

# Humanities at the Periphery. The Return to Philology and the Importance of Literary Studies

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Source / Izvornik: **Periferno u hrvatskoj književnosti i kulturi : zbornik radova 1. svezak, 2021, 19 - 36**

Conference paper / Rad u zborniku

Publication status / Verzija rada: **Published version / Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

<https://doi.org/10.31261/PN.4028.03>

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:131:385856>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-07**



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# Humanities at the Periphery The Return to Philology and the Importance of Literary Studies

**Summary:** The first chapter of the paper summarizes the devaluation process of the humanistic values that has begun in the West a few decades ago. The question is why and how the so-called knowledge societies marginalize humanistic knowledge. The second, third, and fourth chapters are the proposal of the mission of the humanities today: pushed out to society's periphery, the humanities have the task of preserving skills, experiences, and knowledge that so-called knowledge society considers needless. Thereby, the paper advocates the importance of returning to philology, as Paul de Man puts it in his article *Return to Philology*, and tries to show the extent to which philology, ceasing to be national, becomes a communal, political and ethical force.

**Keywords:** humanities, philology, study of literature, politics of literature

## 1. The spectre of humanities is haunting the market and the university

“Do not study history or archaeology, you will not get a job. Study natural sciences instead, that is profitable”<sup>1</sup>. These words are a paraphrase of the address of the President of the Republic of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, to students during her visit to a high school in

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<sup>1</sup> Jutarnji.hr, “Nastavnici povijesti s Filozofskog fakulteta o istupu Grabar-Kitarović,” *Jutarnji list*, September 15, 2019, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/nastavnici-povijesti-s-filozofskog-fakulteta-o-istupu-grabar-kitarovic-neugodno-smo-iznenadeni-da-predsjednica-ucenicima-sugerira-sto-da-ne-studiraju/9358640/>.

Sesvete. Although her statement may seem to someone as a reasonable proposition, it is actually a faithful reflection of the empowerment of the utilitarian worldview by spreading irrational fear: the spectre of the humanities is haunting the market-oriented society and, consequently, it must be exorcized as soon as possible so that the market and society can move forward. The exorcism of the evil spirit of the humanities is a widespread phenomenon today, and the painful side effects are the consternation, lamentation, but also a strong resistance of the scholars in the field of the humanities. These are, in my opinion, two inseparable processes. The former is clearly visible in the relation of modern societies to the humanities in the broadest sense. In Europe and elsewhere in the world, the value of the humanities has been on the decline. For several decades, it has been systematically neglected in the public, denigrated as economic ballast, and very tendentiously ruined as an institution. A reaction to this violent schism is a rethinking of the importance of the humanities. This has in turn fostered numerous discussions about the necessity of teaching and studying literature in the educational system of primary and secondary schools and in the framework of literary studies.

How the defamation of the humanities, which is neither sporadic nor harmless, comes to light in the national public domain suitable is exemplified by an anecdote from the current political and media spheres. On April 2, 2019 the political talk show *Otvoreno*<sup>2</sup>, which runs on Croatian Radiotelevision broadcast, focused on the issue of labour shortages in the context of the upcoming tourist season. One of the discussion participants, a technocrat close to the ruling establishment, smugly blurted out a proposal for the solution to the crisis: let impoverished and underpaid female teachers from Slavonia work on the Dalmatian coast and islands over the summer as cooks, waitresses or cleaning ladies. This commonsensical bureaucratic proposal, which apart from disbelief can cause discomfort and even nausea, echoes public opinion about the place, role and value of the humanities today. The proportion of its collapse and devaluation in our society is such that it can no longer be terminologically designated as peripheral or marginal. A more appropriate description of this trend would be: on the edge of destruction. To some, this image of devastation may seem like an excessively daring hyperbole, but I have decided to use exactly this

<sup>2</sup> HRT1, "O turističkoj sezoni," HRT1, April 2, 2019, accessed Jun 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-RRsPSZlwg>.

perception, keeping in mind a coverage titled *The war against humanities at Britain's universities* published in *The Guardian*<sup>3</sup>. The editorial content of the article suggests that higher education in the UK is like a battleground of a cruel combat for cost effectiveness and market efficiency. Thereby, well-paid bureaucrats mystify the economic criteria of evaluating and using knowledge and do not hesitate to deny humanities departments funding and literally wipe these fields of study off the face of the Earth.

The point at issue is a whole series of already hard-rooted phenomena: the bureaucratization of work at universities, the monetization and quantification of activities of pupils, students, and professors, slavery to goals, outcomes and outputs under the pressure of market usability and profitability<sup>4</sup>. In such an environment, the humanities naturally suffer painful strokes. Its *products*, unlike those derived from the STEM area, are less tangible and more difficult to describe in the economic language that has prevailed over universities. It may seem that the interest and concern of the social and political elite for the natural sciences is justified. But it is often a case of STEM hysteria, as it were, whose symptoms, such as the persistent but rather unjustified denigration of the humanities as an unbearable parasite or an annoying intruder at the very least, indicate a severely ruined health of the so-called knowledge society. That STEM hysteria is not just idle chatter is illustrated by numerous examples arising from both the academia and high politics. I will refer to two recent cases. Boris Podobnik, the vice dean of science at The Zagreb School of Economics and Management, published a kind of pamphlet on STEM in the *Jutarnji list*, daily newspaper. A text that should speak about the social importance of the STEM area is reduced to the banal fact that it is easier for people employed in the field of natural sciences to get the big bucks. As expected, the author completely circumvents a number of ethical issues that have been accumulating in the background of vast social differences in opportunities for quality education. However, he does not forget to discredit the humanities with a cheap pun. Promoting a kind of technocratic dictatorship in education he asks: "How to steer someone that would rather earn a living by re-

<sup>3</sup> Alex Preston, "The war against humanities at Britain's universities," *The Guardian*, March 29, 2015, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/29/war-against-humanities-at-britains-universities>.

<sup>4</sup> Bill Readings, *Sveučilište u ruševinama* (Zagreb: Meandarmedia, 2018). Cf. the chapters *Uvod* and *Ideja izvrsnosti*.

citing poems toward technology and mathematics?”<sup>5</sup> It is disappointing that a distinguished professor of physics and economics makes fun of the humanities as extremely unprofitable and useless knowledge. However, this is not surprising given the fact that STEM hysteria is being spread by the government itself. The minister of science and education, Blaženka Divjak, openly welcomed the reduction of enrolment quotas for humanities faculties whose competences are allegedly not so sought after in the labour market. In doing so, she absolutised fiscal responsibility and advocated for concern towards taxpayers, bearing in mind exclusively the market and economic dimension of higher education<sup>6</sup>.

I am not sure whether any form of objective and accurate market research has been conducted in Croatia. However, I am fully convinced that minister Divjak does not understand the societal importance and usefulness of the humanities, and that the government tendentiously ignores the fact that society certainly does not want every aspect of life match to economic logic. Perhaps a calculation could be made to show that our society would prosper faster if everyone over the age of sixty-five was euthanized. The question, however, is whether we should rely on this kind of the mathematical calculation while evaluating the direction of the progress of our community. In the technocratic culture of financial capitalism, the *objective* is constantly identified with the truth, despite the fact that objective observation of the market still fails to determine its movement and prevent crises. Problems that have antagonised the community, such as: when human life begins, how to integrate minorities, how to prevent peer violence in schools, will not be solved by physical measurements. For such things, as well as for many other important matters we need a different kind of knowledge; namely, knowledge that comes from the humanities.

A number of studies that seriously tackled both causes of the devaluation of the humanities and its importance have been recently published. *The University in Ruins* is a kind of classic of the genre. *The Theory of Miseducation: The Delusions of the Knowledge Society; Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities; The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University; The Usefulness of the*

<sup>5</sup> Boris Podobnik, “Zašto je u hrvatskoj politici danas tako malo STEM-ovaca?,” *Jutarnji list*, February 11, 2019, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/zasto-je-u-hrvatskoj-politici-danas-tako-malo-stem-ovaca/8369075/>.

<sup>6</sup> Darija Radan Jakovčević, “Ministrica Divjak za RD: Preporučujem Lori Vidović da se bolje informira,” *Radio Dalmacija*, April 9, 2019, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.radiodalmacija.hr/ministrica-divjak-za-rd-eksperimentalna-reforma-dobro-ocijenjena/>.

*Useless* and *The Value of the Humanities* are some of the more recent attempts to offer clarification and possible solutions of circumstances in which knowledge is valid only if it can be accounted for<sup>7</sup>. Bearing in mind the publications mentioned above and including several more from the field of literary studies, I will try to show why it is important to preserve and nurture philology as a discipline *par excellence* in the field of humanities for every community wishing to be happy and prosperous. I agree with those who think that this debate should not become a defensive lamentation. Politicians and their consultants, those that shape our destiny and the destiny of our community, must hear our arguments on the humanities as a necessary public good<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Return to philology

Paul de Man is one of the most influential scholars who had a tremendous impact on the successful institutionalization of deconstruction and, in general, the so-called French Theory at American universities, and consequently for its worldwide rise in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>9</sup>. Because the Theory is a type of reflection on literature and culture that does not cease to question the validity of its own starting points and methods and the indisputability of the subject it deals with, it soon becomes, at least in the eyes of the traditional academic, the scapegoat for the rapid collapse of the influence of humanistic ideas<sup>10</sup>. In this respect, de Man's response to accusations that the Theory stimulates "the bankruptcy of literary studies"<sup>11</sup> was interesting: we should return to philology. In

<sup>7</sup> Bill Readings, *Sveučilište u ruševinama* (Zagreb: Meandarmedia, 2018); Konrad Paul Liessmann, *Teorija neobrazovanosti. Zablude društva znanja* (Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk, 2009); Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010); Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas. Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York–London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010); Nuccio Ordine, *The Usefulness of the Useless* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2017); Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Small, *The Value of the Humanities*, cf. the chapter *Use and Usefulness*, 59–88.

<sup>9</sup> Francois Cusset, *French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> That process is analysed in detail and convincingly by Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique*. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Paul De Man, "Return to Philology," in *The Resistance to Theory*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 22.

a polemical text titled *Return to Philology* de Man observes philology as a discipline inherent in theoretical inquiry. He was particularly keen to emphasize the importance of exploring “the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces”<sup>12</sup>. It is, therefore, necessary to analyse the experiential and pragmatic dimension of language that emerges beyond the institutions and proven knowledge. Consequently, this would mean, for the study of literature itself, that literature is no longer understood as a source of historical and humanistic truths necessarily materialising ungarbled during the process of hermeneutic interpretation. De Man thus points out that literature has to be primarily analysed rhetorically and poetically. Thereby, he does not articulate an adoption and application of given rhetorical and poetic rules; above all, he focuses on a careful analysis of the tools of producing and conveying meaning rather than its revealing as a completed concept. Such philological reading could be an understanding of the process of content forming and not the pursuit of clarity and transparency of the content itself. In my opinion, it would be of enormous benefit if we tried to defend today’s philology and, therefore, the study of national literature as philology against the denigration for impracticality and uselessness bearing in mind precisely these theses.

Starting from the assumption that language is an essence of human thought and that the interpretation of the signs and its agency are inseparable, I want to add to this discussion the idea of the politicalness, practicality, and utility of philology. In *The Powers of Philology*<sup>13</sup>, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht reconsiders the power of philology today. In order not to be another empty gesture of the academic nostalgia, philology must shape a desire for making the past present by literally embodying it. He remarks that it is a desire for a physical relationship to completely distant material things, including the texts, and for producing the effect of touch, which, in the sense that touch is conceived by Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>14</sup>, is always already a separation (a separation of writing from sense, of analyses from final cognition, etc.). In Gumbrecht’s opinion, philology is not an interpretative method that dematerializes cultural objects in the hermeneutical process, but brings them to life, exposes them, simultaneously preserving some unavoidable and never completely transparent concealment. For example, he connects one of the most important philological skills, the identification of fragments, with the imagination

<sup>12</sup> De Man, “Return to Philology,” 24.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology. Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana–Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

that literally feeds itself on the objects of the past and thus brings the past to the present. This historical experience is based on the ability to imagine and is never separated from the physical desire for the presence of the past that suddenly appears by the materiality of the fragment. Philological decisions, therefore, have characteristics of practical thinking that leads to creation. However, this creation is not *ex nihilo*; it does not consecrate the role of the creator, it is rather a certain kind of precise spacing and careful arrangement of the existing material where that what cannot be discovered or arranged plays an important role. Philology so teaches us how to include the non-inclusive without underestimating it, how to reveal what is invisible to order and then distribute it non-violently, and how to build rigor towards oneself and the ideas of the discipline, law, and order by being prone to the distant, foreign, and unknown.

I assume that the study of literature as philology should, among other things, revise the idea of interpretation abandoning a hermeneutical penetration into the depth of the truth of the text for the sake of, for instance, the philological aspects of “writing commentaries”<sup>15</sup>. Commentaries do not narrow the text to the point of its final meaning but broaden it, and making it in principle a never-ending, open field of knowledge. This is precisely why Gumbrecht directly links commentaries to Derrida’s idea of the supplementarity. Furthermore, commentaries also refer to the importance of what cannot be completely scrutinized and commented. The best texts of a culture are recognized by a large number of commentaries, meaning that they persistently convey the *seed* of illegibility or incomprehensibility, which is crucial both for their survival and the survival of philological reading. In this regard, the study of literature as philology, as *phyla* and *logos*, as fierce loyalty to cognition that stems from language, should be able to be based on a commitment to what appears as an unknowable boundary in that type of the cognition. Such minute, cavilling, petty commenting based on brushing against the non-transparency of textual material would be a gesture that makes it impossible to close the meaning, but also a gesture that combines the enchantment, surprise, curiosity, self-criticism, attachment, and emotional fusion.

Today, when we feel on our own skin that the bureaucratized university is increasingly dragging us into a dead end of quantification

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<sup>15</sup> Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology*, 41. Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique* advocates similar ideas. Especially cf. chapter *Digging down and Standing Back*.



and utilization, philological work within the study of national literature should cherish sympathy for a persevering openness to what the knowledge society considers as un-purposefulness. It would be an act of fidelity to opening up a space in literature from which things, seen from the perspective of the today's world as uncanny, would emerge: the usefulness of the useless. This is precisely the message of Werner Hamacher's 63rd philological thesis: "only what is disconcerting can be loved; (...) only what is incomprehensible, only what is unanalyzable (...) is a possible object of philology. But it is not an *object*, it is an area in which philology moves and changes itself"<sup>16</sup>.

### 3. The usefulness of the useless

You can often hear condemnation of the humanities, the study of literature, and literature itself as useless for the modern world. In the last two decades, a full range of research has been launched and an enviable number of studies from a variety of disciplines – ranging from philosophy, literary and cultural theory, psychology to linguistics, cognitive studies of literature, and neuroesthetics – have been published, aiming to demonstrate the utmost importance of reading, teaching, and studying literature<sup>17</sup>. Bearing in mind the alarming data published by the American Academy of Pediatrics about the harmful effect of digital media on the mental and physical health of the youngest population, and

<sup>16</sup> Werner Hamacher, "95 Theses on Philology," *Diacritics*, vol. 39, no 1 (2008): 36.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. list of literature: Janet Alsup, *A Case for Teaching Literature in the Secondary School. Why Reading Fiction Matters in an Age of Scientific Objectivity and Standardization* (New York–London: Routledge, 2015); Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *Slow Professor. Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto–Buffalo–London: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Cristina Vischer Bruns, *Why Literature? The Value of Literary Reading and What It Means for Teaching* (New York–London: Continuum, 2011); Robert Eaglestone, *Literature. Why it Matters* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019); Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015); Rita Felski, *Namjene književnosti* (Zagreb: Jesenski i Turk, 2016); Martha Nussbaum, *Pjesnička pravda. Književna imaginacija i javni život* (Zagreb: Deltakont, 2005); Martha C. Pennigton and Robert P. Waxler, *Why Reading Books Still Matters. The Power of Literature in Digital Times*. (New York: Routledge, 2018); Anita Peti-Stantić, *Čitanjem do (spo)razumijevanja. Od čitalačke pismenosti do čitateljske sposobnosti* (Zagreb: Ljevak, 2019); Mark William Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2004); Dennis J. Sumara, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters. Imagination, Interpretation, Insight* (Mahwah–New Jersey–London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2002); Lisa Zunsine, *Why Me Read Fiction. Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006).

the imbalanced and over-emphasized highlighting of the importance of STEM knowledge in elementary and high school curricula, Pennigton and Waxler warn that the time has come for an urgent debate about the role of literature in the process of personal development, achieving a higher quality of life, learning social skills or developing an ethical responsibility. Taking into account numerous instances of experimental research and various theoretical analyses, the authors conclude that the importance of literature is multifaceted:

Connects us to our sensuous nature; arouses our emotions and can both excite and calm us; engages the mind and the imagination in ways that go beyond other media (...); builds vocabulary and general knowledge; improves the ability to interpret information and think for oneself; cultivates understanding of the self and the development of individual identity; increases openness to new ideas and experiences and thus enlarges creative potentials and the possibilities for change; inspires appreciation for human complexity and improves the ability to read and understand others; fosters empathy for other human beings; serves as a cultural bridge to the key themes of human existence; raises complex ethical questions; provides models for human life that are inspiring and that help people create positive aspirations for the future (...)<sup>18</sup>.

Language and narratives are an inalienable part of human existence. They allow us to gain experience and organize it, develop cognitive abilities, form epistemological categories and ethical attitudes. The narrative plots “entail conflicts, predicaments, trials and crises which call for choices, decisions, actions and interactions, whose actual outcomes are often at odds with the characters’ intentions and purposes”<sup>19</sup>. Lyrical poetry, on the other hand, is an exceptional and incomparable linguistic event. It places the reader “in a social situation”<sup>20</sup> requiring thus an emotional and intellectual understanding of what does not appear and cannot be understood in other communication situations. Nevertheless, an intense encounter of a reader with fictional texts, be

<sup>18</sup> Pennigton, Waxler, *Why Reading Books Still Matters*, 18–19.

<sup>19</sup> Yiannis Gabriel, *Storytelling in organizations: Facts, Fictions, Fantasies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 239. About the role of the storytelling in human existence cf. Kristina Peternai Andrić, *Pripovijedanje, identitet, invaliditet* (Zagreb: Meandarmedia, 2019), the chapter *Zagovor književnosti*.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge–Massachusetts–London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 221.

they prose or lyric, relate to their performativity. Reading undoubtedly promotes change, reshapes the reader's consciousness and worldview, and enables his cognitive development. It empowers us to build emotional intelligence and to become better integrated in society. Referring to a number of recent neurological studies, Peti-Stantić concludes that reading has a positive effect on "our brains as well as our intellectual development" and thus "greatly contributes to the well-being of each individual"<sup>21</sup>. In recent years, cognitive studies of literature or research in the field of so-called neuroesthetics have provided experimental confirmation of some of the theses I have just presented. I will refer here to several compelling analyses.

The research titled *Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind*<sup>22</sup> shows that reading complex texts – which are, unlike the popular ones, more semantically and semiotically demanding and in a certain way bring to the reader what is difficult, foreign, or perhaps repulsively – leads to better results in tests of the emotional, logical, and social intelligence. Another illustrative analysis – *Transportation into a story increases empathy, prosocial behavior, and perceptual bias toward fearful expression*<sup>23</sup> – measured an increase in empathy and willingness to help others. The research participants first read a story that encourages empathy, after which the level of their identifying with the story plot was analysed, followed by a simple real-life experiment. The participants who were more involved with the story of empathy also showed more empathy in the real-life situation. A team study titled *Can classic moral stories promote honesty in children?*<sup>24</sup> was conducted on a population of children. Children who read a story about a hero who succeeded because he was telling the truth lied to a lesser extend to the researcher during follow-up questioning than children who did not

<sup>21</sup> Peti-Stantić, *Čitanjem do (spo)razumijevanja*, 52. Cf. Pennington, Waxler, *Why Reading Books Still Matters*, the chapters *A Closer Look at Reading* and *Psychological Effects of Reading Literature*.

<sup>22</sup> David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano, "Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind," *Science*, vol 342 (2013), accessed November 17, 2019, <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/342/6156/377.full>.

<sup>23</sup> Dan R. Johnson, "Transportation into a story increases empathy, prosocial behavior, and perceptual bias toward fearful expression," *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 55 (2012), accessed November 17, 2019, <https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/literatureandthebrain2019/files/2019/04/Johnson12.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Kang Lee and Victoria Talwar, Anjanie McCarthy, Ilana Ross, Angela Evans, Cindy Arruda, "Can classic moral stories promote honesty in children?," *Psychological Science*, vol. 25 (2014), accessed November 17, 2019, [https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Lee\\_et\\_al\\_2014\\_Can\\_Classic\\_Moral\\_Stories\\_Promote\\_Honesty\\_in\\_Children.pdf](https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Lee_et_al_2014_Can_Classic_Moral_Stories_Promote_Honesty_in_Children.pdf).

read the story. Finally, an analysis of reading unknown and complex lyric poems<sup>25</sup> demonstrates, however, that merging with semantically less accessible texts activates brain areas related to memory and introspection.

These and similar forms of experimental research display that common theoretical debates about how reading literature shapes critical thinking and other valuable social skills are not far from the truth. By reading literature, we adopt complex critical operations and analytical strategies that, apart from what has been mentioned, can help us think better in other fields of the humanities, such as philosophy, anthropology, and in areas and branches outside the humanities, such as law, IT or political science. An interesting example in this regard is the *Oxygen* project recently conducted by Google<sup>26</sup>. The aim of the survey was to explore what skills are important to gain a successful management career and leadership positions in the IT sector. The first six characteristics are not related to technological knowledge, but have strong links with the humanities: [an IT manager] “1) is a good coach; 2) empowers the team and do not micromanage; 3) creates an inclusive team environment for success and well-being; 4) is productive and result-oriented; 5) is a good communicator – listens and shares information; 6) supports career development and discusses performance”<sup>27</sup>. It is obvious that an IT manager has to be able to think analytically and critically and to communicate successfully. In other words, she or he has to be able to master basic humanities-related knowledge<sup>28</sup>. But despite the general opinion that reading literature shapes critical thinking, there is very little reliable empirical research to confirm this claim. Therefore, I will advocate a presumption that I can defend more convincingly: studying literature is involved in the developing of the critical thinking and numerous other skills and activities that are important both to the individuals and the entire community.

<sup>25</sup> Adam Zeman and Fraser Milton, Alicia Smith, Rick Rylance, “By heart: An fMRI study of brain activation by poetry and prose,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 20 (2013), accessed November 17, 2019, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263332872\\_By\\_Heart\\_An\\_fMRI\\_Study\\_of\\_Brain\\_Activation\\_by\\_Poetry\\_and\\_Prose](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263332872_By_Heart_An_fMRI_Study_of_Brain_Activation_by_Poetry_and_Prose).

<sup>26</sup> Re:Work, “Learn about Google’s manager research,” *Re:Work*, accessed October 26, 2019, <https://rework.withgoogle.com/guides/managers-identify-what-makes-a-great-manager/steps/learn-about-googles-manager-research/>.

<sup>27</sup> Re:Work, “Learn about Google’s manager research”.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. for that matter Eaglestone, *Literature. Why it Matters*, 78–79

#### 4. Philological work in the contemporary study of literature

I would like to point out, before presenting my thesis more precisely, that I understand literature as communication<sup>29</sup>. As almost every form of communication, literary communication brings out what matters, reveals what we care about, puts events, experiences, and thoughts into language, gives them meaning, and emphasizes those aspects of human life and our personality that are usually less visible. The nature of literary communication lies in creativity. As any other form of communication, it is an inventive act; it begs for our attention, response, understanding of the tropes, digressions, or what has been suppressed. In that sense, it is not detached from reality. It is rather a real event, a process that involves comprehension, wonder, rejection, acceptance, disbelief, and even boredom. Regarding that, the study of literature allows us to understand clearly how we use language regularly and how different languages – from media to politics – impact us on a daily basis; it also enables us and to develop skills and abilities to analyse the forms and content of those languages. Therefore, the study of literature is a communal activity that involves connecting with an interpretive community and sharing experiences in an open debate about what may not have the final meaning. Therefore, the study of literature should not be based on a violent injection of the ultimate truths of literature into the bloodstream of feeble students. In active communication, it should be able to shape and reshape knowledge about understanding and managing symbols, about the modes of production and transfer of meanings that ultimately change others, the world and ourselves. In other words, the study of literature breeds and educates critics, not in terms of their dealing solely with literary criticism or with one-sided criticism of everything, but in terms of a more thorough understanding and judgement of linguistic communication and analysis of ambiguous communication-related situations.

Generations of students in Croatian elementary and secondary schools and universities have been familiar with the lyric of Dobriša Cesarić. His poem *Voćka poslije kiše* (*A small fruit tree after the rain*) is one of those poems whose influence on the collective national memory has not waned for decades<sup>30</sup>. It has been learnt by heart, included in the most relevant

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Eaglestone, *Literature. Why it Matters*, the chapter *What is Literature?*, 1–22.

<sup>30</sup> My translation: “Look at the small fruit tree after the rain: / It is full of raindrops and it swings them again. / And a marvelous luxury of its branches / glitters in the sunshine

anthologies of national lyrics and analysed and commented on numerous times<sup>31</sup>. When you read the poem in a classroom or in a seminar at the university, you first enter into a dialogue with the lyrical tradition and previous interpretations of the text. By close analysis, we discover a symmetrical formal structure based on the binarism and hierarchy derived from it, then the repertoire of the tropes and other stylistic technics, the nine-syllables iambic verse, the quatrain stanza, the romantic idea of the authorship etc. In numerous former interpretations of the text you can follow a shift in aesthetic interests and analytical methods. In that manner we necessarily nurture, secure and preserve the tradition and take care of it. We can think of such philological work as protecting the vanishing heritage and its fragile objects. In particular, it would be a certain kind of restoration of a worn text that prevents it from being forgotten. This work should not be confused with the conservatism and mystification of the allegedly eternal values. It is a kind of journey through time: the philologist seeks to animate the voices of the past, to begin conversations with the distant and in the present time absent forms of life<sup>32</sup>.

On the other hand, this preservation of tradition is under no circumstances just a conservation of it, a permanent protection from wear and tear, but rather a translation or transport. Reading of this poem is always an actualization of the inherited ideas in their present. The idea that beauty is brief and ephemeral, which is the basic idea of Cesarić's poem, migrates through time and in various ways connects with different worldviews, contexts, interests and audiences, and raises new questions. Such philological transportation transforms the idea: the philologist is commonly used to recognising and listening to changes, heterogeneous connections and unusual links. The philologist, therefore, knows how to tame the strange and make it intimate, communicate with the inaccessible and make it present, get in touch with the incomprehensible or less understandable utterances. Reading heterogeneous symbols and interpreting them is a socially useful activity that, for example, makes it easier to cope with unfamiliar contexts or make less harmful decisions in complex situations. The philologist is aware of the fact that the text of

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dances. // But if the sun hides for a little while, / All that enchantment vanishes in style. / It is once more, as it was before, / A common little tree, miserable and poor."

<sup>31</sup> On the extent of the influence of *Vočka poslije kiše* and its reading in elementary school on the formation of the outlook on the literary and social values mediated by literature cf. Tvrтко Vuković, *Tko je u razredu ugasio svjetlo?* (Zagreb: Meandarmedia, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> In this section of the text, I rely on Rita Felski's ideas formulated in *The Limits of Critique*.

the poem itself can change our *Weltanschauung*: following the transformation of the visual perspective in *Voćka poslije kiše* could stimulate change in our cognition or ethical attitude. Herein we can recognize something we could not before. From a poetic image that unites the known and the unknown in one entity can emerge something that essentially relates to all of us, to our fragile identities, which are both permanent and impermanent. To recognise beauty in the flash of a moment is not only an aesthetic but also a political event. Just as the political law allows someone to vote and silences others, in the text the invisible comes into the spectrum of the visible. The philologist therefore has in mind that the fields of the aesthetic and politics are not separate. The politics is always-already literary, just as literature is always-already political. This corresponds with the issues of how to arrange, classify, and police the discursive positions and its values, who is allowed to speak, who is shown directly, who is being pushed aside, etc.<sup>33</sup>

The philological reading alike is therefore always critical. It is a form of disagreement, objection, asking awkward questions, finding out illogicality. *Voćka poslije kiše* is a text that says one thing and does another. We are dealing here with an allegedly unshakable binary opposition between what is decaying (beauty, small fruit tree) and what is firm (habitual, common, poor little tree), between what comes first (poor little tree, it is again as it was) and what is derived from it (small fruit tree). The border between the stanzas strengthens and secures this distinction. Consequently, as the case may be, teaching contrast as a rhetorical device in Croatian elementary schools is just part of the lesson on this poem by Cesarić. However, by close reading, the philologist recognizes that there is no real contrast, that *small fruit tree* and *poor little tree* are in fact one entity, and that the distinction made between the forms of its appearing is arbitrary and simply a matter of perspective. The philologist further notes that the fleeting, impermanent beauty is based on the idea that beauty consists of ornamental, figurative as-trope-like features. And since a lyric poem is by its very nature a figurative language, the philologist asks the question whether its aesthetic value itself is fleeting and impermanent. Moreover, what is the relation between that possible conclusion and Cesarić's other poems by which he advocates that art, or literature, shapes eternal values? Mostly, the philologist asks questions, enters into the intricate dialogue, and is not always ready for consensus. A philological reading affirms

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Politika književnosti* (Novi sad: Adresa, 2008).

an open conversation about the most serious problems. With reference to *Voćka poslije kiše* they may refer to how the aesthetic idea of beauty is formed, on what basis one position in the hierarchy is privileged at the expense of the other, and who is in the locus of power to arbitrate about it. Critical philological reading is always a communal activity. It is connected with the whole interpretive community, in which not only other philologists participate but also pedagogues, cultural scientists, the general public and the community at large. The issue of contrast, which is raised in the curriculum of elementary schools along with teaching this poem, is a political issue about the identities, divisions, differences, confrontation, and background power. These problems are not socially unbiased; they are not just the concern of literary historians or literary theorists. Philological reading is critically involved in social reality.

However, this style of disagreement and problematization can be connected by the philological critical reading to less aggressive and judgmental forms of interaction with the text. Along with deconstruction and demystification based on decomposition, a philological reading can insist on the construction of new networks of meaning and common worlds. Instead of highlighting the problem, it can, as I have already explained, make an effort to add comments; instead of interrupting the previous readings, it can struggle to include and translate them into a new context; instead of challenging the tradition, it can seek to reinterpret it. Instead of simply demystifying the ideas of a pure, untouched source and absolute primacy, or rejecting the thesis of contrast in *Voćka poslije kiše*, a philological reading can keep them and relate to other ideas such as alienation or perspectivism. It can also create a situation where these ideas will raise questions about other areas of human life a little closer to today's readers. Does not the idea of the difference between the ornate *small fruit tree* and the misery of the *poor little tree* actually coincide with the fashion-media makeover trend? Does this kind of transformation not have different manifestations in today's culture, but still interconnected and close with Cesarić's poem? What can we learn from it about the idea of humanity as mimicry, about identity as a disintegrated and decaying image, about the insights that result from enchantment and not logical thinking? Such a philological reading based on the construction and connection teaches us, therefore, how to bring to light what is concealed in the order of things and how to distribute this sudden *novelty* non-violently; it gives us lessons on how to cultivate an affinity to the foreign and the unknown, to question our own prejudices and the deep-rooted opinions we consider unquestionable.



An extreme effort has to be made to convince the government bureaucrats that the modes we think, speak, and use signs are irreplaceable and necessary. For example, if the investment, exploratory and social risks are inherent in the progress of today's Western societies, we must be able to explain that philology, as a "love for non sequitur,"<sup>34</sup> is prone to risk and peril, and as a consequence has the potential to aid that progress. Or, if one of the dominant narratives today is the narrative of the effectiveness, we must be able to explain that complex knowledge about reading and analysing literature provides a better understanding of our desires, emotions, and judgments, as well as the desires, emotions, and judgments of the other people. That can ultimately result in a number of purposeful acts as risk-taking for social fairness or more complex decision-making about the public good. Or we can simply remind politicians that the vast majority of leaders in the democratic world are educated in the field of the humanities and that the link between rhetoric skills, critical thinking, assessing the situation, mediating ideas about the well-being of the community on the one hand and the humanistic ethos on the other is more than obvious.

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<sup>34</sup> Hamacher, "95 Theses on Philology," 31.

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## Humanistika na periferiji. Povratak filologiji i važnost studija književnosti

**Sažetak:** Prvo poglavlje rada sažima proces devalvacije humanističkih vrijednosti koji je na Zapadu započeo prije nekoliko desetljeća. Pitanje je zašto i kako takozvana društva znanja marginaliziraju humanističko znanje. Drugo, treće i četvrto poglavlje donose prijedlog zadataka za današnje humanističke znanosti: istisnute na periferiju društva, one imaju zadatak očuvati vještine, iskustva i znanja koja takozvano društvo znanja smatra nepotrebnim. Rad stoga zagovara važnost povratka filologiji, onako kako je to Paul de Man oblikovao u članku *Povratak filologiji*, i pokušava pokazati u kojoj mjeri filologija, prestajući biti nacionalna, postaje komunalna, politička i etička sila.

**Ključne riječi:** humanistika, filologija, studij književnosti, politika književnosti