

Homer in Germany Around 1800: F. A. Wolf's *Prolegomena* and Its Immediate Impact

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1 Amongst Poets and Thinkers

Friedrich August Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* was published in 1795 amid a great literary movement, arguably the greatest in Germany's intellectual history. Greek literature was then the central cultural reference, with Homer as both the first and greatest author in every respect. The major writers of the day, such as Johann Gottfried von Herder, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schlegel, Friedrich Hölderlin, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Friedrich Schiller, to name only a few, were keenly interested in classical philology. Mediators in this were Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) and Johann Heinrich Voß (1751–1826), the author of the acclaimed translations of the *Odyssey* (1781) and the *Iliad* (1793). Many scholars and poets were in close personal contact. Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729–1812), one of the greatest philologists of the time, had been Wolf's teacher in Göttingen, as well as of Voß, the brothers Schlegel, W. von Humboldt, and many others. Wolf himself maintained a regular correspondence with Voß, Humboldt, and Goethe.¹ Moreover, Wolf's Homer was associated with the widespread notion of original, popular poetry. As Anthony Grafton observes in his masterly introduction,² the *Prolegomena*'s "vision of a primitive Homer captivated poets." It remains to be seen, however, to what extent Wolf's Homer truly fits the image of the primitive poet.

This context contributes to explaining how the *Prolegomena* could produce the sensation it did in both literary and scholarly circles. As Joachim Wohlleben puts it, it fell "like a bomb" in the peaceful German landscape.³ It provoked indignation in many: Homer's identity was destroyed, reduced to being only one of the many Homeridae, or collective singers, in a long and varied oral and later textual tradition. This was an affront to the prevailing notion of the

1 See Reiter (1935) vols. 1–2.

2 Grafton (1985) ix.

3 Wohlleben (1996) 155.

autonomy of the artwork as a normative principle. Most contemporaries, however, defended Wolf's Homer: Heyne, Herder, and, with more enthusiasm, F. Schlegel and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. Meanwhile, Goethe's reaction changed over time. In the following, I focus on Wolf's views, after which I turn to its reception among literary and philosophical figures.

2 Theses and Arguments

Let me summarise Wolf's position. The Homeric age was without writing, as it can be inferred from the fact that, in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, "no mention of writing is made."⁴ The Homeric poems must therefore have been composed orally. We owe the oral preservation of the Homeric poems over a long period of time to the rhapsodes, that is, professional reciters. Recitation was the only way to make one's thoughts public. The philosopher Xenophanes, for instance, is supposed to have performed his poems as a rhapsode (Diogenes Laertius 9.18).⁵ The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* thus derive from individual songs transmitted by various rhapsodes. These songs must have been short enough to allow for memorisation. The view that the long Homeric epic poems must originally have been short poems, later put together, was perceived by many as Wolf's most revolutionary claim. Thus, the traditional character of Homeric poetry rests on the school of professional rhapsodes and their craftsmanship.⁶ Recitation was "performed with lively impulse and emotion,"⁷ and easily led to unintentional changes. Indeed, the Homeric poems themselves present bards/rhapsodes, Phemius and Demodocus, performing⁸ and being capable of eliciting a strong emotional response from the audience. This is confirmed by Plato's dialogue *Ion* (535e).⁹ Hence, the paramount importance of understanding ancient audiences.¹⁰ Since the rhapsodes were poets themselves, they felt free to alter the inherited songs, thinking they could improve them

4 Wolf (1985) ch. 20, 100 [1884, 66]. For all references to Wolf, I quote the English translation first and the original (Latin or German) in brackets; likewise for Humboldt, Schelling, and Gadamer.

5 Wolf (1985) ch. 22, 106, n. 64 [1884, 124, n. 24].

6 Wolf (1985) ch. 24, 108 [1884, 78].

7 Wolf (1985) ch. 25, 111 [1884, 80].

8 Wolf (1985) ch. 22, 104 [1884, 72].

9 Wolf (1985) ch. 22, 105, n. 59 [1884, 72, n. 59].

10 Wolf's imaginative reconstruction of this dimension of oral culture is one of his great merits. On this, see Haugen (2021) 507–12.

here and there.¹¹ Thus, “nothing remained certain and constant (*nihil certum et constans fuit*) through several centuries, since it depended partly upon the places and times of recitation and partly upon the genius and judgement (*ab ingenio et iudicio*) of the rhapsodes.”¹² For ancient evidence confirming the initial oral expression and transmission of the Homeric poems, Wolf refers to Cicero (*De oratore* 3.34.137), Pausanias (7.26.13), Josephus (*Against Apion* 1.2.12), and Aelian (*V.H.* 13.14). These testimonies express “the consensus of tradition [which] attests (*consentiens fama testatur*) that Pisistratus was the first to set down the poems of Homer in writing.”¹³ One point all agree on, claims Wolf: until Pisistratus’ time, “both epics of Homer were sung only bit by bit and in different orders (*particulatim ac diverso ordine*), and each bit had its own popular name.”¹⁴ Thus, from short and dispersed songs, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were consolidated into long and unified written poems for the first time through Pisistratus’ edition.¹⁵ This long, initial oral period in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, so poorly documented, was followed in turn by a long textual history, in which revisions, rearrangements, and deletion began, reaching its period of most intense activity with the Alexandrian critics. The Athenian text, which originated in Pisistratus’ time, was then further altered by the διασκευασταί (“editors” or better “revisers”; from διασκευάζω: “to revise, edit, prepare”), above all the Hellenistic critics such as Zenodotus, Aristophanes of Byzantium, and Aristarchus.¹⁶ The activity of revision, according to Wolf, was mostly based on the aesthetic principles of the time, not on historical considerations typical of modern research. Ancient critics “were driven by the very supremacy of the poems to omit nothing by which it might be increased and by which the most perfect polish of language and poetic art might be contrived.”¹⁷ It is “the common error” into which everyone easily falls to believe that the ancient critics were “similar to those of the present day, and in particular that Aristarchus is very like Bentley or Valckenaer or anyone else who improves the ancient texts with equal brilliance.”¹⁸ Modern philology can only hope, Wolf claims, to reconstruct the vulgate text of late antiquity based on

11 Wolf (1985) ch. 25, 111 [1884, 80].

12 Wolf (1985) ch. 25, 113 [1884, 83].

13 Wolf (1985) ch. 33, 137 [1884, 109]; italics in the original.

14 Wolf (1985) ch. 25, 113 [1884, 82].

15 As Grafton underlines, while Wolf speaks here with confidence, he does not refer to any writer earlier than Cicero. Grafton (Wolf 1985, 137, n. a) adds: “Sources earlier than Cicero have much to say about Pisistratus but nothing at all about his literary activities.”

16 Cf. Grafton (1991b) 224.

17 Wolf (1985) ch. 46, 192 [1884, 181].

18 Wolf (1985) ch. 46, 190 [1884, 179].

the Alexandrian recensions.¹⁹ We are, in other words, far removed from “the original Homer,” wrongly believed to be “both the first and perfect in all regards (*primus et omnibus numeris absolutus*),” notably by Aristotle in *Poetics* 24 (1459b12–3).²⁰ The two Homeric epics we have are largely the result of a long process of revision on the part of ancient critics, who, while improving the text, also altered it. Homeric poetry thus is “the result not of nature but of art (*non naturae, sed artis*),” “the planning out of a continuous story which is so long and so varied in its episodes,” and its “artistic structure was introduced by later ages.”²¹

In short, as Joachim Latacz sums up, the main characteristics of early Homeric poetry, in Wolf’s view, are threefold: orality, tradition, and change.²² The methodological problems of modern scholars include the rhapsode’s free use of the poems and the same “lack of critical method” among the critics later, who “ignored the first law of history (*prima lege historiae*) and changed and deleted those passages in which Homer seemed to err, to slip, or to sleep.”²³ The historical task is thus to go back in mind and “examine carefully the whole method of ancient criticism, and form a true mental image of it.”²⁴ Wolf’s method is thus emphatically historical, indeed historicistic. This means that the past must be studied according to specific periods.²⁵ The importance of periodisation is inseparable from the history of words, whose meaning changes through time, so that the language of an author is to be understood as part of the history of that language.²⁶ This is why Wolf achieves his narrative history in chronological periodisation, in six ages, for which he provides individual, detailed portraits, ending his actual analysis, however, in the middle of the third, with Crates: first “from the origins, that is, from the time of the poetry of the Ionians (around 950 BC) to Pisistratus,” responsible for the first written

19 Wolf writes in a letter from December 14, 1795, to Heyne: “wir können in dieser Rücksicht schlechterdings nicht höher als auf die Alexandrinischen Zeiten zurückgehen” (Wolf [1884] 258; this letter is absent from Wolf [1985]).

20 Wolf (1985) ch. 28, 123, n. 89 [1884, 93 n. 89]. On the influence of Aristotle and his school on Alexandrian scholarship, see Bouchard (2016).

21 Wolf (1985) ch. 28, 121 [1884, 91]; Wolf (1985) ch. 28, 123 [Wolf 1884, 93–4]; Wolf (1985) ch. 31, 131 [1884, 102].

22 Latacz (1979b) 30.

23 Wolf (1985) ch. 46, 191 [1884, 179]. Cf. Horace, *Ars poetica*, v. 359: *quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus* (“whenever good Homer nods”).

24 Wolf (1985) ch. 46, 190 [1884, 179].

25 Wolf (1807a) 55.

26 Wolf (1831) 276–7.

corpus of the two epics; second, from Pisistratus to Zenodotus, the first of the grammarians and Homeric critics; third, from Zenodotus to Apion.²⁷

3 Ambivalence

Wolf defends critical history as science in opposition to the timeless aesthetic norms associated with the “divine Homer.” Yet, in the *Prolegomena*, Wolf remains ambivalent about Homer’s status. In a letter from November 18, 1795, to Heyne, he admits to leaving the crucial question undecided, despite his frequent assertive and combative tone:

The last decisive question was simply left *undecided* (*Die letzte entscheidende Frage war bloss dahin gestellt*): Is *Homer* (the first and best singer (*Sänger*) of Trojan legends), or are the *rhapsodes* by their ῥαφή [“stitching”], or the *collectors, organisers, revisers* (*die Sammler, Ordner, Diaskeuasten*) or the later *correctors and critics* (*Berichtiger und Kritiker*) the *principal* creators (*die vornehmsten Urheber*) of the great artistic compositions that lie before us? Whom do we have to thank for the greater part of this artistry (*das meiste dieser Kunst*)?²⁸

Wolf’s undecidedness is due to the fact that historical evidence did not allow for certainty but only “historical probability,” as Heyne remarked in his review.²⁹ But his undecidedness may also be symptomatic of the underlying ambivalence of his conception of classical philology. Indeed, he stands in many ways between historicism and humanism. Rudolf Pfeiffer opens his chapter on Wolf by calling him the “last and greatest of Winckelmann’s followers.”³⁰ Wolf did write a biographical essay on the young Winckelmann as a philologist at the invitation of Goethe for inclusion in the latter’s *Winckelmann and his Century* (*Winckelmann und sein Jahrhundert*, 1805).³¹ According to Pfeiffer, Wolf’s admiration for Richard Bentley’s strict critical method would have served to temper his humanistic enthusiasm. Wolf’s humanism, as Neschke-Hentschke argues,³² might derive not only from Winckelmann but also, and

²⁷ Wolf (1985) ch. 7, 57–8 [1884, 16–17].

²⁸ Wolf (1985) 235 [1884, 239]; italics in the original.

²⁹ Wolf (1985) 238 [1884, 243].

³⁰ Pfeiffer (1976) 173.

³¹ Wolf (1869b).

³² Neschke-Hentschke (1998) 190.

even more so according to her, from a philosophical anthropology inherited from the metaphysical tradition. Moreover, in his second major publication, *Presentation of the Science of Antiquity* (*Darstellung der Altertumswissenschaft*, 1807) dedicated to Goethe, Wolf seeks to harmonise his historicism with humanistic and more broadly Enlightenment values about human nature (I say more on this below). While advancing, in the *Prolegomena*, rigorous sceptical arguments about the existence of Homer, Wolf opens his school edition of the Homeric poems (1804–1807) with a picture of the traditional bust of Homer. And nothing is more striking than the *Prolegomena*'s subtitle, referring to the original Homer: *Or Concerning the Original and Genuine Form (prisca et genuina forma) of the Homeric Works and their Various Alterations and the Proper Method of Emendation*.³³ This subtitle paradoxically expresses the hope of reaching the *Urtext*.³⁴ While he says his “single primary intention (*mihi unum propositum [...] praecipue*) was to correct (*emendarem*) the text of Homer by the standard of learned antiquity,”³⁵ he failed to reach that goal, since the Alexandrian text has been preserved, he believes, in corrupt manuscripts. As a result, both the Analysts and the Unitarians will express their debt to Wolf's Homer.³⁶

4 Indebtedness

The question of Wolf's originality was a matter of debate early on and still is. In their reviews of the *Prolegomena*, Heyne and Herder complained more or less overtly about Wolf's unacknowledged indebtedness to their own work. In the twentieth century, Georg Finsler³⁷ and especially Victor Bérard,³⁸ who was particularly hostile to Wolf, claimed that he relied more than he admitted on previous authors, especially Abbé d'Aubignac (1715), Villoison's *Prolegomena* (1788), and Merian (1794). While Wolf does not often name his predecessors, he does refer to most of them, albeit briefly and often critically. Luigi Ferreri³⁹ has abundantly documented the work of Renaissance and, more generally, early

33 Cf. Porter (2021) 35.

34 It is to be noted that Wolf's intensive systematic study of the Homeric text goes as far back as 1778, as a remark in his short autobiography indicates; see Wolf (1935) 340.

35 Wolf (1985) ch. 7, 56 [1884, 15].

36 Grafton (1985) 34 writes: “he was able to sit on both sides of the fence,” referring among others to *Prolegomena*, ch. 49, 50.

37 Finsler (1912) 356.

38 Bérard (1917) *passim*.

39 Ferreri (2007).

modern humanists, and shown their influence upon Wolf. As will become apparent, Wolf's originality does not lie primarily in his theses but in his way of arguing for them, that is, in his method, as well as his literary, rhetorical brilliance.⁴⁰

Wolf refers to Charles Perrault and Abbé d'Aubignac in one long footnote. He relates his reading of the *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes* (1692) and the *Conjectures académiques ou Dissertation sur l'Iliade*, published posthumously (1715) but already available in the 1670s. Wolf agrees with Perrault's criticism of the Homeric epics and with the main theses of Abbé d'Aubignac, while criticising the latter for his "capricious temerity and ignorance of antiquity."⁴¹ As a result, he tells us, thus giving us a glimpse into the genesis of his work: "I began in earnest to seek out arguments in support of the common theory, incoherent as it was. For I saw that no proper response had been made to d'Aubignac by Boileau, Dacier, and others."⁴² In the *Querelle des anciens and modernes*, Perrault had associated deficiencies in Homer with the primitive culture to which he belonged. The defenders of the *anciens* too, including Madame Dacier,⁴³ admitted the historical conditions of Homeric poetry and therewith its historicity. Vico had referred, with much originality, to the primitive conditions, but he was unknown to Wolf until a decade after the *Prolegomena*.⁴⁴ Wolf quotes Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (*Essai sur l'origine des langues*, 1781 posthumously) at length about Homer's primitive culture and the absence of references to writing in his epics.⁴⁵ Herder had already opposed the principle of artistic autonomy and authorial inspiration through his theory of popular, primitive poetry. Wolf's views also bear resemblances to those of other important scholars, such as Blackwell, Gravina, Wood, and Merian. Regarding Robert Wood's *Essay on the Original Genius of Homer* (1769), for instance, he ingeniously writes, "the brilliant audacity of Wood above all has made it possible for me to return to this without causing much offense," praising "the chapter on the poet's language and learning"⁴⁶ and the book as a whole as one containing "many shrewd and fine observations," but he adds that "in Wood's arguments many points are weak, many farfetched."⁴⁷ Wolf intends

40 On the *Prolegomena* as a "literary masterpiece," see Grafton (1991b) 242.

41 Wolf (1985) ch. 25, 117, n. 84 [1884, 87].

42 Wolf (1985) ch. 26, 117, n. 84 [1884, 87].

43 Dacier (1741) xxi. See also Simonsuuri (1979) 46–56.

44 Wolf wrote a belated review of it in 1807: Wolf (1807b).

45 Wolf (1985) 102, n. 54 [1884, 69–70, n. 54].

46 Cf. Wood (1769) 237–92 (chapter entitled "Homer's Language and Learning").

47 Wolf (1985) ch. 12, 71, n. 8 and 73 [1884, 32, n. 8 and 34].

to further develop the cultural and technical approaches of his predecessors to make them into a more rigorous, systematically historical-critical method.

Wolf does not push, however, the notion of primitivism, or “Homer’s original genius,”⁴⁸ very far. Indeed, he insists above all on the work of the Hellenistic scholars and critics. As the product of a long period of revisions, “Homer” clearly differs, he believes, from the primitive, original genius prevailing in the eighteenth century. He does admit that everywhere there were talented poets who achieved much well before the development of sophisticated poetic techniques.⁴⁹ He also uses the term *ingenium* (“genius”) many times to refer to great innate talent, but occasionally, and more neutrally or historically, he means by that term the specific mentality of a specific time or author, such as in “the poet’s own genius (*ingenium*) and usage (*usus*)” as opposed to that of later periods, or *ex illorum temporum ingeniis ac moribus* (“the genius and character of these times”).⁵⁰ Indeed, he rejects “the belief to which we have become accustomed: that these two works of a single genius burst forth suddenly from the darkness in all their brilliance.”⁵¹ On the contrary, his thesis, or hypothesis, as we have seen, is that Homeric poetry is the result of a long and varied formation.

Apart from Eustathios’ famous commentaries, and the various readings of excerpts to be found in them, which Wolf repeatedly studied, he is indebted to Villoison’s “outstanding service,” “the first to publish the two Venetian manuscripts of the *Iliad*.” Wolf thinks, however, that Villoison “provided only excerpts from the works of critics and commentators.”⁵² What is needed, he claims, is a “true, continuous, and systematic recension (*perpetua et certis artis legibus nixa recensio*)” of every aspect of the critic’s handiwork.⁵³ Also needed is a more sceptical use of the Venice scholia, since these had not fully explained, he thinks, the methods of the Alexandrian scholars, who in turn lacked a firm foundation as they had no manuscript older than Pisistratus.⁵⁴ Finally, Merian’s 1794 publication, “The inquiry into the question whether Homer wrote his poems” (“Examen de la question, si Homère a écrit ses poèmes”) also played an apparently decisive role in the composition of the *Prolegomena*. Merian gave, in Wolf’s view, “a learned and eloquent account of Wood’s arguments, and a fresh, acute defence of them [...]”. A quick reading of it at just the right

48 On this notion in the eighteenth century, see Simonsuuri (1979) especially 77–89.

49 Wolf (1985) ch. 49, 204 [1884, 197].

50 Wolf (1985) ch. 9, 63 [1884, 22–23] and Wolf (1985) ch. 24, 111 [Wolf 1884, 79] respectively.

51 Wolf (1985) ch. 35, 148 [1884, 122].

52 Wolf (1985) ch. 4, 49–50 [1884, 8]. See his long review of Villoison (1788): Wolf (1791).

53 Wolf (1985) ch. 1, 44 [1884, 2].

54 Grafton (1985) 17, 22.

time induced me to compress and shorten my arguments further and to omit entirely several arguments that I had made for the same thesis.”⁵⁵ Wolf presents eloquently and forcefully Merian’s argument about the fact that words for “books,” “writing,” or “reading” are absent from the two Homeric epics, γράφειν (“to write”), for instance, having then the sense of engraving. On this, he is also indebted to Eustathius.⁵⁶ In short, Wolf was capable of mustering a vast amount of material and of brilliantly defending key theses of his predecessors.

5 Originality

5.1 *Critical-Historical Method*

Wherein lies, then, the accomplishment of the *Prolegomena*? Not so much, it seems, in its theses about Homeric poetry as in the “spirit of critical and historical inquiry,”⁵⁷ in its “philological precision.”⁵⁸ Wolf did make a critical, rigorous, and systematic use of the scholia contained in the two Venetian codices edited by Villoison. His systematic analysis constitutes the first history of an ancient (pagan) text. As he says in a letter from December 14, 1795, to Heyne, his intention was none other than to “follow the large-scale history of the Homeric text (‘den Gang der Schicksale unsers Homerischen Texts im Grossen [...] zu verfolgen’).”⁵⁹

First, Wolf has the merit of establishing the connection between criticism and history, basing cultural history on textual history. Central in that history is the role of the numerous διασκευασταί (“revisers”), whose function Wolf claims to have rediscovered after centuries of neglect.⁶⁰ The term διασκευαστής would go back to Zenodotus of Ephesus, the first head of the library at Alexandria, who identified such a revision in *Iliad* 18.356–68 by the first revisers attempting to sew two sections together.⁶¹ Among the functions of the “editor-reviser,” Wolf includes critical improvement: διασκευασταί were recognised readers supervising or polishing the text, changing, adding, subtracting, that is, systematically

55 Wolf (1985) ch. 12, 71, n. 8 [1884, 32, n. 8].

56 Wolf (1985) ch. 19, 98, n. 48 [1884, 63–64, n. 46].

57 Pfeiffer (1976) 175.

58 Porter (2011) 938.

59 Wolf (1797) 58.

60 Wolf (1985) ch. 34, 143, n. 14 [1884, 116, n. 14]: “This word’s meaning, which we are investigating, is generally unknown (*Vulgo ignota est vis illius vocabuli, vocabuli, de qua quaerimus*) and it is not listed by Stephanus and Scott.”

61 Wolf (1985) ch. 30, 128 [1884, 99].

modifying it.⁶² On the whole, as we have seen, Wolf's detailed study of the history of the Homeric text refutes, or attempts to refute, the classicistic image of Homer as timeless, transcendent, and divinely inspired.⁶³ The awareness and understanding of that text's historical character are part of the founding moment of German philology as a separate discipline.

According to Wolf, historical understanding ("historische Erklärung," *sensus historicus*) requires that we be "transported to other times and another world,"⁶⁴ that is, that we enter ("versetzen") another's mind and time.⁶⁵ The interpreter must make himself in every way at home ("einheimisch") with his whole soul ("mit ganzer Seele [...] wohnt") in this or that age,⁶⁶ that is, to enter it through imagination.⁶⁷ This view of historical imagination and sympathy, required for understanding a past person or event, was already Heyne's. It also roughly corresponds to Schleiermacher's notion of the divinatory access to the past. Indeed, this is a central tenet of Romantic hermeneutics. While Schleiermacher considers this principle only approximately attainable, Wolf seems to deem it feasible.⁶⁸

5.2 Altertumswissenschaft

Wolf's Homeric studies are generally considered the foundational act of the profession of *Altertumswissenschaft* ("science of antiquity") or Classical Studies. This is the view of Boeckh, Sandys, Pfeiffer, and many others.⁶⁹ To be sure, the professionalisation of *Altertumswissenschaft* eventually led to dividing that which was common domain into the "Homer of the poets" and the "Homer of the professors" or scholars, as Glenn W. Most puts it.⁷⁰ Philology eventually became an autonomous science emancipated from theology, with which it was still closely associated in the eighteenth century.

To what extent is Wolf's conception of *Altertumswissenschaft* as a discipline a novelty, and to what extent is it, for him, a truly independent field?

62 Wolf (1985) ch. 34, 143, n. 14 [1884, ch. 34, 116, n. 14]: *repetito committere fabulam, sed mutando, addendo, detrahendo emendatam, refictam et secundis curis elaboratam* (italics in the original).

63 Wolf (1985) ch. 26, 114 [1884, 83]. Cf. Most (2004) 504.

64 Wolf (1985) ch. 22, 104 [1884, 71].

65 Wolf (1831) 281, 283.

66 Wolf (1807a) 38. Grafton (1991b) 241–2 writes: "No one could explain more powerfully just what it meant to think historically, to recognize the pastness of the past."

67 Wolf (1985) ch. 22, 104 [1884, 71].

68 Schleiermacher (1976) 139: "möglichst" ("as much as possible").

69 Boeckh (1886) 38; Sandys (1903–1908) vol. 3, 71; Pfeiffer (1976) 180.

70 Most (2004) 105.

First, as Anthony Grafton has convincingly shown,⁷¹ Wolf's model in matters of method was his teacher Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, another student of Heyne: Wolf "annexed for classical studies the most sophisticated methods of contemporary biblical scholarship," as expounded in Eichhorn's three-volume *Introduction to the Old Testament* (*Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, 1780–1783). For the texts of the Old Testament, too, had been altered in many ways through the centuries,⁷² which had led to the rise of a rigorous historical method, which Wolf could apply to Homer. Second, Wolf expounds his conception of classical studies in his *Darstellung* from 1807 and in his *Vorlesungen* published posthumously in 1831. While it rests on various sources, including Eichhorn, Wolf invented the comprehensive term *Altertumswissenschaft*, as used in his *Darstellung*,⁷³ encompassing the ancient world as a whole but including that period to the exclusion of others.⁷⁴ His pupil August Boeckh (1785–1867) further systematised that field in his epoch-making *Encyclopedia and Methodology of the Philological Sciences* (*Encyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, 1886) while keeping the same ambitious, unitary object. Boeckh also retained Wolf's humanistic orientation, which in turn was largely based on Wilhelm von Humboldt's conception of Greek culture as unique in human history. In his well-known 1793 study "On the Study of Antiquity" ("Über das Studium des Alterthums"), Humboldt claims that the study of the Greek achievements specifically can train and ennoble the mind.⁷⁵ Wolf's general hermeneutics mature through his friendship with Humboldt, notably regarding language (*Sprache*). The degree of influence of Humboldt on Wolf is not easy to assess, as the collaboration between the two friends was intimate and the impact apparently largely reciprocal⁷⁶ (I return to Humboldt's conception of language at the end). The ultimate aim of reading the Greeks, for Wolf as for Humboldt, is *Bildung*, that is, the ennoblement of both mind and soul.⁷⁷ The meaning and purpose of scholarship had to be defended then. And the problem is still with us. Why study Greek? Why read Homer? What is the value of that study? The question of meaning is inherent, in Wolf's mind, to the *Altertumswissenschaft* insofar as it demands both the

71 Grafton (1985) 18–26; (1991b) 235–40.

72 Wolf (1985) part II, ch. 2, 226 (the fragmentary part II is absent from Wolf 1884).

73 Pfeiffer (1976) 175.

74 Wolf (1807a) 30.

75 Humboldt (1969) 3: "Veredlung und steigenden Ausbildung des Menschen."

76 On this question, see Cerasuolo (2017).

77 Wolf (1807a) 80.

re-enactment (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of ancient life and the explicit comparison (*Vergleichung*) with the contemporary world.⁷⁸

6 The Impact of the *Prolegomena*

I use here the title of a section in Grafton's introduction,⁷⁹ in which he discusses the reception of Wolf's work primarily among scholars, including his teacher Heyne, whom I referred to above.⁸⁰ I focus here instead on philosophers, limiting myself to three major figures: Herder, F. Schlegel, and Schelling.⁸¹ The complex case of Goethe would deserve a treatment of its own.

6.1 J. G. Herder: *Natural Poetry*

In his review "Homer as a Favourite of All Times" ("Homer, ein Günstling der Zeit"), first published in 1795 in *Die Horen*,⁸² Johann Gottfried Herder recognises Wolf's impressive "work, study and critical mind (*Arbeit, Studium und kritische[r] Geist*)."⁸³ He agrees with Wolf's main thesis about Homer and the Homeridae, but deems it the commonly accepted view,⁸⁴ a view defended by some for decades, such as by Blackwell, Wood, and Villoison. The common thesis, as understood by Herder, corresponds to the preference of his own (pre)romantic generation, viewing poetry in terms of natural and collective poetry (*Naturpoesie, Volkspoesie*), as opposed to individual poetry. Herder's review is expressed, however, in very general terms, lacking precision and analytic rigour. Moreover, he discusses Wolf's book as though expounding his own ideas, as in his early writings from the 1760s. Herder agrees, for instance,

78 Wolf (1807a) 33.

79 Grafton (1985) 26–35.

80 Grafton usefully includes at the end of his translation of the *Prolegomena* part of the correspondence of Wolf with Heyne (Grafton 1985, 232–47).

81 On the subject, see the excellent studies by Wohlleben (1990), Matuschek (1998), Thouard (2002b), and Most (2004), which I refer to below. Goethe's reaction to the *Prolegomena* changed over time. After his initial scepticism, he welcomed Wolf's thesis as an invitation to write his own epic *Hermann und Dorothea* (1797). But his adherence to Wolf's thesis is short-lived. The Homer of the poets will prevail over the Homer of the scholars. See Volkmann (1874) 77–9; Trevelyan (1981) 225–39; Wohlleben (1996) 164–70.

82 Now in Herder (1985a) 89–115.

83 Similar is Heyne's overall judgment in his review of the *Prolegomena*: "dieses schöne Denkmal seines kritischen Geistes [sc. Wolf's] wird auch von keinem Zeitalter verkannt werden" (Heyne in Wolf [1884] 245).

84 Herder in a letter from May 13, 1795 to Heyne: "seit Blackwell und Wood hat beinahe niemand daran gezweifelt." (Herder [1861] 230).

that rhapsodes were *extempore* singers, such as Demodocus and Phemius in Homer.⁸⁵ He also agrees that Pisistratus and his contemporaries are responsible for assembling and ordering the rhapsodies and that the Panathenaea was an important occasion, from then on, for the singing of the Homeric poems in Athens, the mother of writing.⁸⁶ Herder is sceptical, however, about Wolf's way of conceiving the overall chronological picture, especially of dividing the text into older and later verses of various origins. Rather, the Homeric epics generally belong to "the childhood of the world" (*Kindheit der Welt*), the native art of speech "crowned with eternal fame" (*mit ewigem Ruhm gekränzt*).⁸⁷

6.2 F. Schlegel: *Progressive Poetry*

Friedrich Schlegel's (1772–1829) "On Homeric Poetry: Concerning the Wolfian Inquiries" ("Über die homerische Poesie: Mit Rücksicht auf die Wolfischen Untersuchungen," 1796) differs profoundly from Herder's in tone, style, and emphasis. His laudatory and insightful analysis is considered by Pfeiffer to be the "most significant response" to the *Prolegomena*.⁸⁸ Wolf's treatise changed Schlegel's own thinking, as shown by his notebooks and other publications from that period, thus contributing to his conception of literature and, therewith, to the early Romantic movement. Humboldt notes in a letter to Schiller from October 1, 1796: "Wolf's *Prolegomena* has had a powerful impact, it seems to me, on [F. Schlegel] (sehr mächtig auf [F. Schlegel] eingewirkt), but Wolf never went so far as he did (nirgends hierin so weit gegangen als er)."⁸⁹ Schlegel's own theory can be regarded as a productive appropriation of Wolf's philological model with regard to Alexandrian criticism.⁹⁰

Schlegel was especially impressed by Wolf's philological-historical arguments in favour of the thesis that we no longer have the Homeric poems in their original form but rather as transformed by the rhapsodes, διασκευασταί ("revisers"), and grammarians. The *Prolegomena* constitutes, in Schlegel's view, "a model of historical research" ("ein Urbild geschichtlicher Forschung").⁹¹ He goes as far as to compare Wolf's acumen to that of Lessing and its theoretical novelty to that of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁹² The originality and achievement of Wolf's historical method would be twofold: first, its emphasis

85 Herder (1985a) 95. Cf. Wolf (1985) ch. 24, 109 [1884, 77].

86 Herder (1985a) 111.

87 Herder (1985a) 112, 115.

88 Pfeiffer (1976) 175.

89 Humboldt (1962) vol. 2, 96.

90 Thouard (2002b) 39.

91 Schlegel 1979 [1796], 510, n. 1.

92 Schlegel 1979 [1796], 116, n. 1.

on the textual, including poetic history, before and after writing; and second, its characterisation of the epic genre as a “polyp.” Let us look at these two aspects separately.

First, Homeric epics are the product of a history of revisions, additions, deletions, that is, of readings in which the role of the διασκευασταί (“revisers”) is decisive. According to Denis Thouard, Schlegel has grasped the full scope of Wolf’s true import: “He has perfectly grasped their scope, namely the questioning of the status of the author-authorship, of the text, and of the critic.”⁹³ The intrinsic link between text and reception corresponds to what Schlegel will soon after call in the *Athenaeum Fragments* “progressive, universal poetry” (*progressive Universalpoesie*).⁹⁴ Again, Schlegel’s interpretation of the *Prolegomena* differs significantly from Herder’s: Wolf’s Homer is largely alien to the notion of original genius or creation, of perfect works of natural poetry; rather, it is about the product of the art and work of critics through the centuries.⁹⁵ It is a mistake, Schlegel maintains, to attribute to Homer the notion of popular genius poetry and mind, as found in Herder.

Secondly, epic, as analysed by Wolf, is a poetic “polyp,” characterised by organicity and abundance, all parts of which can live independently from the others and from the whole.⁹⁶ This polyp analogy implies both infinite divisibility and infinite reproducibility.⁹⁷ The epic poem is like a series or *feuilleton* indefinitely prolonged. This is reflected in the work of the endless διασκευασταί (“revisers”) living at different periods and using various methods. Homeric epic is a polyp also because its language is a mixture of all kinds of dialects, as Aristotle had also recognised.⁹⁸ The epic’s unity differs fundamentally, he points out, from that of drama in not constituting a single and full poetic action but a “poetic action of an indeterminate mass of poetic facts” (*unbestimmten Masse poetischer Begebenheiten*).⁹⁹ This is why the epic poem’s

93 “Il en a parfaitement compris la portée, à savoir la remise en question du statut de l’auteur, du texte et du critique” (Thouard [2002b] 33).

94 Schlegel (2018) 91.

95 Schlegel (1979 [1796]) 130 writes: “Leichtigkeit des Homer ist nicht bloss kunstlose Natürlichkeit, sondern die Frucht der höchsten Vollendung.”

96 Schlegel (1979) 131. Diderot had also used the analogy to characterise Homeric poetry: “Homère, toujours Homère élèvera le génie, familiarisera avec tous les dialectes, offrira des modèles d’éloquence dans tous les genres. Son vers ressemble au polype, vivant dans son tout et dans chacune de ses parties” (Diderot [1875] 481).

97 According to Wohlleben (1996) 162, this is, in Schlegel’s view, Wolf’s single most original thesis about epic, while Thouard (2002b) 29 insists instead on the first aspect, the history of the text and the role of the revisers-editors.

98 Schlegel (1979) 128; Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 22 and 24.

99 Schlegel (1979) 124.

scope is unlimited and begins *in medias res*, as Horace famously remarked.¹⁰⁰ Undetermined and unlimited are also the audience's expectations, astounded and delighted by the rhapsode's telling of new events. The epic's modernity lies in its mode of presentation, which does not allow for overview. The modern reader, too, is taken by unlimited expectations, which ultimately corresponds to the Romantic desire for the infinite (*das Streben nach dem Unendlichen*).¹⁰¹ This means, as Thouard observes, the infinite character of the work of art and the inseparability of creation and criticism.¹⁰² On the whole, then, Schlegel's review emphasises how Wolf's *Prolegomena* questions our relation to classic, aesthetic norms, reflecting on the conditions of our knowledge of antiquity. This reflection, however, leads again to the contradiction between the pedagogical value of ancient literature as a model and the requirements of historical knowledge, a contradiction Friedrich Nietzsche will also have to face a century later in his inaugural lecture on "Homer and Classical Philology" (1869).¹⁰³

In 1800, Schlegel published *Dialogue on Poetry* (*Gespräch über die Poesie*), often considered the first full manifesto of the German Romantic movement.¹⁰⁴ In the section "Epochs of Poetry," Schlegel describes the original source (*Quelle*) of poetry as follows: "In the growth of Homeric poetry we see as it were the formation of all poetry, but the roots escape our gaze."¹⁰⁵ The ultimate source remains mysterious and cannot be explained. While the source of European poetry is Greece, Homer and the Homeridae can only be speculatively conceived through images of inexhaustibility, such as the sea, the spring, and the ocean, images already found in ancient writers. Indeed, Schlegel refers to Quintilian's analogies in speculative connection with Wolf's analysis: just as all rivers have their source in the ocean, Homer is the spring of all eloquence, an analogy allegedly taken from Homer himself (Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.1.46; *Iliad* 21.195–7). The other key section, "Speech on Mythology," deals with the very centre of early Romantic theory. Homer is no longer the individual poet of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; he has become the indispensable made-up word for poetry (*zu einem unentbehrlichen Kunstworte der Poesie*).¹⁰⁶ The first known

100 Horace, *Ars poetica* v. 148; cf. Schlegel (1979) 124.

101 Schlegel (1979) 125.

102 Thouard (2002b) 126.

103 Nietzsche (1982) 251–2.

104 This is the case even though *Das Studium über die griechische Poesie* (1797) already expressed many of the same views, albeit in a less explicit manner; see Preface.

105 Schlegel (1982) vol. 2, 344.

106 Schlegel (1982) vol. 1, 327 (in *Die Geschichte der Poesie der Griechen und Römer*, 1798); Matuschek (1998) 27.

document in which the idea of a “new mythology” is found is the famous two-page fragment “The Oldest programme of German Idealism” (“Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus” 1796–97). There, “Homer” is part of a “mythology of reason” (*Mythologie der Vernunft*).¹⁰⁷ The authorship question has remained, up to this day, an enigma. The names usually associated with it are Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling.¹⁰⁸

6.3 F. W. J. Schelling: Reuniting Force of “Homeros”

If Schlegel’s review of the *Prolegomena* goes beyond Wolf’s views, as Humboldt rightly observed, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854) went even further, probably as no one did or could, in his radically speculative appropriation of them. His *System of Transcendental Idealism* (*System des transcendentalen Idealismus*, 1800) ends with a prospective “new mythology” (*neue Mythologie*). He further explains this notion in his lectures on the *Philosophy of Art* (*Philosophie der Kunst*, 1802–1805), in explicit connection this time with Wolf’s Homer. Schelling claims to follow Wolf in defending the collective identity of “Homer,” while admitting that Wolf’s analyses do not include the notion of the poet creator of myth as a collective individual. First, for Schelling, mythology and Homer are one.¹⁰⁹ Second, Homer is “the general” (*das Allgemeine*) made concrete. Schelling’s underlying intuition, which he shares with other Romantic figures, is the idea that poetry has the unique, harmonious power of overcoming the split forces between head and heart and that “Homer” is the name of that reuniting force. Schelling criticises Wolf’s general hypothesis that the Homeric text has been put together by a series of chance encounters because it overlooks the possibility that an entire people can constitute an individual and that the members of a society can share the same opinions and feelings expressed in poetry.¹¹⁰ More generally still, Schelling inverts Wolf in reuniting that which the latter had separated: “Wolf as a critic simply views the whole matter too empirically and too narrowly limited to the written work itself that we call Homer.”¹¹¹ Schelling’s Homer stands for a speculative identity. He relies here on an etymology common in the eighteenth century: *Homeros* as meaning the “identical.” Identity here is the unity and reciprocal penetration (*Durchdringung*) of the two great forces, namely that of nature through history, and that of history through nature: “the epic itself—the Homeros (literally the

107 Jamme, Schneider (1984) 21–78 (with commentary).

108 For a comprehensive study of the question, see Hansen (1989).

109 Schelling (1989) 52 [1985 vol. 2, 244].

110 Schelling (1989) 215 [1985 vol. 2, 479].

111 Schelling (1989) 52 [1985 vol. 2, 244].

unifying one, the identity (*der Einigende, die Identität*)),” which was the initial element, and will be the final element, fulfilling “the complete destiny of the new art.”¹¹² In other words, Homer, or mythology, conceived as the synthesis of nature and history, brings together modern science and the primordial mythical tale in a cyclical process.¹¹³ This means nothing less than the ultimate aim of world history, in which the world spirit (*Weltgeist*) is complete. Schelling concludes: “It is the highest idea for all history as such of world history.”¹¹⁴ Like F. Schlegel, Schelling uses the metaphor of the ocean to characterise Homeric poetry, “from which all rivers flow out and to which all flow back.”¹¹⁵ He gives it a radical meaning: “the wide ocean that is surrounded only by the vault of heaven; the immensity of the earth itself in its boundlessness (*Unendlichkeit*), for which every possible human standard is found to be inadequate.”¹¹⁶ On the whole, then, as Stefan Matuschek observes,¹¹⁷ the “new mythology” intimately associated with “Homer” is intended as a speculative utopia of social reconciliation, as well as a speculative philosophy of history, similar to the one found in “The Oldest programme of German Idealism.”

7 Wolf's Homer and Language as Dynamic Force

Let us return to Herder and, above all, to Humboldt's conception of language and his close collaboration with Wolf referred to earlier. Humboldt fully agrees with Wolf's explanation of the origins of Homeric poetry.¹¹⁸ This agreement can be linked to Humboldt's own conception of language, even if no clear relation of cause and effect between the two can be established, given the mutual influence between the two men. The question concerning Wolf's originality and significance can be examined in connection with the history of the Homeric text and Humboldt's conception of language, as Ada Neschke-Hentschke and Holger Schmid suggest.¹¹⁹ Let us recall Humboldt's well-known definition of language in *The Diversity of Human Language-Structure* (*Einleitung über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, 1836):

¹¹² Schelling (1989) 82 [1985 vol. 2, 285].

¹¹³ Matuschek (1998) 26.

¹¹⁴ Schelling (1989) 51 [1985, vol. 2, 242–3]. Schelling admits the incomprehensibility (*Unbegreiflichkeit*) of this idea to our age.

¹¹⁵ Schelling (1989) 52 [1985 vol. 2, 244].

¹¹⁶ Schelling (1989) 86 [1985 vol. 2, 479].

¹¹⁷ Matuschek (1998) 24.

¹¹⁸ Humboldt (1988) 178 [1974, 251].

¹¹⁹ Neschke-Hentschke (1983) 89–93; Schmid (1999) 262–70.

Language (*Sprache*), regarded in its real nature, is an enduring thing, and at every moment a *transitory* one (*Vorübergehendes*). Even its maintenance by writing is always just an incomplete, mummy-like preservation, only needed again in attempting thereby to picture the living utterance (*den lebendigen Vortrag*). In itself it is no product (*Ergon*), but an activity (*Energieia*). Its true definition can therefore only be a genetic one.¹²⁰

According to Humboldt, then, language is a dynamic force (*Kraft, energieia*) as opposed to work (*Werk, ergon*), that is, an active, dynamic process rather than a static system. Language as *ergon* is poor because it is lacking in the life-principle, while language as *energeia* is creativity, the condition for discovery and expansion. While Humboldt develops this view fully only later in life, it is already implied in his celebrated essay “On the Study of Antiquity” (“Über das Studium des Alterthums,” 1793). Wolf’s philology had apparently contributed to inspiring this theory in Humboldt, and possibly vice versa.¹²¹ In that essay, Humboldt considers the arts, and especially music and dancing, as “energetic” (*energisch*)—dynamic and creative—in nature.¹²²

This conception of language is defended by Herder already in 1769¹²³ against Lessing’s priority of the visual over the aural (*Laokoon*, 1766): performance (*Vollzug*) of a lecture or a concept, including its reception, that is, the dynamic force (*Kraft*) or imagination of the listener. For both Humboldt and Herder, Homeric epic as oral poetry is paradigmatic speech *qua* singing, in contradistinction to speech *qua* static work. This is why Wolf’s *Prolegomena* could be regarded at the time as offering the concrete paradigm of that view of language, in its earliest extant expression as found in “Homer.” The debated question about Wolf’s relative originality, referred to earlier, might fade into insignificance in comparison with that widespread view of an oral Homer.¹²⁴ Indeed, the Homeric question would thus be considered inseparable from the view that “poetry is the mother tongue of the human race” (*Poesie ist die Muttersprache des menschlichen Geschlechts*), in Johann Georg Hamann’s well-known formulation.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Humboldt (1988) 49 [1974, 55–6].

¹²¹ According to Wolf (1807a) 103, Language is the bearer of “what is highest and deepest in human nature” (“das höchste und Tiefste, was in dem Menschen liegt”).

¹²² Humboldt (1969) 8.

¹²³ Herder (1878) 158–61 (in “Ersten Kritischen Wäldchens,” 1769).

¹²⁴ Schmid (1999) 262.

¹²⁵ Hamann (1821) 258. For a similar conception of poetry as the initial and true language of humanity, see Strabo, *Geographica* 1, 2, 6, and Plutarch, *De Pythiae oraculis*, 406b–d.

The notion of language and poetry as *energeia* will lead to further theoretical consequences, which, closer to us, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) for instance drew for his own philosophical hermeneutics. In *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*, 1985), Gadamer claims that the arts, such as drama and music, including the recitation of epics or lyrics (*beim epischen oder lyrischen Vortrag*), only exist in being performed.¹²⁶ This is the “central problem” of hermeneutics, the problem of application (*Anwendung*), namely the “concretion of the meaning” in time.¹²⁷ Works of art, such as the Homeric epics, always present themselves differently in the changing course of the ages and circumstances. They must therefore be understood emphatically in terms of time (*Zeit*).¹²⁸ Their essence is fundamentally accidental and lies in performative interpretation.¹²⁹



A twofold image of Wolf’s Homer has emerged: the oral and primitive poet on the one hand, and the literate, sophisticated poet on the other. The view that Wolf defends—an oral and primitive image of Homer—emphasises the early history of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, while those seeing him as adhering to the latter image highlight the later history of the poems. These opposing views in scholarship reflect the two sides of the long history of composition: the first (mostly) oral through the rhapsodes, the second (mostly) written through the collectors and revisers. This contrasting reception is also due to the fact that the Homeric question was, after all, left open by Wolf himself, namely whether Homer, the rhapsodes, or the early or later revisers are the “the principal creators of the great artistic compositions” of the two Homeric poems. Wolf’s ambiguity on this crucial question has contributed to the striking fact that both the Analysts and the Unitarians have since declared their debt to Wolf’s Homer. Wolf’s impact, however, as we have seen, also reached philosophically minded readers of his own time, notably regarding a new conception of language.

Holger Schmid (1999) 266 sees in this vast problematic the opposition between poetry *qua* music and philosophy (specifically Plato’s) *qua* logos (*Rede*).

126 Gadamer (1989) 118 [1985, 125].

127 Gadamer (1989) 306 [1985, 312].

128 Gadamer (1989) 119 [1985, 125].

129 Gadamer (1989) 401 [1985, 404].

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