

Friedrich August Wolf and the Scientific Study of Antiquity

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FRIEDRICH AUGUST WOLF (1759–1824) is one of those literary figures who hovers between fame and obscurity, somehow without deserving either. Wolf was a professional classicist, a man of extreme erudition, and a good friend of Wilhelm von Humboldt and of Goethe. Through these acquaintances he took part in the Neo-Hellenism of that fertile period in German letters during the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth. His encyclopedic knowledge of antiquity provided a foundation of learning which aided more imaginative writers—Goethe, Wieland, Schiller, and others—in their creative use of classical models. Among classicists he is best remembered for his work on Homer, for he was the first to defend systematically the analytic theory (that the Homeric poems are the composite works of several poets or editors). The idea dominated Homeric scholarship for over a hundred years, though later scholars spelled it out far more effectively than Wolf himself. A classicist who today reads the *Prolegomena ad Homerum* is likely to be disappointed, for it lacks almost any literary analysis of the Homeric poems. It is true of most of Wolf's essays and critical editions that they have been surpassed, even when judged by their own standards, by the work of other German scholars of the nineteenth century.¹

¹ Wolf's most important writings are available in three volumes: his *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, reprinted by Peppmüller (Hildesheim 1963), and his *Kleine Schriften* I–II, ed. by G. Bernhardt (Halle 1869) [hereafter KL.SCHR.]. His letters have been collected by S. Reiter, *Friedrich August Wolf: Ein Leben in Briefen* I–III (Stuttgart 1935). His son-in-law Wilhelm Körte wrote his biography, *Leben und Studien, Friedrich August Wolfs, des Philologen* I–II (Essen 1833). The standard interpretation of his work (that Wolf is a founding father of modern classical philology) can be found in such authors as: C. Bursian, *Geschichte der classischen Philologie in Deutschland* (Munich and Leipzig 1883) 517ff; M. Pattison, *Essays* I, ed. by H. Nettleship (Oxford 1889) 337–414; J. L. Myres, *Homer and his Critics*, ed. by D. Gray (Oxford 1958) 69ff; J. E. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship* III (Cambridge 1954), 54ff; and more recently R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship from 1300 to 1850* (Oxford 1976) 172ff. Two further articles: B. Hemmerdinger, "Philologues de jadis," *Belfagor* 32 (1977) 485–522; J. Irmscher, "F. A. Wolf, Founder of the Science of Classical Antiquity," *VDI* 127 (1974) 20–33, in Russian and unavailable to me.

On the other hand, it was students of Wolf, such as August Boeckh and Immanuel Bekker, who led German scholarship to these results. Their teacher's influence can be seen in the passion for detail and precision that allowed most of his own work to be superseded. Wolf spent his most productive years, 1783–1806, as professor and director of the classical seminar at the University of Halle. There his main concern was to mold a new generation of classicists and through teaching to provide the field with methods and goals he thought appropriate, and in this he succeeded.

Wolf was as influential as any single scholar in creating the modern discipline of classical studies. He coined the term *Altertumswissenschaft*, 'the scientific study of antiquity', and helped to make it the first modern humanistic discipline. His concept of scholarly method remains influential today. Although classics has been affected by numerous trends of twentieth-century thought, from psychoanalysis to the 'new criticism' to structuralism, classicists still operate within a framework erected by Wolf and his followers in the nineteenth century. For this reason alone, Wolf's work deserves to be better known and better understood by contemporary classicists. These are the questions I intend to explore in the following pages: what is *Altertumswissenschaft*, how can the study of classical culture become a science, according to Wolf, and why should it be one?

I begin not with Wolf's more famous *Prolegomena* but with an essay called the "Darstellung der Altertumswissenschaft," a survey of classical studies published in 1807 in the journal *Museum der Altertumswissenschaft*.² At Halle Wolf had often given a course of lectures entitled "An Encyclopedia of Ancient Literature." Its purpose was to provide entering students with a comprehensive view of the classics; individual authors and works were then studied in detail privately or in seminars. In 1806 Napoleon's invasion forced the closing of the University of Halle, and Wolf found himself in Berlin without regular academic duties for the first time since his student days almost thirty years before. When Goethe suggested that he use the free time to write, Wolf decided to turn his lectures into a definitive essay.³ The "Darstellung," then, is a summary of Wolf's experience as a classicist, one whose most productive years were already behind him. The essay is not only a list of past achievements but also a program for the

² *Kl.Schr.* II 808–95.

³ For the story see Körte (*supra* n.1) I 352ff and II 10ff.

future, explaining what Wolf expects his new science to be and to accomplish.

The program rests upon three tenets. The first is that the study of the classics should be a professional activity. In the dedication to Goethe, Wolf speaks of the study as a secret rite, to which the "common crowd without preparation and devotion" must not gain access.⁴ The theme of exclusivity returns several times in the "Darstellung." The 'common crowd' is of course the educated literary public of Germany—men who have learned Latin and perhaps some Greek at school but have not dedicated their adult lives to the intensive study of the ancients. It is they who lack the tools for a proper understanding of the classics. Such a commoner in the scholarly world was Friedrich II himself, who is obliquely mentioned in the essay and complimented for getting as far as an amateur could hope to get. Wolf's great fear is that popularizing the classics will lead to superficiality.⁵ Professional classicists should debate issues of research among themselves, reach firm conclusions, and then release the results to the general literary public. Wolf carefully distinguished between his Latin and German writings. His scientific works, such as the *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, were published in Latin, as such material was not meant for the eyes of the uninitiated. When Herder published an essay on Homer in German, Wolf attacked it for being a mere popularization of his own ideas and for setting before the public a confused and unscientific picture. The "Darstellung," on the other hand, was written in German, because its purpose was to give beginning students and general readers an overview of *Altertumswissenschaft*. Once Wolf sent Wilhelm von Humboldt some verses he had translated from Aristophanes' *Clouds*. In the accompanying letter he said that only those who can read Greek would be able properly to read the translation.⁶ The remark indicates how little Wolf cared about making the classics available to a wider public.

The reason that only a professional can study the classics is that the study should be and can be a rigorous science, like physics or mathematics. In several passages in the "Darstellung" Wolf compares his new 'philosophico-historical science' to the scientific study

⁴ "das buntgemischte Volk ohne Vorbereitung und Andacht" in the Dedication, *Kl.Schr.* II 808–10, may be regarded as the kind of rhetoric suited to such a dedication to Germany's poet laureate. Wolf later reiterates his disregard of amateurs, 836ff.

⁵ *Kl.Schr.* II 893, for example.

⁶ Reiter (*supra* n.1) II 129–30.

of nature. Unlike natural science, Altertumswissenschaft concerns itself chiefly with the moral side of human nature, but like natural science it must integrate the exhaustive study of details into a unified picture of its entire field.⁷ When the methods of philological criticism are properly applied, they can lead to a truth “which is no less convincing than those of which the exact sciences are so justly proud.”⁸ The methods of proof are different: the physicist uses mathematics, the philologist historical judgement and his knowledge of classical languages. But the results are comparable. The physicist uncovers the unknown and the invisible in the natural world, while the philologist establishes the facts about the literary and historical world of one or two thousand years ago. Sometimes Wolf’s tone is defensive. People complain, he notes, of the dryness and even the inhumanity of the classicist’s work. Why do they not raise the same complaint against the astronomer or botanist, who pass up the opportunity to praise God and instead engage in musings and speculations with no humanistic aim?⁹ Wolf admits that many parts of Altertumswissenschaft are no more useful for humane education than are “our otherwise so admirable exact sciences,” but he clearly believes that this is no valid criticism of either Altertumswissenschaft or physics.¹⁰ Rigorous method leading to certain proof in a field of study with a defined area of competence—these are the qualities Wolf finds in the study of nature which he wishes to introduce into the study of ancient languages and ancient civilization. The idea is nowhere so clearly expressed in Wolf’s writings as here in this essay, but it lies behind all of his philological work. In the *Prolegomena ad Homerum* he complains of the lack of rigor with which his predecessors have approached the text and the content of the Homeric poems. In the introduction to his edition of Cicero’s *Pro Marcello*, he argues that philological criticism possesses the same power of judgement over dead languages and ancient times that mathematics possesses over remote heavenly bodies. The knowledge won is in its way just as certain as the knowledge “of which the mathematician is so justly proud.”¹¹

⁷ *Kl.Schr.* II 816–17.

⁸ *Kl.Schr.* II 832.

⁹ *Kl.Schr.* II 837n.

¹⁰ *Kl.Schr.* II 856–57.

¹¹ *Kl.Schr.* I 408.

The philologist is the mathematician of the study of antiquity, but the final purpose of that study has possibly no parallel in the natural sciences, and Wolf offers none. The philologist's goal is the knowledge of ancient man himself. Examining the remains of antiquity, he achieves an "organically developed" picture of the national character of the Greeks and the Romans and so learns about human nature itself: "its original powers and tendencies, and all the restrictions and limitations [which act upon them]." ¹² Wolf does not explain in detail the connection between this admirable goal and the rigorous method of study he has already proposed. It seems clear that he has taken the idea from the writings of his friend Humboldt, who claimed as early as 1793 that the study of antiquity aims at a "knowledge of the ancients themselves, or of humanity in antiquity" and defined this knowledge of humanity as that of "the various intellectual, sensual, and moral powers of men." ¹³

These, then, are the cardinal virtues of Wolf's new science: that it can be practiced only by professional scholars; that it is an exact, rigorous science like mathematical physics; and that its aim is the empirical knowledge of human nature. Classicists today would be likely to agree with the first two points and show less enthusiasm for the third: at least, they would probably say that a knowledge of human nature is too much to expect solely from the study of Greek and Roman culture. But the interesting question is what led Friedrich August Wolf, a scholar at the end of the eighteenth century, to emphasize precisely these qualities in his work. To answer this question, it is necessary to call to mind the intellectual climate of the age which produced Wolf.

Wolf spent his adolescent and adult life in the universities of Göttingen, Halle, and Berlin, and the rapidly evolving German academic scene was surely a great influence on his thinking. ¹⁴ Halle (founded in 1694) and Göttingen (1737) led the way in Germany, and indeed in Europe, to new educational means and goals. In the seventeenth century, and still in the eighteenth in the more conservative universities, the goal had been 'a wise and eloquent piety'

¹² *Kl.Schr.* II 883-84.

¹³ See W. von Humboldt, *Werke* II (Darmstadt 1961) 1-24, in particular 1-3. The suggestion that Wolf is borrowing from Humboldt belongs to P. B. Stadler, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Bild der Antike* (Zürich and Stuttgart 1959) 41, 53ff.

¹⁴ For a description of the German academic world, see Friedrich Paulsen, *Das deutsche Bildungswesen in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Leipzig 1912) 60ff.

A student approached the classics in order to learn eloquence and to absorb the wisdom of the ancients, and he certified his learning by producing Latin literature of his own. In the eighteenth century, as the natural sciences gained gradual access to the universities, the study of antiquity also changed. Students read the classics still to absorb their wisdom, but they no longer produced Latin literature of their own. The goal of the 'new humanism' was to understand rather than to imitate. At Göttingen two professors, whose careers together lasted from the founding of the university to the second decade of the nineteenth century, helped classical studies to flourish: J. M. Gesner and his successor Christian Gottlieb Heyne. Both led philological seminars designed to train scholars to fill the few university posts available and the numerous positions as teachers in secondary education. Wolf himself studied under Heyne, though briefly and rather unhappily, and then spent four years as a schoolmaster before his professorship at Halle. The reason there were so few university positions for classicists was that the study of ancient letters was not one of the higher faculties. Even at the progressive schools, philology was still regarded the handmaid of law or theology: Halle was noted for its Pietist theological faculty under Thomasius, while Göttingen excelled at law. In March 1776 the seventeen-year-old Wolf went to Göttingen and obtained an interview with Heyne.¹⁵ When he told the professor that he intended to become a philologist, Heyne responded that that was a foolish idea. Wolf should enroll in the faculty of theology or law; he should not expect to make a profession of studying the classics, since there were hardly half a dozen university chairs available in the whole of Germany. Wolf replied, according to his son-in-law and biographer, that he modestly hoped to fill one of these chairs. The next year, when he enrolled at Göttingen, Wolf insisted on being entered in the register as a 'student of philology,' although this description was not customary at the time.¹⁶ Even during his student days, Wolf clearly felt the need to make classical philology into a profession, and in particular to guarantee its status over against law and theology, the two faculties which had held philology captive, at least in recent German history.

There was also a broader educational trend that threatened the position of the classics in European culture. As early as 1693, John

¹⁵ Körte (*supra* n.1) I 40–41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

Locke in *Some Thoughts on Education* had emphasized that schools should teach subjects that would be useful in later life. Latin should not be abandoned, but it need not be taught to every pupil.¹⁷ In the eighteenth century educators such as Basedow and Pestalozzi began to put the criterion of utility into practice.¹⁸ Everywhere, and particularly in Germany, Rousseau's tract on education, *Émile*, was having its impact. Rousseau devoted his extraordinary rhetorical powers to showing that education should give children the knowledge, experience, and confidence for later life. His ideas seemed to challenge any curriculum that emphasized the ancient languages, simply by posing the question: how do most children benefit by studying Latin and Greek? Wolf understood the threat posed by contemporary educational trends. He referred disdainfully to the criterion of utility in the "Darstellung" and elsewhere, and he knew well that Latin had ceased to be the common language of scientific and philosophical debate as it had been in the seventeenth century. It is ironic that, in coming to Halle, Wolf had replaced one of the educational reformers, Trapp, who had been unsuccessful in turning pedagogy into a university discipline. Wolf intended to succeed precisely where Trapp had failed, by compelling the German university system to recognize a small group of scholars as the custodians of ancient culture. These scholars would cultivate their Latin and Greek even if the rest of Europe forgot.

There was a second struggle for recognition in which the German classical scholar needed to take part, though in this struggle he worked side by side with colleagues from all fields of science and letters. For much of the eighteenth century German culture had been dominated by the French. Although Friedrich the Great had raised Prussia to the rank of a major military power in Europe, he had not performed a similar service for German literature. The king himself preferred to speak and write cultivated French rather than his native language. At the middle of the century, any impartial observer could find little in Germany to compare with the achievements of Montesquieu, Voltaire, or such rising stars as Diderot and Rousseau. The situation was to change drastically, so that by the end of the century the

¹⁷ Peter Gay, *John Locke on Education* (New York 1964), in particular 108ff. Latin is necessary for the gentleman but is best learned casually, through some conversational method and as play. Sons of tradesmen do not need Latin.

¹⁸ Paulsen (*supra* n.14) 99ff.

Germans could boast of Goethe, Kant, Schiller, and many others. But then political fortunes turned against Germany. Defeat at the Battle of Jena in 1806 and the humiliating Peace of Tilsit made Germany, in particular Prussia, once again subject to French domination. The German response was cultural as well as political. German scholars and scientists felt that they too should do their duty in re-establishing the reputation of their homeland. The founding of the University of Berlin in 1810 was as much an answer to Napoleon's invasion as was the Battle of Leipzig in 1813, and in the nineteenth century the Germans were perhaps nearly as proud of their scholarship and natural science, which now far surpassed the French in many areas, as they were of their political and military achievements.

Wolf spent his entire academic career in Prussia, at Halle and Berlin, and had patriotic sentiments toward Germany and its leading state. In addition to his compliments paid in the "Darstellung" itself, Wolf wrote a Latin eulogy of Friedrich the Great, as well as an essay on his versification. He also wrote that during his years at Halle "the name of Friedrich II rang sweetly in my ears."¹⁹ On the other hand, he seems to have taken little interest in French literature. Although he was eventually made a member of the French Academy, I believe there is no record of any contact with the real leaders of culture in the period. Wolf did, however, approve of the work of Goethe, as the dedication to the "Darstellung" shows, and had met or corresponded with other German men of letters. His main concern, of course, would be the contribution of his own discipline to the renaissance of German culture: he could point to the fact that during his lifetime German classical scholarship had achieved undisputed mastery of the field. If there was any doubt about it in 1780, there could be none in the years following the establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810, and two leading professors on that faculty were Wolf's own students—Boeckh and Bekker. Throughout the century German classical scholarship was unsurpassed in its volume and its quality—judged at least by Wolf's own standard of detail and precision.

We turn finally to the most important element in the eighteenth-century background of Wolf's thinking: the spectacular growth of the physical sciences. Isaac Newton had provided the foundation for mechanics in his *Principia Mathematica* in 1687, in one sense summing

¹⁹ See the *Kl.Schr.* for these works. The remark about the name of Friedrich in Wolf's ears comes from a sketch of an autobiography, printed in Reiter (*supra* n.1) II 345.

up the work of the great mathematicians of the seventeenth century, but in another sense breaking new ground and spelling out the task of a fully mathematical physics of motion. The circle of mathematicians who could read Newton with full understanding was small, but Newton's influence was of course vast, because even for men of a general literary education his 'natural philosophy' seemed to provide a paradigm of what the reasoning human mind can achieve. Newton's analysis of the motion of the planets was a stunning illustration of the scientific method. Popularizers, such as Voltaire and indeed the classicist Richard Bentley,²⁰ made Newton's results available without the mathematical detail, just as popularizers have had to do with the theories of relativity and quantum physics in our own century. The catch-phrase from Newton himself—"I do not feign hypotheses"—suggested a simple picture: a man working from exhaustive experiment through careful induction to the general truths of nature. And the truths themselves were so compelling. Through the theory of gravitation Newton had conclusively united phenomena of the heavens and those of the earth, which had been separated by nearly all physicists since ancient times. The metaphysical interpretations of his work remained a subject of controversy for some time, though by the mid-eighteenth century even that controversy was dying down. But the success of his equations, the lovely certainty that mathematics seemed to provide, could not be denied.

Altogether, Newton's was an intellectual achievement with which every thinking man in the eighteenth century had to come to terms.²¹ Poets like Pope could simply praise Newton and continue to write satires of English society. Philosophers, on the other hand, could not help feeling the persistent challenge as well as the extraordinary opportunity offered by the new physics. After all, Newton's physics, then called 'natural philosophy', had coopted an area of experience, the structure of the physical universe, which had traditionally belonged to philosophy—Aristotle's physics was nothing but philosophy. Philosophically minded men of letters saw themselves excluded from serious debate over questions of motion in the universe, and as physics became more certain of itself throughout the

²⁰ Bentley in his Boyle Lectures, published in 1692, and Voltaire in his essay on Newton's physics and optics, *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*, published in 1737.

²¹ For an account of the *philosophes'* reaction to Newton, see P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* II (London 1969) 126ff.

eighteenth century, it threatened to enlarge its sphere of competence, always at the expense of traditional philosophy. Some philosophers, in particular Hume and Kant, responded by trying to develop a philosophy of science. By examining the metaphysical and epistemological foundations of science, they hoped to secure a sphere of competence for philosophy which no advance in physics could threaten. Another response to science was to attempt to match its success by imitating its method.²² So the eighteenth century saw the birth of the ‘sciences of man’, as Hume called them: psychology, sociology, political economy, and scientific history. Such *philosophes* as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Adam Smith, and Hume sought to do for the study of man and society what Newton had done for the study of nature—to put that study on a firm basis from which it could grow as rapidly and as surely as Newton’s natural philosophy was growing. Many of the *philosophes* were quite conscious about their attempt to apply Newton’s method to man and society: it was the highest compliment that one *philosophe* could pay another to say that he was the Newton of his field.

What impressed men of letters about the scientific study of nature was surely that the natural philosopher seemed to go about his business with a clear plan of action (experiments leading by induction to mathematical laws) and to offer certain proofs for his conclusions (the certainty provided by mathematics). The accumulation of knowledge, assured because each detail was verified by scientific method, was the fondest dream of every student of man and society. The social philosophers were particularly eager to end the backtracking and duplication of effort that had characterized history and psychology up to their day.

Friedrich Wolf claimed all of these scientific qualities for his *Altertumswissenschaft*. He was trying to do for the study of classics what Hume tried to do for psychology, Smith for economics, Voltaire for history: to make the study into a science in accord with his conception of the physical sciences of his day. Early in the “*Darstellung*” Wolf expresses the hope that, since man is a part of nature, natural studies will include the study of man.²³ By his way of thinking, *Altertumswissenschaft* takes its place alongside physics in contributing to

²² This response is carefully documented by Gay: it is a major thesis of the second volume of *The Enlightenment* (*supra* n.21); see in particular 8ff, 126ff, 180ff, and 334ff.

²³ *Kl.Schr.* II 813.

our scientific understanding of nature as a whole, particularly because *Altertumswissenschaft* achieves empirical knowledge of human nature itself, by studying the remarkable cultural example of the ancient world. This science of antiquity is not yet completely formed; it must still win a “separate province and certain limits.”²⁴ The scholar must be able to decide what belongs to this new science and what does not. He must have a method that he can point to as distinctly philological, and the application of this method must lead to certain proofs: Wolf more than once speaks of demonstrating truths about ancient literature and culture with the same certainty that a mathematical physicist achieves in his equations.²⁵ Finally, knowledge must be cumulative: the purpose of the “*Darstellung*” as an outline of classical studies is to show what sound philology has already established and to sketch the areas in which more research is needed. (Classicists before and after Wolf have been particularly eager to demonstrate that their knowledge of antiquity is cumulative; very few other disciplines have produced an encyclopedia like the Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie*, which attempts in over eighty thick volumes to capture all our knowledge of antiquity.) Wolf’s principal concern in the “*Darstellung*” is to place *Altertumswissenschaft* among those “all-dominating sciences of our day.”²⁶

In Wolf’s eyes (as in Hume’s or for that matter in those of a twentieth century sociologist), the main problem in establishing a new science is finding a suitable method. Knowledge of the subject will accumulate when proofs are certain, and proofs are certain when the method is sound. For many fields experiments, modelled after those of the physicist, are possible, but not for classical studies. The philologist must be content with the remains of classical civilization that long ages have grudgingly left him: ruins of buildings, statues, inscriptions, and literature. In Wolf’s day all the avenues to the ancient world except that of the literary tradition were narrow indeed. One of Wolf’s contributions was to emphasize the importance of coins, archaeological remains, and the like in forming an accurate judgement of antiquity. Still, none of these materials could be manipulated experimentally in the eighteenth century, in the way the physicist could manipulate projectiles in motion to verify the laws

²⁴ “ein gesondertes Gebiet and sichere Grenzen,” *Kl.Schr.* II 816.

²⁵ See, for example, *Kl.Schr.* I 408 and II 832.

²⁶ “die allherrschenden Wissenschaften der Zeit,” *Kl.Schr.* II 860.

of mechanics. But that in itself was no cause for despair: the astronomer cannot experiment on the planets, and yet he draws conclusions about their motion and even the gravitational forces they generate.

To make up for the fact that he cannot directly observe or experiment on the ancient world, the classical scholar must use every scrap of evidence that has come down to him. Wolf regarded an encyclopedic knowledge of the classics as the indispensable foundation of any scientific study. A gentleman's acquaintance with the best authors was hardly a beginning; the scholar must study with unremitting diligence. Wolf's own diligence was legendary: as a youth he is said to have studied far into the night, reading with one eye while resting the other, and with his feet in a pail of cold water to keep himself alert.²⁷ In his effort to master all the available evidence, Wolf, like Richard Bentley before him and all the best classicists of the eighteenth century, poured over such texts as Hesychius or the *Suda*, which preserve amid masses of irrelevant and distorted material precious bits of evidence about the more ancient and, for most, more interesting times. Wolf and his followers were the first to insist that all this dubious and often conflicting material needs to be consulted—that if a classicist wishes to study Homer he must also study systematically the testimony of Aristarchus, Cicero, Josephus, Eustathius, and a score of other ancient and mediaeval sources.

This encyclopedic yet precise method of study determines the questions about the ancient world that may be asked. Wolf clearly preferred questions which seemed to allow a definitive, objective answer. He emphasized textual criticism for just this reason, as did his followers in the nineteenth century. The goal of the textual critic is, or seems to be, clear: to bring the text back to the state in which it left the hand of its author. The critic must remove, then, the accumulated errors of generations of copying, by comparing the conflicting testimony of existing manuscripts and by using his own detailed knowledge of the ancient languages and culture, first to find the errors and then to suggest corrections. Ideally, there is one right answer to every textual question. The critic is precisely right if he finds the word or phrase the ancient author really wrote, and wrong in so far as his suggestion varies from this ideal. Wolf's scheme of *Altertums-wissenschaft*, of course, allows for much more than textual criticism.

²⁷ Körte (*supra* n.1) I 21–22.

But questions that can be answered Yes or No have preference, because they can lead to the accumulation of knowledge.

Wolf's own scholarship provides a cardinal example of his scientific method of criticism in his study of the Homeric poems. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had been favorites of Wolf at least since his days as a student at Göttingen; he often lectured on Homer at Halle and in 1784–85 prepared a school edition of the epics. In 1794–95 he revised this edition and provided an introduction in a separate volume, the *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, which raised intense controversy among European men of letters.²⁸ Wolf claimed that the two epics were not the unified works of a single author but collections of smaller poems, edited into their present form at Athens in the time of the tyrant Pisistratus. Homer himself, that is, the poet to whom the poems were ascribed, lived long before the invention of writing. Short poems from his time were preserved by memory, until they could be woven into the fabric of a long epic in Athens. Now to the literary community the conclusion that the great Greek epics were not products of a single creative mind, but rather of a committee, was potentially very distressing. Wolf adopted a tone in the *Prolegomena* suitable to scientific inquiry, as if unaware of the magnitude of the “literary impiety,” as a fellow scholar called it. The *Prolegomena* is at any rate not an essay in literary criticism but one in textual criticism. Wolf begins with several pages of examples: places where he has improved the text over his predecessors. He complains that others have not exercised sufficient diligence and precision in establishing the right readings. Then he proposes to review the history of the text of the Homeric poems, and it is in this context that his Homeric theory emerges. He draws on every bit of available evidence: inscriptions to establish when the art of writing came to Greece, a passage in Cicero and one in Josephus to suggest the Athenian editing of the poems, the newly published manuscript with valuable notes from Alexandrian scholars, and so on. The evidence properly weighed allows Wolf to arrive at a certain truth about antiquity, the multiple authorship of the Homeric poems—a truth which happens to contradict the received, unscientific opinion, no less wrong simply because it has been believed for centuries. The startling conclusion begins from the study of the history of the text. Wolf claims there is

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 263ff.

also evidence of interpretation: that when a scholar reads the *Iliad* critically he can find inconsistencies that betray the work of an editor. He promises to present this evidence in a second volume, which in fact he never wrote. This too is significant. Textual criticism comes first, literary criticism second, and criticism of both kinds is best directed to establishing a scientific conclusion, such as the multiple authorship of the *Iliad*.

The reactions to Wolf's essay varied widely.²⁹ Wilhelm von Humboldt, Wieland, and of course Wolf's students accepted his conclusion wholeheartedly. Some rejected it outright as a literary impiety. Others, like Goethe, vacillated between belief and rejection. Goethe read the *Prolegomena* carefully and had considerable respect for its author's learning, but he could never fully overcome his conviction that such a poem as the *Iliad* must be the product of one creative imagination. Wolf was more upset by the reaction of Herder and of Heyne, the professor at Göttingen from Wolf's student days. Both these men claimed they had known for years of the multiple authorship of the Homeric poems. Wolf responded to Heyne with a series of open letters, in a tone of increasing violence.³⁰ Just after publication of the *Prolegomena* in 1795, Herder published an essay "Homer, Time's Favorite"—a piece in German for the educated reading public, in which he explained that the Homeric poems were folk poetry. Like the works ascribed to Ossian, they were the expression of a whole people's creativity.³¹ As Herder mentioned Wolf's book only in passing, in a footnote, the scholar felt slighted and published a short, angry review of Herder's essay. He attacked the author for having produced an inadequate, popular piece. Wolf's own book had been written for the expert; such a work could be judged only by experts, and only through their judgement should conclusions be allowed to pass to the greater public. Herder's essay itself, Wolf continued, might fairly be called *ein Günstling der Zeit*, a product of its time, in the sense that it substitutes "a mix of common

²⁹ For the reactions, see Körte (*supra* n. 1) I 276ff and II 20ff. Goethe's vacillations are described by M. Bernays in his introduction to *Goethes Briefe an Fr. Aug. Wolf* (Berlin 1868) 13ff.

³⁰ The documents of this literary quarrel are present in Peppmüller's reprint of Wolf's *Prolegomena* (*supra* n.1).

³¹ See Herder, "Homer: Ein Günstling der Zeit," *Sämtliche Werke* XVIII (Berlin 1883) 420–46. For Wolf's reply see *Kl.Schr.* II 724–28.

and inadequately understood thoughts” in place of solid proof.³² A field such as Homeric studies demands rigorous proof.

Much of the violence of Wolf’s reaction to Heyne and Herder was due to personal animosity. It is clear from Wolf’s letters to the poet Voss that Wolf hated Heyne even before this episode.³³ Heyne apparently felt little warmth for Wolf. Wolf believed his reputation at stake, especially since Heyne was a renowned professional classicist, who condemned Wolf’s work not for being impious but simply for being unoriginal. But Wolf’s anger was also grounded in his conviction that the classics should be studied as a science. Heyne and Herder could not have known of the true nature of Homeric poetry. Their reading may have given them vague intuitions of the poems as edited works, but they had not bothered to apply rigorous methods to support their intuitions. If Herder could casually suggest the answer without acquiring the professional skills to support his suggestion, the result would be not merely that Wolf’s own contribution is neglected but also that his critical method, his scheme for the new science, is belittled. For Wolf the results justified the method, and at the same time the method vindicated the results. Herder and perhaps Heyne too failed to realize how important the method was to Wolf, and so the two sides could not help but talk past one another.³⁴

Wolf would surely have been disappointed by the eventual fate of his prize application of critical method. His Homeric theory was hotly debated for a time, and literary men such as Wieland or Goethe took sides, just as did the scholars of the day. In the course of the nineteenth century the gulf between scholars and poets grew wider. Virtually every German classical scholar accepted in some form the theory of multiple authorship: they were after all Wolf’s pupils or pupils of his pupils or somehow touched by his great influence. They

³² “Das Ganze aber ist ein Gemisch von gemeinen und halbverstandenen Gedanken. . .” *Kl.Schr.* II 726.

³³ See Reiter (*supra* n.1) I 151–55. In one letter Wolf writes to Voss: “My hatred of Heyne has reached such a pitch since our acquaintance, that I cannot think of him without affecting my nerves.” These lines were written in April 1795, before Heyne’s review of the *Prolegomena*.

³⁴ Giambattista Vico had much earlier claimed that Homer was collective poetry, in his *Scienza Nuova* in 1744. But Vico’s ‘new science’ was anything but science in Wolf’s sense—a mixture of every imaginable kind of reasoning from allegory to dry legal argument. Vico presented no threat to Wolf’s ideal of scholarship, and Wolf felt safe to praise his interesting visions, as he called them. See “Giambattista Vico über Homer,” *Kl.Schr.* II 1157–66, particularly the last page.

read the poems always searching for inconsistencies of plot, style, and diction. The general literary public, however, continued to treat the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as unified works and no longer bothered much about scholarly theories. This in itself would not have upset Wolf, since he was writing only for professional classicists. Yet in the twentieth century, as we know, many scholars began to return to the view that each of the two epics was a unified work, principally the product of one poet. In Wolf's terms they took a step backward and simply denied what he regarded as certain proof.

Of course Wolf had chosen a controversial topic in which to demonstrate his technique. If he had taken another author or set less ambitious goals, the results might have been more widely and permanently accepted. It might seem that Wolf wanted to be controversial. He presented his material in the *Prolegomena* in the driest possible way, but he knew quite well that every educated European would be upset to learn that there was no single poetic genius behind the most famous epics of all time. But Wolf did not enjoy controversy: he was in fact an unhappy man, whose frequent quarrels with colleagues caused him much pain. He simply wanted to show that his scientific approach could achieve new and startling results. He might well have fancied himself a humanistic Copernicus or Galileo who exposed false opinions about the great figures of antiquity, opinions which had been held by even the most enlightened men for centuries.

Even when scholars rejected Wolf's specific conclusions, they followed faithfully his vision of classics as a profession and as a science. In the nineteenth century in Germany, philologists came to occupy positions of the highest respect and influence in the universities. These universities were modelled on Berlin, and at Berlin a professor was expected to be a researcher as much as a teacher—a professional who contributed to the accumulating knowledge in his field.³⁵ Wolf's pupil Bekker hardly taught at all during half a century's tenure at Berlin, devoting his energies to textual criticism and turning out an imposing series of editions of ancient authors.³⁶ We could point to a score of German scholars in this period who wrote grammars or lexica, collected inscriptions or fragments and testimonia, studied Greek metrics, or compared Greek and Latin

³⁵ See Paulsen (*supra* n.14) 115ff.

³⁶ Sandys (*supra* n.1) 85–87.

with other Indo-European languages—all in the spirit of Wolf’s program of *Altertumswissenschaft*. Wolf’s own pronouncements on the new science were not forgotten. Boeckh taught for fifty-five years and gave no fewer than twenty-six times a course of lectures on the “Encyclopedia and Methodology of the Philological Sciences.” Boeckh disagreed with his teacher on many points but did not question the idea that philology is a science by which we secure knowledge of the ancient world.³⁷

Modern scholars study the classics as they do in large part because they share the assumptions of Wolf and his followers. It remains important, therefore, to understand the intellectual climate which led Wolf to his definition of classical studies—to realize that professional humanism begins, like the social sciences in the eighteenth century, as a reaction to the success of the physical sciences. We may then ask whether the decision to emulate the physical sciences was, or continues to be, a wise one. The question is made more complex and more interesting by the existence of an alternative tradition of humanism: that of the talented amateurs in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment who read and used the classics without professional or scientific motives, simply because they felt that classical authors still spoke to their concerns. The followers of Wolf consciously chose to break with this tradition, and the impact and wisdom of this break surely deserve examination.

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³⁷ A. Boeckh, *Encyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, herausgegeben von E. Bratuscheck (Leipzig 1886).