

## ABRAM FOLEY

### *Friedrich Kittler, Charles Olson, and the Return of Postwar Philology*

In literary studies' ongoing "return to philology," few have commented on the return's coincidence with the emergence of media history within the humanistic disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the coincidence is implicit, for philological study has long concerned itself not only with tracking the roots of languages but also with investigating the meanings and media of verbal expression. Yet it is worth making the correspondence between philology and media history more apparent as media history becomes prominent in Anglo-American literary studies, a field once dominated by hermeneutics. Jerome McGann comes closest to remarking on the overlap between philology and media history when he suggests that "Philology in a New Key" must attune itself to the digital technologies now drastically changing humanistic scholarship and education. In particular, McGann argues that we can avoid the utopian hopes and dystopian fears attendant to digital humanities by initiating an "imaginative recovery of philological method."<sup>2</sup> In one sense, McGann simply balances the optimism and angst aroused by digital humanities with what Edward Said lovingly called "the least with-it, least sexy, and most unmodern of any of the branches of learning

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<sup>1</sup> Paul de Man, "The Return to Philology," in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Lee Patterson, "The Return to Philology," in *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*, ed. John van Engen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Jonathan Culler, "The Return to Philology," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36 (2002); Edward W. Said, "The Return to Philology," in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Roots, Races, and the Return to Philology," *Representations* 106 (2009); Martin G. Eisner, "The Return to Philology and the Futures of Literary Criticism: Reading the Temporality of Literature in Auerbach, Benjamin, and Dante," *California Italian Studies* 2 (2011). John Guillory's "Genesis of the Media Concept" presents a philological history of "media" and "medium" in order to "describe the philosophical preconditions of media discourse." Of all these works, Guillory's is most traditionally philological and most interested in the history of "the media concept." See John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010): 321-62 (p. 321).

<sup>2</sup> Jerome McGann, "Philology in a New Key," *Critical Inquiry* 39.2 (Winter 2013): 327-46 (p. 328).

associated with humanism.”<sup>3</sup> Too excited by the new? Return to philology. Afraid of the new? Return to philology. More provocatively, McGann’s “philological method” implies a mediating dialectic we see throughout recent commentary on philology’s return: between the hermeneutic-visionary and the descriptively methodological. Digital or not, a return to philology forces literary criticism to confront its divide between speculation and empiricism.<sup>4</sup> It leads us back, in some sense, to the challenge issued by Theodor Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* that “art is an entity that is not identical with its empiria.”<sup>5</sup> But philology is also not identical with its empiria. Beyond the empirical method lie the concepts that it begets. Hence McGann does not simply call for the recovery of philological method. He calls for its “imaginative recovery,” restoring the art in philology.

The return to philology is anything but methodical. The scholars currently writing about the return to philology hardly practice anything resembling philology as it came to prominence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that is, either as a discipline now roughly equivalent to historical linguistics or as a scholarly methodology roughly equivalent to textual studies. Historical linguists and textual scholars still exist, to be sure, but they seldom care to rebrand as new philologists.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the contemporary return to philology rests on the convergence of two fields: media history and hermeneutics, particularly as the former bears the weight of historical description and empiricism while the latter marks the indeterminacy associated with textual interpretation and literary

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<sup>3</sup> Said, “The Return to Philology,” p. 57. Said anchors his philology firmly in humanism and conflates philology and humanism over the course of his essay. We can imagine that humanism is roughly synonymous with philology when Said concludes his essay: “Humanism... is the means, perhaps the consciousness we have for providing that kind of finally antinomian or oppositional analysis between the space of words and their various origins and deployments in physical and social place, from text to actualized site of either appropriation or resistance, to transmission, to reading and interpretation, from private to public, from silence to explication and utterance, and back again... all of it occurring in the world, on the ground of daily life and history and hopes, and the search for knowledge and justice, and then perhaps also for liberation” (p. 83).

<sup>4</sup> Harpham, “Roots,” pp. 36-7.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 335.

<sup>6</sup> Literary critics who most nearly approximate a return to an older philological method tend to have some background in textual studies, including Jerome McGann. See, also, Stephen G. Nichols, “Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture,” *Speculum* 65.1 (January 1990): 1-10.

theory.<sup>7</sup> Bound between material description and literary interpretation, philology now occupies a position in the midst of diverging limits. It forms the middle ground between the descriptive approaches of textual studies and media history on the one hand, and the more revelatory and speculative approaches of hermeneutics and textual interpretation on the other. By this account, the return to philology revives the foundational tension at the heart of literary studies: between the historical-material and the literary-aesthetic.

I propose to examine this tension by comparing the divergent philological adaptations of a self-described German media historian and an American poet: Friedrich Kittler and Charles Olson. While the most obvious connection between these two thinkers is the emphasis each places on the typewriter in the development of modern bureaucratic society (Kittler) and postwar poetry (Olson), their conceptions of philology in the postwar period prove a more incisive correspondence in light of our contemporary return to it. This essay develops the correspondence—and attendant contradictions—between the two thinkers by considering how both Kittler and Olson theorize philology in relation to corpses and literary corpora. The trajectory of Kittler’s work, developed most fully in *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (German 1985; English 1990) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (German 1986; English 1999) begins with a textual body inhabited by a “pure soul”—later associated with the romantic spirit—and ends with that soul turned into a “stinking cadaver.”<sup>8</sup> In developing this trajectory, Kittler makes a strongly anti-hermeneutic claim that exorcises the romantic “spirit” from literary texts—the spirit after which hermeneutics seeks—and thereby makes texts into material expressions of a broader informational discourse network. Kittler’s anti-literary and anti-hermeneutic claims, in turn, affect his particular version of philology. Indeed, Kittler praises philology for its “mega-technologic” commitment and emphasizes its devotion to describing the

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<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of the empiricist and positivist approaches attendant to digital humanities scholarship, see Tom Eyers, “The Perils of the ‘Digital Humanities’: New Positivism and the Fate of Literary Theory,” *Postmodern Culture* 23.2 (2013): <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed 3 October 2014). While my essay does not assess the role that digital humanities plays in the return to philology, Eyers’s distinction between positivism in the digital humanities and speculation in literary theory is useful to keep in mind when considering the new philology.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800 / 1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 3, 178.

material technologies of communication.<sup>9</sup> For Kittler, philology must sever its troublesome ties to hermeneutics so that descriptive media history can found itself on philology's trenchant historical-material basis. Literary texts become textual corpora: bodies of information, corpses without souls. The movement away from the soul or spirit of the text makes sense in the context of Kittler's historical narrative, and I do not seek to reinsert a "spirit" into literary texts. However, Kittler's "mega-technologic" version of philology forms a technocratic overcorrection in his approach to literary corpora, especially as textual bodies emerge from the particularities of human work in language.<sup>10</sup> In Kittler, that is, philology becomes part of a powerful apparatus under which the particularities of expression made available by a text are flattened by a mega-technologic desire to understand literary expression as the effect of a more powerful discourse network.

Olson, meanwhile, introduces his first major book-length work, *Call Me Ishmael*, by revisiting the origin story for Melville's *Moby-Dick*. In his "First fact as prologue" to *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson retells the story of the whaling ship Essex.<sup>11</sup> The ship set sail for the Pacific Ocean eleven days after Melville's birth in 1819 and over a year later, on 20 November 1820, had its "bows stove in"

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew Griffin, Susanne Herrmann, and Friedrich A. Kittler, "Technologies of Writing: Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler," *New Literary History* 27.4 (Autumn 1996): 731-42 (p. 732).

<sup>10</sup> Here I purposefully echo a phrase developed by Edward Said in his book *Beginnings: Intention and Method*. Said writes that "beginning is making or producing difference; but—and here is the great fascination in the subject—difference which is the result of combining the already-familiar with the fertile novelty of human work in language." Here the philologically inclined humanist begins to distinguish himself from Foucault, whose conception of discourse was influential for Said, but from whom Said came to distance himself as he saw Foucault's discourse allowing too little room for the consideration of the particularities of "human work in language," which is very much a philological claim. See Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), p. xiii. The contradictory stances taken by Kittler and Said make sense here, as Kittler adopted the aspect of Foucauldian discourse from which Said distanced himself. For criticism of Kittler's work grounded in the particularities of human interaction with a medium, specifically the gramophone, see Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 1-25. Gitelman's approach to media history falls much more in line with Said's philological approach to language, writing, and criticism, which is to say that it emphasizes the particularity of media adoption and adaptation in the way a philologist would consider the particularity of the development of a word's use.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 9.

when a bull spermaceti whale struck it twice head on.<sup>12</sup> The ship's crew searched for land in three whaleboats, but the South American coast they sought was over 2,000 miles away. Eventually, men began dying from dehydration and starvation, and their remaining mates ate them for nourishment. Most importantly for Olson, Owen Chase, First Mate and eventual author of the book which inspired *Moby-Dick*, resorted to cannibalism in order to survive. Olson paraphrases the event:

It was not until February 8<sup>th</sup>, when Isaac Cole died in convulsions, that Owen Chase was forced, some two weeks later than in the other boats, to propose to his two men [...] that they should eat of their own flesh. It happened to them once, in this way: they separated the limbs from the body, and cut all the flesh from the bones, after which they opened the body, took out the heart, closed the body again, sewed it up as well as they could, and committed it to sea.<sup>13</sup>

This passage joins Olson's interest in corpses with their survival in media. Olson implies that Chase's account survives because Chase partook in eating a corpse. The point, however, is not simply morbid. By making this "First Fact" a prologue to his account of *Moby-Dick*, Olson proposes that literary histories of Melville's novel must take into account the corpses and literary corpora that helped to make the novel possible. Olson discovers the flesh of words: literary texts both bear and unbury the dead.

The emphasis each writer places on corpses and literary corpora is particularly fitting, as philology is itself a zombie concept in contemporary literary studies. Rather than speaking only of a "return to philology," which places the activity of critical thought in the present "returning to," we should also consider the "return of philology," which emphasizes historical and textual particularities placing demands on contemporary thought and accounting. The question of accounting becomes central here, for both Kittler's and Olson's philological adaptations form oblique responses to World War II and the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> Kittler sees the

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Both events had significant effects on philological investigation, with Erich Auerbach writing *Mimesis* in exile from Nazi Germany and then publishing his important "Philology and *Weltliteratur*" shortly after the conclusion of World War II. The Austrian-born philologist Leo Spitzer, too, worked

history of German romanticism as partly responsible for the destruction, with World War II as the end—result and termination—of romantic ideology and its hermeneutic apparatuses. This helps to explain Kittler’s overcorrection to a mega-technologic philology. Olson, by comparison, offers an avenue for considering media of inscription and transmission that is less terminal than Kittler’s conclusions lead us to believe. He envisions philology—and poetry—as taking part in an ongoing history which continues to impose itself upon the present because it remains partially accessible in media and in language: in corpses and corpora past and present.<sup>15</sup> To the extent that Olson attends to these bodies, his philology—which undertakes both a linguistic and media-historical unburying—transposes corpses and literary corpora, what LeRoi Jones once called “Olson’s revivification of the dead” in print.<sup>16</sup> If philology now functions as a zombie concept, returning to us from out of the past, Olson’s philological adaptations demonstrate that postwar philology brings corpses with it. Following Olson, we should attend scrupulously to these dead and the media that bear them.

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in exile. And Edward Said, who came from a Palestinian family with a Christian background and who adapted philology for his postwar scholarship, was also deeply influenced by the effects of World War II. More recently, the German scholar and theorist Werner Hamacher has tested the relationship between WWII and philological thought by responding to Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” with his own “95 Theses on Philology.” Hamacher’s theses channel the aphoristic style not so much of Martin Luther’s reformatory Ninety-Five Theses but of the Kabbalistic thinker Gershom Scholem’s “95 Theses on Judaism and Zionism,” which Scholem originally compiled in May 1918 and intended to give to the young Walter Benjamin on his birthday. When Hamacher writes his own “95 Theses,” meant to echo both Scholem’s and Benjamin’s works, he implies that philology remains haunted by the violent history of the twentieth century. We should also consider that Benjamin’s Angel of History, who desires to reassemble the pieces of historical wreckage thrown down before him, is a figure of philology. See Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” trans. Maire and Edward Said, *Centennial Review* 13.1 (Winter 1969): 1-17; Werner Hamacher, “95 Theses on Philology,” trans. Catharine Diehl, *Diacritics* 39.1 (Spring 2009): 25-44.

<sup>15</sup> In thinking of corpses and literary corpora as markers of both history and presence, Olson falls in line here with a conception of philological synchronicity developed by J. Mark Smith in an essay on Ezra Pound’s philology. Following Pound’s complicated relationship with philology, Smith writes that he works with “an idea of philology, not only as a body of knowledge concerning defunct languages, or as an institutionally transmitted and endorsed expertise in the deciphering of such languages and the texts in which they survive—but as an archive of historical usage charged with synchronic possibility.” Olson, who was profoundly influenced by Pound’s poetry and poetics, senses the synchronic possibility made available by a philological approach to language and graphic media. See J. Mark Smith, “The Energy of Language(s): What Pound Made of Philology,” *ELH* 78.4 (Winter 2011): 769-800 (p. 770).

<sup>16</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Raise Race Rays Raze* (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 23.

### *Spirit, Corpse, Corpus*

The distinct philological approaches taken by Kittler and Olson hinge upon their sometimes converging but often conflicting conceptions of literary texts. Kittler opens *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* with the provocative assertion that “German poetry begins with a sigh.”<sup>17</sup> The sigh Kittler refers to is Faust’s, from the first line of Goethe’s tragedy: “Habe nun ach! Philosophie [...] studiert” translated as “Have, oh! studied philosophy.”<sup>18</sup> According to Kittler, Faust’s sigh—ach! or oh!—inspires German romantic poetry as it marks the alphabetic expression of romanticism’s “pure soul.”<sup>19</sup> The exclamatory “ach!” manifests the inarticulate spirit, the Geist which animates the “Geisteswissenschaften,” or human sciences, particularly hermeneutics. The sigh countersigns the hermeneutics through which interpretation seeks the spirit of the text. By the end of WWII, in Kittler’s historicizing narrative, the “pure soul” has been eliminated in favor of textual information (circa 1900) and digital supremacy (circa 1945). While Kittler frames the sigh of the pure soul as that which must be exorcised from poetry, Olson turns to the breathing body as a source of poetic innovation for postwar poetry. “Verse now, 1950,” he writes, “if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.”<sup>20</sup> Olson positions “projective” verse against “The NON-Projective,” which he characterizes as “‘closed’ verse, that verse which print bred.”<sup>21</sup> What Olson rejects here—a print-based poetry that remains closed to the world outside of it and refuses to project beyond its own status as text—is precisely what Kittler praises about literary textuality coming out of WWII. For Kittler, poetry without spirit and without meaning marks literature’s concession to data and information. For Olson, a poetry open to the breathing body is not coincident with a return of the romantic spirit. Rather, projective verse remains open to the linguistic and corporeal histories present in human languages in various forms. Olson’s postwar

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<sup>17</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Olson, “Projective Verse,” in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Olson, *Selected Writings*, p. 15. Olson’s projective poetics relies more heavily on forms of graphic inscription than he makes clear here. This essay will arrive at that point later.

poetics thus offers an alternative to the historical narrative Kittler develops thirty years later.

Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*—the complementary volume to *Discourse Networks*—opens with a conclusive assertion. “Media determine our situation,” he writes, “which—in spite or because of it—deserves a description.”<sup>22</sup> He arrives at this conclusion through his elaborate description of three distinct discourse networks over the course of *Discourse Networks* and *Gramophone*: 1800, 1900, and 1945. The discourse network of 1800 expressed the conjunction of orality and literacy within the burgeoning democratic state and marked the convergence of hermeneutics and state power. The figure of convergence was the mother, the locus of a “primary orality.”<sup>23</sup> Around 1800, Kittler argues, primary orality became alphabetic orality through the introduction of numerous alphabetic primers into the home and into the mother’s mouth. As Kittler puts it, “Pedagogical discourses disappeared into the Mother’s Mouth only to reappear multiplied in the form of bureaucratic administration.”<sup>24</sup> And further, “What Faust called a life source became institutionalized. The mother ‘must be an educator’ because ‘the child sucks in its first ideas with the mother’s milk.’”<sup>25</sup> While Kittler distinguishes between the mother’s voice as a life source and as an institutionalizing apparatus, he argues that romantic writers such as Goethe failed to make any such distinction. As a consequence, romantic writers both exacerbated and elided the gendered divide between the idealized Mother, whose symbolic power bolstered the Nation,<sup>26</sup> and the bureaucratic state which required a corps of clerks to administer its power. Kittler consequently connects the symbolic power of the mother’s voice (and the romantic spirit) to the institutionalization of hermeneutics as an academic discipline. Faust’s analphabetic “ach!” found its origin in a universal Mother who guaranteed the transcendent spirit of the text; hermeneutics sought that spirit with clerical dogmatism. And for Kittler, hermeneutics is clerical in both senses of the word.

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<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. xxxix.

<sup>23</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 25.

<sup>24</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> My peculiar capitalizations here follow Kittler and his English translators.

It upholds the national spirit (clerical transcendence) while strengthening the bureaucratic apparatus (the textual laborer, the clerk).

The discourse network of 1900 countered the spirit of the text by means of machine recording. The gramophone recorded not only a voice but also the noise which surrounded it. The typewriter marked discrete letters on a blank page. Kittler taps the white noise from which expression emerged in order to describe the spirit's removal from writing. In a chapter on Nietzsche and his typewriter, for instance, Kittler proposes that "Not content or message but the medium itself made the Spirit, the corpus composed of German Poetry and German Idealism, into a stinking cadaver."<sup>27</sup> The clang and clatter of machine recording drowned out the spirit's poetic sigh: "An inarticulate tone defines the zero point of literature, a tone not only inhuman, but also not animal or demonic [...] Within the realm of all sounds and words, all organisms, white noise appears, the incessant and ineradicable background of information. For the very channels through which information must pass emit noise."<sup>28</sup> At the zero point of literature, the written corpus of the literary text was no longer inhabited by the spirit. It became instead the meaningless expression of contemporary modes of media inscription.

Still, there was the residue of a former discourse network within this system. Texts expressed information and data flows, but the data were forced to "pass through the bottleneck of the signifier. Alphabetic monopoly, grammatology."<sup>29</sup> The discourse network of 1945, which emerged out of World War II, eliminated this informational bottleneck with digital expression. War technologies such as encryption and Alan Turing's Universal Machine transformed inscription from alphabetic monopoly into digital supremacy. With World War II, Kittler writes, "The language of the upper echelons of leadership [...] is digitalization; it transforms sources of accidental noise into absolute all-or-none organs."<sup>30</sup> Ones and zeroes compose the most powerful inscription system, leaving alphabetic writing in general, and literature in particular, with little to articulate. Kittler thus

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<sup>27</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, p. 183.

<sup>29</sup> Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, pp. 249-50.

concludes *Gramophone* by contending that “Under the conditions of high technology, literature has nothing more to say [...] An automated discourse analysis has taken command.”<sup>31</sup> In this conclusion, literature is a corpse. Digital machines decompose its spirit in the “absolute all-or-none organs” of ones and zeroes. This is the anti-literary and anti-hermeneutic present Kittler had set out to describe from the beginning. Literature has at last shed its romantic ideology and now expresses nothing more than an aspect of media history.<sup>32</sup>

Kittler’s anti-hermeneutic and anti-literary trajectory informs his conception of philology, which Kittler considers an antidote to hermeneutics. In his digital network of 1945 literature has “nothing more to say,” and so hermeneutics has nothing to interpret. David Wellbery offers an overview of Kittler’s antagonism toward hermeneutics in his foreword to *Discourse Networks* in which he remarks on the particularly strong tradition of hermeneutics in the German academy. Kittler regards the foundations of hermeneutics as untenable in light of its sociological and medial history as an academic discipline. According to Wellbery, Kittler “tears the veil away from hermeneutics and dispels its aura, its shimmering suggestion of sacral authority,” by performing a “genealogy” of hermeneutics.<sup>33</sup> “Under the optic of genealogical analysis,” he writes, “the universality claim of hermeneutics evaporates and hermeneutics is exposed in its situational boundedness, its particularity.”<sup>34</sup> Kittler undermines the grand claims of hermeneutic interpretation by locating hermeneutics within a series of materially, historically, and institutionally based media networks.

Wellbery rightly derives Kittler’s method from Nietzschean and Foucauldian genealogical analysis. Yet “exposing the situational boundedness” of hermeneutics also stems from a different textual and historical methodology that is equally rooted in Nietzschean thought and the German critical tradition: philology. In an interview with Matthew Griffin and Susanne Herrmann published in 1996, Kittler responds to the abandonment of philology in newer

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<sup>31</sup> Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 263.

<sup>32</sup> For more on Kittler’s antagonism toward literature and preference for historical description, see E. Khayyat, “The Humility of Thought: An Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler,” *boundary 2* 39.3 (Fall 2012): 7-27 (especially p. 11).

<sup>33</sup> David E. Wellbery, “Foreword,” in Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, pp. vii-xxiii (p. ix).

<sup>34</sup> Wellbery, “Forward,” pp. ix-x.

models of literary and cultural studies: “I think we all understand that the movement away from the philologic basis can create monstrous problems [...] There has always been in the philologic disciplines a firm, that means mega-technologic, basis for work. In cultural studies every canon drifts away. You’re essentially free to do what you want, and you have to hope that students also have the philologic basis which you yourself bring as a transition figure.”<sup>35</sup> A follow-up response to a question about sociology reinforces his philological emphasis: “Sociology cannot be an ersatz for philology. If you abandon philology just because the philologists don’t reflect upon their own medium, you don’t necessarily have to abandon the one positive thing about philology, namely, its reference to a specific medium.”<sup>36</sup> Here Kittler warns against abandoning the medium-specific interests of philological investigation. His media history takes form not only in genealogical analysis but also as a philology shorn of its hermeneutic interests. The “positive thing” about philology, it would seem, is its empirical positivism, which frustrates the hermeneutic drive toward speculation and interpretation.

Kittler characterizes 1945 as the zero point of literature, when literature has nothing left to say. Olson takes that zero point as the point of departure for a postwar poetics based in philology. Olson himself emerged as a writer more or less directly out of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Office of War Information, for which Olson worked resolutely during the war before resigning out of frustration with administrative policy. Among his first important artistic companions was the Italian artist-in-exile Corrado Cagli, whom Olson met in 1940.<sup>37</sup> While Olson worked in administration during the war, Cagli joined the American Army and, as Ralph Maud reports, was in the artillery unit which liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp.<sup>38</sup> Cagli documented what he saw at Buchenwald in starkly drawn ink on paper. One such sketch depicts an emaciated corpse in a prone position in the extreme foreground. The corpse’s face, turned slightly toward the viewer, exposes one nearly blacked out eye. The body is splayed across the bottom of the drawing with its head on the right side of the image, and has its

<sup>35</sup> Griffin, Herrmann, and Kittler, “Technologies of Writing,” p. 732.

<sup>36</sup> Griffin, Herrmann, and Kittler, “Technologies of Writing,” p. 732.

<sup>37</sup> Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson’s Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), p. 70.

<sup>38</sup> Maud, *Charles Olson’s Reading*, p. 70.

right arm twisted around its back extending up and back at a forty-five degree angle into a closed fist. Immediately beyond the fist, another corpse occupies the middle ground on the left side of the drawing. This body is more difficult to make out, with its torso and head either covered by fabric or obscured in sketched abstraction. Yet its supine position with one leg bent and a knee pointing skyward distinguishes it as another of the Holocaust dead. I describe this picture in detail here, because after Cagli returned to the United States he planned two gallery shows that included his Buchenwald sketches. He commissioned Olson to write several poems for an accompanying brochure.

Among Olson's poems for the brochure I focus here on "La Préface" because it demonstrates how Olson's philological interests inform his work between media, in this case between drawn and written expression. The critic Sherman Paul has called the poem "as important to [Olson's] work as 'The Second Coming' is to Yeats's."<sup>39</sup> Paul's point is shrewd because the poem forms Olson's most ardent poetic response to the horrors of World War II, just as Yeats engages with the destruction of World War I. Most significantly for the purpose of this essay, some of Olson's earliest positions on the relationship between media, philology, and visionary poetry originate in this poetic response to drawings of the Buchenwald dead. Over the course of the poem Olson's focus moves from the unburied corpses I describe above to a philological and visionary unburying of older expressive forms.<sup>40</sup> Put differently, the poem progresses from medial limitation, through philological process, to a kind of trans-historical poetic vision. While such a sequence might sound foreign to those familiar with criticism on Olson, particularly the claim that Olson takes interest in a visionary poetics, the changes over the course of the poem show how Olson understood artful abstraction to emerge from the media-based process poetics for which he became most known. Named for the position it held in the gallery show brochure, the poem "La Préface" prefaces the poetic theory Olson developed in the years following 1946 and shows that Olson's philological interest in the

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<sup>39</sup> Sherman Paul, *Olson's Push: Origin, Black Mountain, and Recent American Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Davidson has written on Olson's philological interest in linguistic roots, arguing for example that his "desire to antedate modern associations for words such as 'myth,' 'history,' and 'truth,' in Indo-European roots reflects his attempt to recover physical, material bases at the heart of all speech acts." See Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 109.

media of poetic expression must also be understood in the context of its scrupulous caring for the dead.

Olson's poem begins amid two confounding allusions: one to the drawings of the Buchenwald dead; the other to Dante's *La Vita Nuova*,<sup>41</sup> a sequence of courtly love poems sutured together by sections of prose. "La Préface" begins:

The dead in via  
                   in vita nuova  
                           in the way.<sup>42</sup>

The step-like descent begins with Buchenwald's "dead in via," a phrase in which the dead emerge by way of Cagli's drawn and Olson's written lines. Yet "vita nuova," or new life, surfaces within these medial limits as well. Resting typographically between or in the middle of "The dead" and poetry's expressive "way"—both horizontally and vertically—"vita nuova" inhabits a middle ground: between the limit-marking corpses and the expressive but impeded way of the poetic line. More than this, Dante's book of love poems devoted to Beatrice was itself interrupted and haunted by her death. *La Vita Nuova* consequently bore Beatrice in life and death via the expressive means of poetry. Olson thus draws on Dante in "La Préface" to propose that poetic expression is bound to the ultimate medial limit of the corpse. Yet it also originates in a love for the dead that forms of graphic expression bear with them.

It is the task of "La Préface" to bear the dead with it: to carry them in the expressive way of the poetic line. Olson takes on this responsibility by giving his poem over to the voices of those who died at Buchenwald, incorporating them in fragmented sentences. The speaker addresses the dead and receives several replies:

You, do not you speak who know not.  
                   "I will die about April 1<sup>st</sup>..." going off

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<sup>41</sup> For a reading of *La Vita Nuova* and its connection to philological survival see Eisner, "The Return to Philology."

<sup>42</sup> Charles Olson, "La Préface," in *Selected Writings*, p. 160.

“I weigh, I think, 80 lbs...” scratch  
 “My name is NO RACE” address  
 Buchenwald new Altamira cave  
 With a nail they drew the object of the hunt.<sup>43</sup>

Olson’s reference to Buchenwald as a “new Altamira cave”—a space of Upper Paleolithic graphic expression—suggests just how cataclysmic an event the Holocaust is for Olson’s conception of postwar poetry. The Altamira cave paintings, after all, became a touchstone for modernist art and poetry. Hugh Kenner reports on the importance of the Altamira images in *The Pound Era*, writing that “Here was a lost visual mode thrust into the present, undimmed. No one could begin to imagine how it had felt to draw such things; one could only look at the confident lines. Picasso came from Barcelona to Altamira to look at them in 1902, at the threshold of a long career of being unabashed by the past. Their existence launched Leo Frobenius on a 40-year career as an anthropologist to whom African antiquity spoke today. [...] In 1919, T. S. Eliot stood in a cave in southern France experiencing the revelation that ‘art never improves,’ and soon afterwards wrote of how all art enters a simultaneous order.”<sup>44</sup> If the discovery of the Altamira images gave rise to a sense that “Time folded over; now lay flat, transparent, upon *not-now*”<sup>45</sup>—a description which recalls J. Mark Smith’s more recent conception of the synchronicity operating within philological method<sup>46</sup>—the stakes of poetic accounting changed no less dramatically for Charles Olson in light of the Holocaust and the images emerging from it. And so Olson gives his poem over to the dead who speak via media, to the extent that they can, in the form of Cagli’s sketches and in the more chilling forms of inscription Olson imagines from within the Buchenwald camp. Still, their scratchings “go off” in ellipses. The fragmented records—stamped with anonymity—leave Olson the philological and poetic task of bearing witness to what the dead no longer can.

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<sup>43</sup> Olson, “La Préface,” p. 160.

<sup>44</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 30.

<sup>45</sup> Kenner, *The Pound Era*, p. 30.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, “The Energy of Language(s),” p. 770.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub recognize the vacillating relation between the act of witnessing and the media that ultimately bear the account of that act in their influential work, *Testimony*. The book, in which Olson's "La Préface" would have fit very well, addresses texts that were "written and produced consequent to the historic trauma of the Second World War, a trauma we consider as the watershed of our times and which the book will come to view not as an event encapsulated in the past, but as a history which is essentially *not over*, a history whose repercussions are not simply omnipresent [...] but whose traumatic consequences are still actively evolving."<sup>47</sup> According to Felman and Laub, the traumatic omnipresence of World War II eliminates the "too-familiar critical accounts of the mutual 'reflection' (or 'representation') between 'history' and 'text.'"<sup>48</sup> The denial of the reflective model comes about not only through the "contextualization of the text," but much more critically through the "textualization of the context,"<sup>49</sup> in which a particular context finds its afterlife in the media in which it is "textualized."

The textualization of context aptly describes the process poetics Olson develops in "Projective Verse." As we saw earlier, Olson proclaims that

Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and *put into itself* certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings. (emphasis added)<sup>50</sup>

The projective poem works by way of the ear and the breath in order to "catch up and put into itself" an endless stream of perceptions: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. [...] must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!"<sup>51</sup> Yet for all of Olson's apparent interest in immediacy, projective verse still depends on the poetic line, which

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<sup>47</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. xiv.

<sup>48</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. xiv.

<sup>49</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, p. xv.

<sup>50</sup> Olson, "Projective Verse," p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Olson, "Projective Verse," p. 17.

comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination.<sup>52</sup>

To put the breathing and listening of the poet “into” the line of poetry not only suggests a particularly embodied and oral/aural approach for which Olson is now well known.<sup>53</sup> It also formalizes the “textualization of context” that Felman and Laub understand as necessary to writing in light of the Holocaust.

I look to the textualization of context, then, to propose that Olson’s projective line of poetry derives in part—despite his swearing otherwise—from a contextual medium different from “the breathing of the man who writes.” The projective line also originates in Olson’s response to the drawn Buchenwald corpses he addresses in “La Préface.” Although neither the Holocaust nor its dead is mentioned by name in “Projective Verse,” one early line in Olson’s foundational essay makes its link to “La Préface” apparent. Just after Olson famously writes that verse in 1950 has to “put into itself” the “breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings”—the pithy thesis of the whole piece up front—he adds: “(The revolution of the ear, 1910, the trochee’s heave, asks it of the younger poets).”<sup>54</sup> The meaning of this parenthetical remains obscure unless one is familiar with “La Préface.” Ten lines after Olson offers his poem to the voices of the dead, he writes:

Draw it thus: ( ) 1910 ( )  
It is not obscure. We are the new born, and there are no flowers.

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<sup>52</sup> Olson, “Projective Verse,” p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> For the most resolute promotion of Olson’s oral / aural impulse, see William V. Spanos, “Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation,” *Contemporary Literature* 21 (1980). For approaches which balance Olson’s interest in a speech-based poetics with an emphasis on his typographic experimentation see: Thomas H. Ford, “Poetry’s Media,” *New Literary History* 44 (2013); Nathaniel Mackey, “That Words Can Be on the Page: The Graphic Aspect of Charles Olson’s Poetics,” in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> Olson, “Projective Verse,” p. 15.

Document means there are no flowers  
and no parenthesis.<sup>55</sup>

In “Projective Verse,” 1910 marks the year of the “trochee’s heave.” Four years earlier in “La Préface,” 1910 refers to the shared birth year of Cagli and Olson, and it opens a parenthetical which Olson refuses to close. Yet the “new born” sensibility Olson names has two referents: the birth of the infants in 1910, and the “vita nuova” emerging amid the Holocaust dead in the poem’s first lines. Moreover, in the line “Draw it thus: ( ) 1910 (”, the imperative “draw” refers equally to Cagli’s drawings of Buchenwald and Olson’s attempt to draw open a postwar poetics. The open parenthetical he forms in “La Préface” marks the opening of the poetic field later envisioned in “Projective Verse.” Olson’s projective poetics thus results not only from the breathing poet but also from Olson’s own attentiveness to corpses and the graphic corpora that bear them. He anchors “La Préface” in documentation—document means there are no flowers and no closed parentheses—and thereby expresses the material interests of his poetic philology.

Corpses and documentation dominate the early sections of the poem; yet the poem’s conclusion discloses a philological attentiveness to media which gives rise to visionary abstraction. Midway through “La Préface” Olson writes of himself and Cagli: “It is the radical, the root, he and I, two bodies / We put our hands to these dead.”<sup>56</sup> Olson calls up the philological method of digging for “roots” as he and Cagli put their hands to “these dead,” the proximal demonstrative adjective in “these” intimating that the dead are indeed at hand. We find a clarifying repetition of his phrasing here in the *Mayan Letters*, in which Olson expresses his admiration of Mayan glyphs to Robert Creeley: “the glyphs never got out of hand (out of media).”<sup>57</sup> To put one’s hands to the dead is to work via media. However, even in light of his desire to keep postwar writing in hand, Olson concludes “La Préface” balanced between medial limitation and poetic vision:

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<sup>55</sup> Olson, “La Préface,” p. 160.

<sup>56</sup> Olson, “La Préface,” p. 160

<sup>57</sup> Charles Olson, *Mayan Letters*, in *Selected Writings*, p. 110.

We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead  
crossed stick, wire-led, Blake Underground

The Babe  
the Howling Babe.<sup>58</sup>

While Olson appears insistent on keeping poetry in hand, he asserts that he and Cagli are in fact born of “these unburied dead.” His media-philological method of digging for roots and putting hands to the dead gives rise to the unforeseen “vita nuova” in the midst of corporeal limits. “Wire-led” currents engender a visionary moment. William Blake emerges from underground, a return of the dead poet offset by the birth of a “Howling Babe.” We should not mistake this birth for a second coming. Olson’s howling babe results from a philological method whereby the vita nuova of the “new born” emerges from the dead in the way of poetry’s expressive line. In Olson’s media philology the newly born is borne within medial limits.

### *Philology’s Shudder and Its Postwar Return*

I have directed my analysis of philology in Kittler and Olson by focusing on two types of corpora to which both turn their attention: corpses and graphic corpora, by which I mean textual bodies that have been written, drawn, or inscribed, among other means of graphic expression. The former, morbid emphasis serves several purposes; primary among them is to reference the very real corpses to which both Kittler’s and Olson’s philology responds: those of World War II and the Holocaust. While this essay is not primarily about the Holocaust or World War II, it assesses two theorists whose thinking about media and philology were greatly affected by their occurrence. For instance, Timothy Brennan writes that philology remains “skeptical about romanticism and literary modernism” due to the “attractions to supermen, the evacuation of the subject, the calligraphic fetishization of writing, the addictions to secrets and enigmas, and so on.”<sup>59</sup> In turn, Kittler’s attraction to an anti-hermeneutic philology functions as a riposte to the horrors to which he sees romantic ideology leading. However, his adaptation

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<sup>58</sup> Olson, “La Préface,” p. 161.

<sup>59</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light, Vol. 1: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 10.

of only the mega-technologic aspect of philology—as media history—results in a problematically technocratic interest in being silent whereof he cannot speak. While Kittler’s method allows him to diagnose the structure of discourse networks leading up to World War II, it leaves not only literature but Kittler himself with nothing to say in its aftermath. His deathly silence, paradoxically, expresses the positivism in his media historical approach.

Charles Olson meanwhile wrote one of his most important early poems, “La Préface,” after seeing images of the Buchenwald dead starkly drawn by a close friend. Olson turns to these drawings in his poem to put an affectionate hand to “these dead.”<sup>60</sup> In this, Olson’s attention to media and methodology introduces an ethical measure of historical consequence into his approach to both philology and poetry. The dead may form an obdurate limit, but they may also remain within the still graspable limits of media. In a later poem which also pays heed to the dead, Olson writes that

Limits  
are what any of us  
are inside of.<sup>61</sup>

Here, Olson finds a limit to the modernist call for the new, just as he repudiates a naïve philological desire to find some original “truth of the past.”<sup>62</sup> Olson wrote to Creeley from among the ancient Mayan ruins that we live in a “second time” which has a past but no discoverable origin.<sup>63</sup> “[S]econd time” is the time of Olson’s postwar poetry—as a philological poetics—turning its interest ever more to the media it is “inside of.” Corpses and graphic media thereby function as indices of Olson’s own “second”-ness as he looks back, like Benjamin’s angel of history, in an attempt to make sense of the history working within his present.

Olson’s artful philology, unlike Kittler’s mega-technologic variety, provides an early and ethical response to the devastation of World War II, a response from

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<sup>60</sup> Charles Olson, “La Préface,” p. 160.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Olson, “Letter 5,” in *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> Brennan, *Borrowed Light*, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Olson, *Mayan Letters*, p. 113.

which our current return to philology has much to learn. In “Theories on the Origin of Art,” a brief essay in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes that “aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image.”<sup>64</sup> Adorno goes on to say that this “shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity is the act of being touched by the other. Aesthetic comportment assimilates itself to that other rather than subordinating it. Such a constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity in aesthetic comportment joins eros and knowledge.”<sup>65</sup> Adorno’s aesthetic comportment establishes an ethical relation to the other; Olson’s philology carries out a similar task. With it, he turns to the dead not to subordinate them to his poetry, but to develop in his poetics the “constitutive relation of the subject to objectivity,” a phrase which characterizes Olson’s poetic goals in “Projective Verse.” Aesthetic comportment shudders as it joins “eros and knowledge.” Olson’s philology, in which love (*philia*) joins with the word (*logos*), affirms that an aesthetic shudder might yet derive from an ethical and undying affection for media and for the dead they bear with them.

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<sup>64</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 331.

<sup>65</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 331.