 as an appendix.

⁴ For these positions, see McGillivray (1994, 400) and Eagleton (2008, 10), respectively.

⁵ As Hayden White puts the issue: "If literary texts are functions, or articulations, of their historical contexts, it does not follow that they are nothing but records or reflections of such contexts" (61).

One can speak of the ‘life’ of a work of art in history in exactly the same sense in which one can speak of an animal or a human being remaining the same individual while constantly changing in the course of a lifetime. The *Iliad* still ‘exists’; that is, it can become again and again effective and is thus different from a historical phenomenon like the Battle of Waterloo which is definitely past, though its course may be reconstructed and its effect may be discernible even today. (1977, 155)⁶

Like “an animal or a human being,” the literary work changes while retaining a basic identity, but, unlike a biological being, which dies, or an historical event, which ends, the literary work “can become again and again effective.” Wellek never resolves the tension between these two images, and the phenomenon he describes does not have much influence on how he suggests that critics should analyze literary works of art. The placement of this passage, however, is intriguing. Situated as the conceptual bridge from the discussion of “The Extrinsic Study of Literature” that occupies the third part of the book to “The Intrinsic Study of Literature” of its fourth part, the position of this discussion suggests the critical trajectory that I propose here.⁷ I argue that literary critics can use the modalities of a given work’s survival to interpret the work’s form and potential meanings and thus bridge the gap between external and internal or historicist and formalist readings. Recognizing that the manifestations of a literary work produced by the printing press, the printing machine, and other digital formats constitute its “special ontological status,” this method contends that the material evidence of a work’s trans-historical existence can be used to understand its poetics or, in the words of Walter Benjamin, that “the history of works prepares for their critique” (1996, 298).

Benjamin expands on this idea in an extraordinary analogy that suggests how the literary critic might use the history of a work’s survival:

If, to use a simile, one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre,

⁶ The problem of what constitutes Homer’s text is not merely a theoretical or conceptual issue; it is a foundational problem of modern textual criticism, from Wolf (1985; first published 1795), which includes “imitations of Homer” as well as manuscripts in its review of the transmission history (ibid., 53), to the current debates over what moment in the textual tradition should serve as the basis for an edition (West 2001; Nagy 2004).

⁷ The literary work is “neither real (like a statue) nor mental (like the experience of light or pain) nor ideal (like a triangle),” but rather all of these things, according (Wellek 1977, 156). Although this special status recognizes that a work can exist as an ideal or imaginary form, the best evidence for any history of its survival remains those written documents, which Marx emphasizes, but whose relationship with one another can often be difficult to describe. Although Wellek co-wrote the book with Austin Warren, he makes clear that he is responsible for the chapter from which this passage is quoted in an exchange with Wayne Booth in *Critical Inquiry*. Booth reads Wellek’s chapter as a theoretical justification for the “intrinsic study of literature” that he associates with New Criticism and argues that Wellek limits the literary work to a single mode of existence (1977, 408-10). A more sympathetic reading of the chapter suggests that Wellek is pointing to a work’s multiple modes, which are all called by the same name, rather than trying to limit its existence to a single mode.

then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma: that of what is alive. Thus, the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced. (1996, 298)

Benjamin's comparison of a work's existence to a burning funeral pyre captures the paradoxically posthumous existence of the literary work, which both lives "like a human or animal" but only survives and "can become effective again and again" (Wellek) thanks to the transformation of the materials that constitute it. Each materialization of the work is part of the life of that object and adds fuel to the fire of its f(l)ame. In other words, Benjamin's image of the flame suggests that while the literary work is not reducible to its material element, these material documents, those logs and ashes, remain the best access to it.⁸ The work is more than the sum of these manifestations but that whole can only ever be partially accessed.

Although Benjamin contrasts the critic's interest in the flame with the commentator's concern for the wood and ash, he also acknowledges that their operations are not independent of each other.⁹ Earlier in the same paragraph, Benjamin writes that the critic is like "a paleographer in front of a parchment whose faded text is covered by the lineaments of a more powerful script which refers to that text. As the paleographer would have to begin by reading the latter script, the critic would have to begin with commentary" (298). For the critic to be able to analyze the flame, he needs the commentators' knowledge about the heavy logs and light ash, even if they are not his primary concern. As Benjamin's mention of the paleographer suggests, the literary critic who wants to investigate the survival of a literary work needs to return to philology.

The Return to Philology

The idea of "The Return to Philology" has been a titular trope for reflections on the aims and methods of literary studies since Paul de Man inaugurated the critical genre in a 1982 essay of the same name.¹⁰ These returns to philology, however, have tended to define

⁸ Since the term "text" can mean not only "a material object but also of the very form of the work in its original ideal state" (Culler 2007, 101), I maintain a distinction between the term "work," which refers to the ideal state, and the term "text," which refers to one of its material instantiations. The relationship between the work and text has been a topic of ongoing debate in editorial theory, stimulated by McGann (1983), mediated by Tanselle (1989), and summarized by Greetham (1999).

⁹ Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, sees an opposition in the image: "The critic as an alchemist practicing the obscure art of transmuting the futile elements of the real into the shining, enduring gold of truth, rather than watching and interpreting the historical process that brings about such magical transfiguration—whatever we may think of this figure, it hardly corresponds to anything we usually have in mind when we classify a writer as a literary critic" (1968, 5).

¹⁰ See Patterson (1994) and Harpham (2005 and 2009). To this list should probably be added the troping of de Man's trope (with another De Manian trope) in Greetham (1997). At the same time, the term "philology" has come to be modified by a proliferation of adjectives. To quote one recent catalogue:

philology according to an already existing critical practice. For Paul De Man, who was always interested in the ways “a literary text simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode” (1979, 17), the purposively perverse appropriation of the term “philology” simply gave a new name to his concern with “an examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces” (1986, 24). Edward Said, on the other hand, in keeping with his long-standing critique of scholars, like de Man, who “isolated textuality from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses that made it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work” (1983, 4), defines philology as “a detailed, patient scrutiny of and a lifelong attentiveness to the words and rhetorics by which language is used by human beings who exist in history” (2004, 61).¹¹

If the term “philology” can be used to define opposing critical methods, it is perhaps time to return to the earliest extensive representation of Philology in Martianus Capella’s *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. In the unforgettable scene of her apotheosis, Martianus has Philology vomit forth a vast library, containing volumes written in a variety of scripts and on a wide range of material supports: “There were some made of papyrus which had been smeared with cedar oil, other books were woven of rolls of linen, many were of parchment, and a very few were written on linden bark” (Stahl 1977, 47). These objects are gathered by allegorical figures of the Arts, Disciplines, and Muses, who collect “whatever the maiden brought forth from her mouth, each one of them taking materials for her own essential use and her particular skill.” They choose volumes on the basis of the books’ graphic formats or *mise-en-page*: “In some of these books the pages were marked with musical notation and were very long; in others there were circles and straight lines and hemispheres, together with triangles and squares and polygonal shapes drawn to suit the different theorems and elements.” For Martianus the physical forms and formats of these material books are literally bound up with the ideas and disciplines that the books contain, transmit, and represent.¹² A return to Martianus’ Philology accommodates a variety of modes of reading by both acknowledging the historicity of, and agency behind, the materials that transmit these works and recognizing not only the textual contents of these objects but also their material and paratextual forms.¹³

“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)” (Warren 2010, 286). Two significant modifiers missing from this extraordinary list are Sean Alexander Gurd’s call for a “radical” philology and Sheldon Pollock’s invocation of a “critical” philology in a crucial article that expands the investigation of philology to Asian as well as European contexts. See Gurd (2005) and Pollock (2009).

¹¹ De Man’s essay provided the impetus for a 1988 conference at Harvard University whose contributions are collected in Ziolkowski (1990). For an article that is inspired by that collection which reuses de Man’s title and takes his model of philology’s marginality (because pre-hermeneutic) as exemplary of medieval studies in general, see Patterson (1994). For a critique of de Man’s idea of philology as pre-hermeneutic and a discussion of some editors’ attraction to that idea, see Greetham (1997, 19). For another use of de Man’s title in a brief reconsideration of the place of the humanities at Yale, see Culler (2002). For a consideration of de Man and Said, also see Harpham (2005). For an attentive analysis of de Man’s idea of literary history, see Balfour, who explains de Man’s view that “The common-garden variety of literary history constitutes a sort of non-reading that is, in effect, not even open to what a text might actually, in its specificity, be saying. Such literary history is thus non- or, worse, pseudo-historical” (57).

¹² On the book as image and symbol in the Middle Ages, see Curtius (1953, 302-47).

¹³ Philology, moreover, must give up these material books in order to become a god. It is only “After the maiden had with travail brought forth from deep inside herself all that store of literary production, worn out

In a sense, the turn to the material in literary studies over the last twenty years has constituted a return to philology along similar lines. From the call for a New or Material Philology that returns to “the manuscript matrix” of medieval studies (Nichols 1990, 8) and the renewed attention, to “the materiality of the Shakespearean text” (de Grazia and Stallybrass 1993), to the importance of reading the “bibliographical codes” of Romantic and modernist works (McGann 1991, 77), critics have followed Martianus’ insight by exploring how certain material and graphic choices, from a work’s physical dimensions and its hand or type to its *mise-en-page* and paratextual apparatus, contribute to produce meaning. These scholars, who “insist that every aspect of a literary work bears interpretation—even, or especially, those that look most contingent” (Price 2006, 11)—have examined these materials not “for their truth as one might seek to define that by an authorial intention, but for their testimony as defined by their historical use” (McKenzie 1999, 29).¹⁴ What has been missing from these inquiries, however, has been an attention to the meaning of the survival of the literary work.

Although book historians and material philologists contrast their exploration of “typesets, bindings, book prices, page format, and all those textual phenomena usually regarded as (at best) peripheral to ‘poetry’” (McGann 1991, 13) with the practice of editors and textual critics who seek to reconstruct the author’s original (and exclusively verbal) text, both approaches ultimately reduce the work to a single historical moment. Whether that moment is the book historian’s instance of its material reproduction or the textual critic’s time of its initial composition, both rely on a mode of “historical interpretation that makes the work a symptom, whose causes are to be found in historical reality” (Culler 2007, 9). What book history demonstrates, however, in its insistence on the historicity of the literary work, is not only that works exist in history but also that they survive in different historical circumstances and situations.¹⁵

Marx’s concern with an individual work’s survival suggests the need to establish a new relationship between literary criticism and book history that would not only respond to questions of social history but also to problems of literary criticism. Whereas one of

and pale with exhaustion” that she can drink the draughts of Immortality. This connection between the book and the human—or, in other terms, the book as defining the distance between man and God—recalls the end of Dante’s vision in *Paradiso* 33 where he sees gathered and bound by love in a single volume all that is scattered into fascicles (“si squaderna”) throughout the universe. This connection between the philological and the human is crucial for thinking about the relationship of philosophy to philology, from Vico and Nietzsche to Agamben.

¹⁴ For these critics, “the texts’ historicity...is not to be thought of as a contamination of its essence, but as the very condition of its being” (Kastan 1999, 39). Ginzburg calls it the “dematerialization of the text” (1989).

¹⁵ In this sense, the selectiveness of Roger Chartier’s widely-cited quotation from McKenzie that “New readers make new texts, and their new meanings are a function of their new forms” seems significant. (This quotation first appears in Chartier [1992, 51] and then in Chartier [1994, 5]). McKenzie writes that “By abandoning the notion of degressive bibliography and recording *all* subsequent versions, bibliography, simply by its own comprehensive logic, its indiscriminate inclusiveness, testifies to the fact that new readers of course make new texts, and that their new meanings are a function of their new forms” (1999, 29). By removing the first half of the thought, Chartier omits the historical (and material) inclusiveness of McKenzie’s argument. Book history is often concerned with the history of the evolution and transformation book form and its functions. It is a history of a technology in which individual works are, or may contain, examples for that history but are not the focus or object of analysis. Since this kind of book history has a less direct bearing on the interpretation of texts that is the main concern of literary criticism, it has been relegated to this footnote.

the co-editors of a recent special topic of *PMLA* on “The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature” proposes bracketing the question of “what book history can do for literary criticism” in favor of asking “what literary theory can do for book history” (Price 2006, 10), that first question cannot be so easily dismissed.¹⁶ How can literary criticism acknowledge and use the history of a work’s continued existence without relying on the historicist hermeneutic that the work’s very survival complicates? Just as the emergence of digital media twenty years ago compelled scholars to explore what was lost in such acts of remediation, the fact that “in the next 50 years the entirety of our inherited archive of cultural works will have to be re-edited within a network of digital storage, access, and dissemination” (McGann 2003, 249) invites reflection on the meaning of that history. Such reflection should not only concern the past but also be open to discoveries that could be facilitated by new configurations and modes of presenting content that go beyond the codex form imagined by Martianus in his fantasy of the sum of all learning.¹⁷ As works are transferred from the digits of scribes to the digital, the question of how to understand the meaning of a work’s survival and use it to understand and read the work becomes all the more pressing. The realization that a work was not just its verbal text but also a visual and material object needs to be supplemented by an examination of the potential meaning of its material changes over time.

I argue that this representation of Philology can provide one way to bring these apparently opposed methods of formalism and historicism together. In other words, Philology, understood as the material record of a work’s transmission not only in manuscripts and editions, but also translations and adaptations, can provide one way to accommodate the historicist and formalist modes. Building on the textual critic’s classification of the relationships among these documents and the book historian’s investigations of the singularity of individual documents, the literary critic can explore the space between the recognizable work and its various versions or texts, aiming to reconstruct neither the literary work at the moment of its production nor the historical circumstances of its reproduction, but rather to use the history of its survival to discover the work’s fundamental structures.¹⁸ By returning to a philology that, in Nietzsche’s words, “teaches how to read *well*, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously

¹⁶ The relationship of literary theory to book history and problems of textual editing had in any case been examined at some length well before the *PMLA* issue. For an excellent overview of the intersection of book history, editorial practice, aesthetics, and textual theory, see Greetham (1999).

¹⁷ These issues of transmission cut across disciplines, from the legal to the literary. For a variety of approaches, see Chandler, Davidson, and Johns (2004). For a recent discussion of “database as genre” see Folsom (2007) and Freedman et al. (2007).

¹⁸ To use the imagery of Benjamin’s bonfire analogy, investigating the enigma of the living flame of a work’s survival means examining the wood and ash of the material record that have been examined by textual critics and material philologists or book historians. While textual critics attend primarily to the texts of these documents in order to organize the genealogical relationships between these pieces of wood and ash so that they can reconstruct the contours of the lost original, book historians (or material philologists) attend to those “accretions of terrific matter” that textual critics tend to ignore in their “dematerialization of the text” to its verbal components. One could say that textual critics examine the textual content of these pieces of wood and ash in order to classify the genetic relationships between them, while the material philologist or book historian examines these heavy logs and light ash as the traces of the historical forces. But these pieces of wood and ash are not only potential vestiges of an archetypal text or clues to the synchronic historical situations that produced them, but also evidence of a diachronic literary system that is the work’s continued existence, which Benjamin expresses in the image of the funeral pyre. The quotations are from Joyce (1939, 114) and Ginzburg (1989, 107), respectively.

before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate eyes and fingers” (Nietzsche 1997, 5, trans. modified), the literary critic can make new discoveries that could accomplish the remarriage of Philology, as the goddess of material texts, and Mercury, as the god of communication and hermeneutics (to use a term derived from the god’s Greek name) that Martianus describes.¹⁹

Dante’s Vita nuova

This article offers two examples from Dante’s *Vita nuova*—one structural and the other verbal—that will demonstrate how an analysis of an individual work’s transmission can provide key interpretive moments for its poetics and meaning. Dante’s work, in which he tells the story of his love for Beatrice by gathering poems he had previously written about her in a prose frame, has been a constant problem for readers who have submitted its formal mixture of poetry and prose to often radical transformation. From the scribes who reduced the work exclusively to its poetic components to modern editors who have proposed different chapter divisions, readers have used the editorial means at their disposal to try to make sense of Dante’s frequently enigmatic book.²⁰ One of the most striking changes in this history is the elimination of the so-called divisions that Dante uses to explain the logical structures of his poetic compositions. In copies of the work from the mid-fourteenth to the late nineteenth century, editions either marginalize or wholly eliminate these pieces of analytical prose. Like dozens of Pierre Menards from various historical periods, these editors change what they acknowledge to be an element that the author considered to be an essential part of the work. The persistence of these alterations over such a long period of time suggests the limits of a socio-historical explanation, which would require several distinct and independent treatments, and the need for literary and formal analysis, which could investigate the purpose, function, and meaning of the divisions to the work as a whole.

Although modern readers may find the divisions to be as tedious as these editors have, the reader of a complete modern edition will notice that after Beatrice’s death Dante actually moves the divisions from their placement after each poem to before it so that, in his words the poems will seem “to remain more widowed after its end” (*Vita nuova* XXXI.2; rimanere più vedova dopo lo suo fine).²¹ These divisions are not only guides to reading the poems they analyze but also guides to the reading of the book as a whole, since they establish a textual rhythm that Beatrice’s death interrupts, thus giving readers an experience of textual loss to match Dante’s existential loss of Beatrice. The shift of the divisions is a macrotextual expression of the textual interruption that occurs at the moment of Beatrice’s death, when the poet interrupts the transcription of a *canzone* so

¹⁹ See the intriguingly similar remarks of Hugh of St. Victor’s *Didascalicon* III.17 (1991, 100).

²⁰ On these editions see Cervigni and Vasta (1995); Alighieri (1996); Trovato (2000).

²¹ All translations are mine. “E acciò che questa canzone paia rimanere più vedova dopo lo suo fine, la dividerò prima che io la scriva; e cotale modo terrò da qui innanzi” (So that this canzone seems to remain more widowed after its end, I will divide it before I write it; and from here on I will continue in this way). On the image of widowhood, see Vickers (1989). For other discussions of the divisions that address their antecedents and function, see D’Andrea (1982), Stillinger (1992), Botterill (1994). For a discussion of the novelty of Dante’s auto-commentary with a rich bibliography, see Ascoli (2008, 175-201).

that it never develops past the fourteen lines of its first stanza.²² The movement of the divisions in the rest of the work serves as a reminder of Beatrice's death which is lost not only in editions that eliminate them entirely but also in those that seek to restore them to the text but continue to place them after the poems they analyze, contrary to Dante's own indications in the text, thus disturbing by this literally preposterous dislocation Dante's carefully calibrated order.²³ The *Vita nuova* may be the first book of the Italian literary tradition, but with this clever use of interruptions and movements, Dante manipulates the structural possibilities of the book form, and editors' varied reactions to this experimentation reveal his accomplishments.²⁴

While the marginalization and elimination of the divisions point to one of the book's key narrative strategies, a textual change in the *editio princeps* of 1576 can focalize a long-standing debate about the status of Beatrice. In this edition, the editors transform Dante's characterization of Beatrice as "la gloriosa donna de la mente" (*Vita nuova* II.1; the glorious lady of my mind) found in all the manuscripts of the work to "la graziosa donna de la mente" (the gracious lady of my mind).²⁵ The religious associations of this word *gloriosa* suggest Dante's identification of Beatrice with a saint and require alteration in order to satisfy the Counter-Reformation censors.²⁶ While some critics find it incredible that one could find anything to offend one's religious sentiments in the *Vita nuova* and find the changes trivial and absurd, Charles Singleton suggests that the problem is historical distance (Barbi 1931, xci; Toynbee 1908). "[The editors'] mistake," he argues, "is to fail to see that, as the *Vita nuova* has used it, the word declares not an identity but an analogy: an analogy which, understood in its proper medieval terms, is no sacrilege at all" (1958, 4).²⁷ Singleton suggests that "a reader in the twentieth century is likely to see in [these uses] no more than a playing with words, a pun on...several meanings" (ibid., 4-5). Historicism cannot erase surprise at the strangeness of the past, however, and modern readers have taken Dante's claims for Beatrice as seriously as the sixteenth-century censors. Robert Pogue Harrison, for example, finds that the *Vita nuova* is "at bottom shocking, even blasphemous" and "approaches the limits of sacrilege," by making "weighty, and somewhat shocking, claims about a mortal woman" (2007, 36-37). In his 1929 book, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World (Dante als Dichter der irdischen Welt)*, Erich Auerbach proposes an alternative explanation, which understands the novelty of Beatrice not as blasphemous but as the product a particularly Christian mode of interpreting reality. He writes that "the new element in Dante's Beatrice...is something eminently Christian, more profoundly so than the troubadours' cult of the saints: she is transfigured and transformed while preserving her earthly form" (1961, 62).

²² In copies that reduce the work to its poems, like the Giuntina, this incomplete canzone of fourteen lines is printed with the other sonnets. See De Robertis (1970). On the way scribes manage this moment, see Storey (2005). Martinez (1998) explores the implications of the fact that the poem is interrupted by a quotation from Jeremiah's Lamentations.

²³ For examples, see Barbi (1931, xviii).

²⁴ It is "il primo libro della nostra letteratura," according to De Robertis (1970, 5).

²⁵ See Dante (1576). For a typology of the edition's changes, see Russo (2000).

²⁶ In other instances *gloriosa* is similarly altered (to *leggiadra*, *vaga*, or *unica*). Likewise the keyword *salute*. Sensitive to Dante's fusion of these two meanings, since—to approximate the word play—Dante locates his salvation in her salutation, the censor changes it at various times to *quiete*, *dolcezza* and even *donna*.

²⁷ It is worth noting that in other instances, these sixteenth-century editors actually have to introduce an analogy into the text in order to save it.

The problem of Beatrice's identity is related to larger issues of time and the temporality of reading and literary history that this essay addresses. To provide "solid historical grounding" for Dante's treatment of Beatrice as both an earthly person and a miracle, Auerbach undertakes his well-known essay, "Figura," in which he examines "the figural interpretation of reality" that "was the dominant view in the European Middle Ages" (1959, 71). The idea of *figura*, Auerbach explains, "establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second while the second encompasses or fulfills the first" (53). According to this principle, a given event is not only symptomatic of its historical context but also may anticipate or fulfill another historical moment. Applied to Beatrice, the idea means that Dante's exaltation of Beatrice is neither mere analogy nor blasphemy, but the product of a particular interpretive practice, whose basic claim is that people and events can gain a new significance over time.

Dante exploits this figural strategy throughout the *Vita nuova*. In its first chapters he observes that the dream vision of Beatrice that he describes in the first poem of the *Vita nuova*, *A ciascun' alma presa*, which he circulates to his fellow poets, or "fedeli d'amore," who fail to understand its meaning at the time but whose meaning is "now manifest even to the simplest" (*Vita nuova* III.15; ora è manifestissimo a li più semplici) by the time he writes (or perhaps, because he writes) the *Vita nuova*. Similarly, at the end of the little book (*libello*), Dante plays with the same idea of the revelation of meaning over time by promising that in another work he will say of his lady what has never been said of anyone else (XLII; "io spero di dicer di lei quello che mai non fue detto d'alcuna"), that is, another text, usually identified with the *Commedia*, will fulfill the promise of surpassing the already astounding claims made in the *Vita nuova*.

The figural mode that Dante's work performs informs not only Auerbach's research into the notion of *figura* but also another key twentieth-century attempt to discover an alternative to historicism, Walter Benjamin's idea of the "dialectical image."²⁸ Benjamin read Auerbach's book on Dante and quotes from it in his essay on surrealism to show how medieval love poetry "comes surprisingly close to the Surrealist conception of love" (1999b, 210).²⁹ The passage Benjamin quotes in the essay immediately precedes Auerbach's discussion of Beatrice, so he was certainly aware of Auerbach's attempt to explain the figural conception of history that he found in Dante, although it is not clear whether Benjamin also read the "Figura" essay, which was circulating by late 1938 (Auerbach, 2007, 755). Nonetheless, the idea of history that Benjamin expresses in his notion of the dialectical image has much in common with Auerbach's idea of *figura*. Both the dialectical image and *figura* depend on time to reveal meaning. Critics have pointed out that the correspondences between these ideas may be due less to direct influence than to a shared historical situation (Barck 1994), but what has not been noticed is that Dante's *Vita nuova* informs Benjamin's idea of the dialectical image as well as Auerbach's idea of *figura*. Two pages before his discussion of the dialectical image, in the notes he gathers as Convolute N "On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress" for *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin quotes from Rudolf Borchardt's *Epilegomena zu Vita*

²⁸ For a discussion of how the figural mode of history is different from the genetic (which one could identify with textual criticism) and causal (which could be identified with book history), see White (1996).

²⁹ Benjamin misunderstands the subject of Auerbach's remarks, however, since the poets of the "new style" in his quotation from Auerbach are Italian rather than the Provençal poets Benjamin takes them to be.

nova. It may not be surprising that Dante returns here, since Benjamin himself describes the surrealism essay as “a screen placed in front of the *Paris Arcades*” project (1994, 348), but the content of the quotation from Borchardt suggests a more significant relationship. Benjamin quotes Borchardt to describe what Benjamin calls “the pedagogic side of the undertaking” of *The Arcades Project*: “To educate the image-making medium [*bildschaffende Medium*] within us, raising it to a stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of historical shadows” (ibid., 458).³⁰

The role of *Bild* in the quotation from Borchardt anticipates the importance of *Bild* in Benjamin’s description of the dialectical image two pages later:

For the historical index of images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding ‘to legibility’ constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior.... It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (1999a, 463ff [N3, 1])

In a reading of this passage, Giorgio Agamben applies the idea that images “attain to legibility” at a certain moment in the interpretation of texts. Agamben argues that Benjamin’s idea is “the absolute opposite of the current principle according to which each work may become the object of infinite interpretations at any given moment” and that “Benjamin’s principle instead proposes that every work, every text, contains a historical index which indicates both its belonging to a determinate epoch, as well as its only coming forth to legibility at a determinate historical moment” (2005, 145; translation modified). Investigating the historical existence of literary works in manuscripts, editions, translations, and adaptations, however, one finds that different features attain to legibility at different times, whether it be a paratextual device or a key textual choice, because they “can become again and again effective” (Wellek and Warren 1977, 155).

The task for the literary critic who returns to philology is to explore this record of

³⁰ In the original: “pädagogische Seite dieses Unternehmens: das bildschaffende Medium in uns zu dem stereoskopischen und dimensionalen Sehen in die Tiefe der geschichtlichen Schatten zu erziehen” (Borchardt 1923, 56–7). A poor reproduction of this page can be found in (Benjamin 1999a, 457). Borchardt expands on this idea in his own Italian version of the text (1923, 197–98). Benjamin mentions Borchardt in his correspondence and in “The Task of the Translator,” but he does not mention him elsewhere in *The Arcades Project*.

transmission and discover those moments that can function as what Auerbach called an *Ansatzpunkt*, or “point of departure,” for an analysis of the work’s formal structure. For Auerbach, the *Ansatzpunkt* “must be the election of a firmly circumscribed, easily comprehensible set of phenomena whose interpretation is a radiation out from them and which orders and interprets a greater region than they themselves occupy” (1969, 14). An *Ansatzpunkt*, or starting point, should be “a characteristic found in the subject itself, essential to its history, which, when stressed and developed, clarifies the subject matter in its particularity and other topics in relation to it” (Auerbach 1993, 19). New Historicists found that Auerbach’s own application of the idea of the *Ansatzpunkt* in *Mimesis* could produce “a quasi-magical effect: the conjuring of a complex, dynamic, historically specific spirit of representation out of a few paragraphs” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000, 37), but these points of departure can lead one into the work as well as into its world. Critical editions with their treasure-troves of textual variants are one place to start, but every transcription, edition, translation, or adaptation institutes changes, paratextual and material as well as textual, that the critic can use as points of entry into a given work’s poetics.³¹ More history provides more materials, but only two versions of a work are needed to begin an investigation.

Auerbach first proposes this idea of *Ansatzpunkt* in his essay “Philologie der Weltliteratur” as a method for achieving some kind of synthesis when dealing with the vastness of world literature. If world literature “encompasses all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (Damrosch 2003, 4), then the return of literary criticism to philology that this essay proposes would also constitute a philology of world literature, to appropriate the title of Auerbach’s essay. Attention to these philological materials over the course of a tradition could expand the often-limited temporal dimensions of world literature (Ziolkowski 1990, 28) and aid many of the various projects that have taken on the moniker of world literature.³² It could bring Franco Moretti’s “distant reading” (2004) closer to the material texts and introduce the complicated vicissitudes of transmission into Dimock’s idea of “literature as a continuum” (2001, 174).

Dante’s *Vita nuova* could well be considered a work of world literature not only because it has survived for six centuries and is linked with Dante’s *Commedia*, but also because that success has depended on a reception outside of its own linguistic and cultural tradition. Through its translation both literally into English and figuratively into images by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (n.d., 1915?), the work attained a world status and continues to circulate widely as, for example, one of the key (and titular) intertexts of Orhan Pamuk’s *The New Life* (1997). Its manuscripts and editions have been equally various. Reduced only to its prose or poetic components in different transcriptions and

³¹ Wolf noted that critical editions “seem to contain different possible wholes in their variegated stratigraphy” (Porter 2000, 74). Sean Alexander Gurd has developed this notion further with the idea of a “radical philology,” which he defines as “a philology of critical texts” (2005, 163). This project recalls Jonathan Culler’s suggestion that “the task of philology to dismantle and expose” be used to critique philological practices (1990, 52).

³² These different titles include “global lit (inflected by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi), cosmopolitanism (given its imprimatur by Bruce Robbins and Timothy Brennan), world lit (revived by David Damrosch and Franco Moretti), literary transnationalism (indebted to the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), and comparative postcolonial and diaspora studies (indelibly marked by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Françoise Lionnet, and Rey Chow, among others)” (Apter 2003, 254-55).

appearing in codicological company with treatises on dream interpretation, lives of philosophers, collections of *novelle*, and lyric poems, its formal structure, not to mention its meaning, remain contested in recent critical editions. Throughout its history, this very bookish book has been adapted to a variety of media, becoming an object of bibliographic experimentation in an early twentieth-century edition that improvises the look of a medieval manuscript and includes a musical score, the topic of a play from the same period, and, more recently, as the subject of not only a fictitious operetta of it in the Ridley Scott's film *Hannibal* but also a real opera.³³

The survival of the literary work suggests a model of time that is an alternative to the historicism on which Marx depended and many critics still depend. This alternative idea of time acknowledges that literary works have a special mode of being that produces a particular kind of history. While critics have long recognized that "succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter" (Lessing 1984, 91) and noted that "a literary work of art is accessible only through a time sequence" (Wellek and Warren 1977, 254), attention to a work's temporal duration typically encompasses only its internal development rather than its diachronic historical existence. The exploration of a work's survival far from the heights of Parnassus "in the valley of its saying" will always remain incomplete and imperfect, but being stuck in time means that the critic can also accommodate future moments when new features of the work's "making" "attain to legibility," as the fire of the work's bonfire continues to transform its matter into flame.

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³³ The music is in an undated Rossetti edition of the *Vita nuova* published by Harrap (Alighieri n.d. [1915?]). The play is *Underdown* (1903). The recent musical adaptation is Vladimir Martynov's opera, which, according to reviews actually includes the divisions in its libretto! See Tommasini (2009). Scott's film is riddled with even more references to the *Vita nuova* than the Thomas Harris novel on which it is based and the composition and cinematic performance of this fictional operetta with its soaring tones and mime-like representation reveal how easily Dante's work could fall into portentous melodrama. At the end of the performance Hannibal Lecter recites the first poem of the *Vita nuova*, whose meaning was not understood by Dante's fellow poets when he first wrote it but was then manifest even to the simplest, to a police inspector and his wife. Lecter's reading of the poem's morphetic mastication amplifies its cannibalistic undertones, which Lecter will gruesomely literalize later in the film. When, at the end of his recitation, Lecter offers a folio of a medieval Dante manuscript to the detective's wife, he adds an extraordinary moment to the history of the work's material transmission. In the novel, he gives the inspector's wife a parchment copy of the seventeenth century score of the opera not a medieval copy of Dante (Harris 1999, 203).

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