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Hypercriticism: A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Vice

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This article traces the history of a scholarly vice of little renown: hypercriticism. Focusing on classical philologists and biblical scholars in nineteenth-century Germany, it examines how Hyperkritik developed from a technical philological term into a pejorative label that was widely invoked to discredit the latest trends in classical philology and, especially, biblical scholarship. Methodologically, this broad use of the term challenges historians' preference for treating scholarly virtues and vices as norms tied to scholars' research practices. The article therefore develops a rhetorical approach, complementary to the praxeological one, in which scholarly vice terms are interpreted as parts of a repertoire of scholarly "don'ts" on which both specialists and nonspecialists could draw in addressing the perceived ills of scholarly work.

Introduction

One of the most talked-about books among German classical philologists in the mid-1830s was Petrus Hofman Peerlkamp's 1834 commentary on Horace's *Odes*.¹ The book prompted a "deluge" of responses, as one historian put it, most of which aimed to prove, "with the degree of knowledge and taste bestowed upon them by the muses," that Horace's *Odes* were not as badly corrupted as Peerlkamp maintained.² This controversy had only just begun, however, when another iconoclast study claimed the attention of many: David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (The Life of Jesus) (1835).³ Although the debates prompted by the two books were in many ways incomparable, with Strauss's attack on the reliability of the Gospels causing greater turmoil in educated middle-class circles than Peerlkamp's revisionist views on Horace, there were also similarities.⁴

¹P. Hofman Peerlkamp, *Q. Horatii Flacci carmina* (Haarlem, 1834).

²Lucian Müller, *Geschichte der klassischen Philologie in den Niederlanden* (Leipzig, 1869), 113; Müller, "Ein Besuch bei Hofman Peerlkamp," *Jahrbücher für classische Philologie* 9 (1863), 171–86, at 171. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

³David Friedrich Strauss, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*, vol. 1 (Tübingen, 1835).

⁴On the debate prompted by *Das Leben Jesu* see Erik Linstrum, "Strauss's *Life of Jesus*: Publication and the Politics of the German Public Sphere," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71/4 (2010), 593–616; William Madges, *The Core of Christian Faith: D. F. Strauss and His Catholic Critics* (New York, 1987); Edwina

Perhaps the most striking parallel was that Strauss and Peerlkamp were both accused of “hypercriticism,” with *Hyperkritik* being a technical term for an excessively critical attitude vis-à-vis the historical record. In both cases, moreover, this accusation had ramifications beyond the realm of textual scholarship. Hypercriticism was associated with a lack of respect for tradition that was religiously heterodox and, in the reactionary climate of the 1830s, potentially politically subversive. As the *Gymnasium* teacher and Horace specialist Lobegott Samuel Obbarius put it in a review of Peerlkamp’s book, “I find in this publication the sad sign of a literary Sansculottism, for which nothing is sacred and inviolable anymore, which only wants to put its beloved I on the throne,” and for this reason “is closely connected to the political Sansculottism that is haunting France and parts of Switzerland and southern Germany.”⁵

What is remarkable about this argument is not that it accused Peerlkamp of a scholarly vice—a way of behaving, reasoning, or writing that scholars regarded as detrimental to their work—but that it offered a *symptomatic reading* of this vice, in which Peerlkamp’s hypercriticism served as evidence of an iconoclastic attitude that was manifesting itself in the worlds of learning and politics alike.⁶ Similarly, when the Thuringian pastor Johann Friedrich Weingart accused Strauss of “immoral Sansculottism of the highest kind,” he was treating *Das Leben Jesu* as evidence of “the efforts of several talented minds ... to demolish the sacred laws of the eternal world order.” Without discussing Strauss’s arguments in any detail, he presented “hypercriticism in the field of scholarship” as an acute religious and societal danger.⁷ These symptomatic readings of Peerlkamp’s and Strauss’s hypercriticism were not unique: the nineteenth century saw a broader tendency to turn hypercriticism from a scholarly vice into a pejorative label that nonspecialist authors could use to discredit unwelcome research findings or entire bodies of scholarly literature. Although hypercriticism never ceased to be a scholarly vice—it continued to be invoked in methodology manuals and learned periodicals—the most striking development between the 1830s and the 1880s was its appropriation and use by authors who perceived “critical” scholarship as a threat to deeply held beliefs.

There are two reasons why this history merits attention. First, compared to prejudice, speculation, and dogmatism, hypercriticism is a scholarly vice of little renown. Although much discussed by nineteenth-century historians, philologists, and biblical scholars, it has so far been ignored in the historical literature on

G. Lawler, *David Friedrich Strauss and His Critics: The Life of Jesus Debate in Early Nineteenth-Century German Journals* (New York, 1986).

⁵[Lobegott Samuel] Obbarius, review of *Q. Horatii Flacci carmina*, by P. Hofman Peerlkamp, *Neue Jahrbücher für Philologie und Paedagogik* 6 (1836), 355–62, at 362.

⁶On scholarly vices see Sari Kivistö, *The Vices of Learning: Morality and Knowledge at Early Modern Universities* (Leiden, 2014); Herman Paul and Alexander Stoeger, *Dogmatism: On the History of a Scholarly Vice* (London, 2024). I use “symptomatic reading” in a nontechnical sense, a shorthand for interpretations that treat the perceived deficiencies of individual scholars as evidence of broader societal ills. On the Althusserian (Marxist, Freudian) connotations of the term in literary theory see Robert J. C. Young, “Rereading the Symptomatic Reading,” in Nick Nesbitt, ed., *The Concept in Crisis: Reading Capital Today* (Durham, NC, 2017), 35–48.

⁷[Johann Friedrich] Weingart, “Religiöse Gegenstände,” *Allgemeiner Anzeiger und Nationalzeitung der Deutschen*, 1836, 3209–17, at 3213, 3214.

scholarly virtues and vices.⁸ Also, whereas the conceptual history of “criticism” (*Kritik*) before and after Immanuel Kant has been traced in some detail,⁹ this is not the case for the term’s two principal others, *Unkritik* and *Hyperkritik*.¹⁰ The first objective of this article, therefore, is to fill this lacuna by mapping the vicissitudes of hypercriticism in and around the fields of classical philology and biblical scholarship in nineteenth-century Germany.¹¹

More important, however, is the article’s second, methodological aim. While scholarly virtues and vices are receiving growing historiographical attention, the case of hypercriticism poses a challenge to one of the currently most prominent approaches in the history of the humanities: a praxeological approach that seeks to embed scholarly virtues and vices in academic research practices like reading, editing, drawing, and measuring.¹² Lorraine Daston adopts such an approach by interpreting objectivity as cherished by historians in the Rankean tradition as a virtue originating in “the practices of the new-style scientific historian.” While acknowledging that Ranke’s pupils disagreed about the meaning and importance of objectivity, Daston argues that the term’s core meaning was shaped by the broadly shared practice of collecting sources and subjecting them to “source criticism” (*Quellenkritik*).¹³ Similarly, with examples from the same Rankean tradition, Markus Krajewski states that the virtue of exactitude emerged out of, and

⁸On virtues and vices in the nineteenth-century *Geisteswissenschaften* see Herman Paul, “An Ethos of Criticism: Virtues and Vices in Nineteenth-Century Strasbourg,” in Paul, ed., *Writing the History of the Humanities: Questions, Themes, and Approaches* (London, 2023), 193–216; Christiaan Engberts, *Scholarly Virtues in Nineteenth-Century Sciences and Humanities: Loyalty and Independence Entangled* (Cham, 2022); Lorraine Daston, “Objectivity and Impartiality: Epistemic Virtues in the Humanities,” in Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn, eds., *The Making of the Humanities*, vol. 3 (Amsterdam, 2014), 27–41. On the virtues and vices of nineteenth-century historians see Elise Garritzen, *Reimagining the Historian in Victorian England: Books, the Literary Marketplace, and the Scholarly Persona* (Cham, 2023); Kasper Risbjerg Eskildsen, “Virtues of History: Exercises, Seminars, and the Emergence of the German Historical Discipline, 1830–1900,” *History of Universities* 34/1 (2021), 27–40; Herman Paul, “The Virtues of a Good Historian in Early Imperial Germany: Georg Waitz’s Contested Example,” *Modern Intellectual History* 15/3 (2018), 681–709.

⁹Benedetto Bravo, “Critique in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and the Rise of the Notion of Historical Criticism,” in Christopher Ligota and Jean-Louis Quantin, eds., *History of Scholarship: A Selection of Papers from the Seminar on the History of Scholarship Held Annually at the Warburg Institute* (Oxford, 2006), 135–95; Werner Schneiders, “Vernünftiger Zweifel und wahre Eklektik: Zur Entstehung des modernen Kritikbegriffes,” *Studia Leibnitiana* 17 (1985), 143–61; Giorgio Tonelli, “‘Critique’ and Related Terms Prior to Kant: A Historical Survey,” *Kant-Studien* 69 (1978), 119–48; Claus von Bormon, Helmut Holzhey, and Giorgio Tonelli, “Kritik,” in Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, and Gottfried Gabriel, eds., *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 4 (Basel, 1976), 1250–82.

¹⁰Although Mouza Raskolnikoff’s book, *Histoire romaine et critique historique dans l’Europe des Lumières: La naissance de l’hypercritique dans l’historiographie de la Rome antique* (Rome, 1992), seems an exception, it treats hypercriticism as an analytical category rather than an actors’ term. The same applies to Robert Villers’s essay “Gérard de Beseler: Misères et grandeurs de l’hypercritique,” in [Jean Bart et al.], *Mélanges offerts au Professeur Louis Falletti* (Paris, 1971), 545–59.

¹¹On the entangled histories of these two fields see Catherine Conybeare and Simon Goldhill, eds., *Classical Philology and Theology: Entanglement, Disavowal, and the Godlike Scholar* (Cambridge, 2021).

¹²On praxeological approaches to the history of the humanities see Steffan Martus and Carlos Spørhase, *Geistesarbeit: Eine Praxeologie der Geisteswissenschaften* (Berlin, 2022).

¹³Daston, “Objectivity and Impartiality,” 31.

contributed to, “practices of excerpting, copying, paraphrasing, redescribing” and techniques like the card index as a “medium for storing and processing historical facts.”¹⁴ By emphasizing the entanglement of ideals and practices, this praxeological approach helpfully prevents scholars’ talk of virtues and vices from evaporating into mere language. The price paid for this, however, is that the rhetoric of virtue and vice—that is, the way in which people spoke about objectivity, exactitude, and hypercriticism—disappears from attention, especially insofar as virtues and vices were invoked outside the academic realm, by people without much firsthand experience of scholars’ research practices. What the praxeological approach hides from view is what Lutz Raphael calls the “scientification of the social,” or the appropriation of scholarly terms by people outside the academic establishment.¹⁵

To remedy this deficiency, this article proposes a *rhetorical approach*, attentive to how scholarly virtue terms and their negative counterparts, scholarly vice terms, were used both in and outside the academic realm to articulate evaluative stances towards ongoing scholarly developments. This rhetorical approach does not, of course, deny the importance of praxeological research. Insofar as the term “hypercriticism” was used by classical philologists and biblical scholars themselves, there is a sense in which it emerged out of reflection on the risks inherent to conjectural reasoning, or out of evaluative practices in which scholars assessed the credibility of specific conjectures. Seen from this perspective, hypercriticism was intimately connected to philology’s quest for authenticity and commitment to correcting errors.¹⁶ Unlike the praxeological approach, however, the rhetorical approach proposed in this article does not limit itself to the scholarly realm. It seeks to trace how scholarly virtues and vices were invoked in multiple contexts, not only by specialists but also by schoolteachers entrusted with the task of teaching Homer or pastors worried about the latest advances in biblical scholarship. It seeks to understand why technical terms like *Hyperkritik* found their way among nonspecialists and, more specifically, what uses these nonspecialists made of idioms imbued with the authority of “science” (*Wissenschaft*). If praxeological research explores the relationship between scholars’ virtues and their research practices, then the rhetorical approach supplements this by tracing scholars’ talk of virtue and vice across genres, with special attention to the rhetorical stances and strategies that this vocabulary allowed for.¹⁷

¹⁴Markus Krajewski, “Geisteswissenschaftliche Genauigkeit: Zwischen epistemischer Tugend und medialer Praktik,” in Ruben Hackler, Andreas Gelhard, and Sandro Zanetti, eds., *Epistemische Tugenden: Zur Geschichte und Gegenwart eines Konzepts* (Tübingen, 2019), 217–37, at 222, 226.

¹⁵Lutz Raphael, “Die Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen als methodische und konzeptionelle Herausforderung für eine Sozialgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22/2 (1996), 165–93.

¹⁶Irene Peirano Garrison, “Source, Original, and Authenticity between Philology and Theology,” in Conybeare and Goldhill, *Classical Philology and Theology*, 86–109; Simon Goldhill, “Ad Fontes,” in Adeline Buckland and Sadiya Qureshi, eds., *Time Travelers: Victorian Encounters with Time and History* (Chicago, 2020), 67–85.

¹⁷While this approach is obviously indebted to conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and the history of political discourse as practiced by Quentin Skinner, it adds a rhetorical dimension by examining authors’ strategies of persuasion—a long-term topic in rhetorical history as advocated in Kathleen J. Turner, ed., *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases* (Tuscaloosa, 1998); and Kathleen J. Turner and Jason Edward Black, eds., *Reframing Rhetorical History: Cases, Theories, and Methodologies* (Tuscaloosa, 2022).

The article proceeds in five steps. After a sketch of the emergence and consolidation of hypercriticism as a scholarly vice term prior to the 1830s, it examines how the expression acquired public prominence in the controversies provoked by Peerkamp and Strauss. It goes on to examine how, in the half-century following these debates, *Hyperkritik* transformed from a personal vice into a pejorative shorthand for questionable trends in classical philology and biblical scholarship at large. Although academic researchers continued to use the term *ad hominem*, the third quarter of the century saw especially *Gymnasium* teachers and Protestant clergy using *Hyperkritik* more generically, sometimes to the point of reifying it into an evil power threatening neo-humanist education or Christian faith. A brief comparison across confessional borders reveals that Jewish and Roman Catholic authors also contributed to this discourse. With its implied commitment to “healthy,” unexaggerated criticism, the notion of hypercriticism allowed them to pose as guardians of true scholarship—an attractive stance for authors who were frequently denied a claim to scientific status because of their religious allegiances. In its concluding remarks, the article suggests that, in this respect, hypercriticism was not unique: several other scholarly virtue and vice terms also found their way into religious and political controversies.

The emergence of the term

The idea that criticism could overstep its bounds, especially in relation to canonical texts, was, of course, not new. Antoine Godeau and Jean Mabillon were only two of many seventeenth-century authors who warned that criticism “should remain within its limits”; that is, refrain from applying its ingenious tricks to Scripture, while also avoiding “criticism only for the sake of practicing criticism,” driven by passions detrimental to faith and scholarship alike.¹⁸ There was, moreover, no lack of labels for designating such impertinent behavior. While Momus, the Greek deity who had dared to criticize his fellow gods at Olympus, was an identification figure for religious and literary critics throughout the early modern period, his name also served as a byword for excessive criticism (with Luther at some point calling Erasmus a “true Momus” who “mocks and trifles with everything”).¹⁹ Pyrrho, likewise, lent his name to excessive doubt, with the specter of Pyrrhonism haunting the early eighteenth-century Republic of Letters not unlike the threat of hypercriticism would do in nineteenth-century Europe.²⁰ Like

By doing so, the rhetorical approach examines scholars’ talk of virtue and vice not only *referentially* (as denoting intellectual habits or character traits that were perceived as conducive and detrimental, respectively, to the pursuit of scholarship) but also *performatively*, with an eye to how authors “did things with words.” See Herman Paul, “The Highest Virtue of the Philologist, or: How to Do Things with Virtues and Vices” (submitted).

¹⁸ Antoine Godeau, *Histoire de l’église*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1653), 198; Jean Mabillon, *Traité des études monastiques, divisé en trois parties*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1691), 295, quoted here in the English translation by John Paul McDonald: *Treatise on Monastic Studies* (Lanham, 2004), 188.

¹⁹ Quoted in George McClure, *Doubting the Divine in Early Modern Europe: The Revival of Momus, the Agnostic God* (Cambridge, 2018), 90. See also Donatella Capaldi, *Momo: Il demone cinico tra mito, filosofia e letteratura* (Naples, 2011).

²⁰ Anton M. Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 2016); Markus Völkel, “Pyrrhonismus historicus” und “fides historica”: *Die Entwicklung der deutschen historischen*

skepticism, moreover, Pyrrhonism was a term that could be used derogatorily. Calling someone a *Pyrrho redivivus*, analogous to how Luther called Erasmus a Momus, amounted to diagnosing them with pathological doubt.²¹

While hypercriticism belonged to the same word field as Pyrrhonism and skepticism, it was not nearly as old.²² Originating in the sixteenth century, *hypercritica* had entered scholarly parlance as shorthand for responses to criticism or reflections on the critic's task.²³ Already in the early seventeenth century, however, the term was used accusatorily ("the hypercritical controller of Poets," "too Hypercritical upon so short a Digression"), with the prefix denoting an excess of critical zeal.²⁴ Dictionaries codified this meaning by defining the hypercritic as someone "above, or passing the common sort of Criticks, a Master Critick," "over critical," "over exact," engaged in "more than ordinary Judgment or Censure."²⁵ The hypercritic so defined was an embodiment of virtue turned into vice ("that hypercritical Momus") and, as such, an object of contempt and ridicule.²⁶ Gilles Ménage's 1638 satire on the French Academy, ironically addressed "to our academic lords, our lords the hypercritics, sovereign arbiters of words," is a case in point.²⁷ "Here is the hypercriticism," wrote Ménage on another occasion, "which sovereignly judges all works: which censors my books; which treats them as ridiculous."²⁸ Clearly, Ménage hoped to return the compliment by turning the hypercritic into a figure of mockery—not unlike the pedant whose vices had been ridiculed by generations of French and Italian playwrights.²⁹ Hypercritics, wrote another French critic, are men with "very sharp eyes to see the slightest faults, and who take pleasure in noticing them."³⁰ By the early eighteenth century, then, hypercriticism had come to denote a reduction *ad absurdum* of what criticism was supposed to be. It

Methodologie unter dem Gesichtspunkt der historischen Skepsis (Frankfurt am Main, 1987); Carlo Borghero, *La certezza e la storia: Cartesiansimo, pirronismo e conoscenza storica* (Milan, 1983).

²¹See the examples in Winfried Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus: Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik- und Religionskritik des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1988), 358; Theobald Freudenberger, "Die Annales Collegii Herbipolensis Societatis Jesu und ihr Verfasser Johannes Spitznase aus Mühlhausen in Thüringen," *Würzburger Diözesangesichtsblätter* 43 (1981), 163–262, at 165, 166.

²²The term is notably absent from Silvia Rizzo, *Il lessico filologico degli umanisti* (Rome, 1973).

²³Julius Ceasar Scaliger, *Poeticæ libri septem* (Lyon, 1561), 295; Edmund Bolton, "Hypercritica; or a Rule of Judgment for Writing, or Reading Our History's" (1621), in Joseph Haslewood, ed., *Ancient Critical Essays upon English Poets and Poësy*, vol. 2 (London, 1815), 221–54.

²⁴[William Camden], *Remaines Concerning Brittain*, 4th edn (London, 1629), 13; A. Cowley, *Poems* (London, 1656), 36, both referring to Julius Ceasar Scaliger (who was not only among the first to use the term but also the first to become known as a hypercritic).

²⁵[Thomas] Blount], *Glossographia: or a Dictionary ...* (London, 1656), s.v. "hypercritick"; E. Coles, *An English Dictionary ...* (London, 1677), s.v. "hypercritick"; E[dward] P[hillips], *The New World of Words: Or a General English Dictionary ...*, 4th edn (London, 1678), s.v. "hypercriticism" (appendix, n.p.); N. Bailey, *An Universal Etymological English Dictionary ...* (London, 1721), s.v. "hypercriticisms."

²⁶[Thomas Coryate], *Coryates Crambe, or his Colwort Twisse Sodden ...* (London, 1611), n.p. ("To the Reader").

²⁷[Gilles Ménage], *Le Parnasse alarmé* (Paris, 1649), 3.

²⁸[Gilles Ménage], *Observations de Monsieur Ménage sur la langue française*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1676), 194.

²⁹Jocelyn Royé, *La figure du pédant de Montaigne à Molière* (Geneva, 2008); Antonio Stäuble, "Parlar per lettera": *Il pedante nella commedia del cinquecento e altri saggi sul teatro rinascimentale* (Rome, 1991). I owe these references to Arnoud Visser.

³⁰Review of *Observations sur le nouveau breviaire de Cluni* by Jean-Baptiste Thiers, *Journal des sçavans*, 1702, 693–4, at 694.

symbolized both *excessiveness* (criticism gone too far) and *absurdity* (too obviously wrong to be taken seriously).

Although older meanings of the term did not immediately disappear—throughout the eighteenth century, it remained possible to sign a letter to the editor with “Hypercriticus”³¹—excessiveness and absurdity established themselves as dominant connotations. In the satirical prose of Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne, hypercritics were readers pedantic enough to correct the dinner scenes in a novel or to measure the accuracy of the narrated time between two events in *Tristram Shandy* with a “scholastic pendulum.”³² Writing in 1763, a British author even proposed a *Hypercritical and Anticritical Monthly Review*, designed as a publication outlet for critics who, in Swift’s memorable words, “travel through this vast World of Writings, to pursue and hunt those *monstrous Faults* bred within; to drag out the *lurking Errors*, like *Cacus* from his Den, to multiply them like Hydras Heads, and rake them together like *Augea’s Filth*.”³³ This tradition of ridiculing hypercriticism would persist until well into the nineteenth century.³⁴

If Swift made fun of overzealous literary critics, textual scholars also came to be seen as susceptible to excessive criticism.³⁵ In the overlapping communities of classical philologists and biblical scholars, *Hyperkritik* became a word of disapproval for conjectures or emendations that were too radical to be convincing. When Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, commenting on a passage in Plutarch on Sophocles’ tragedies, proposed to substitute the name of Sophocles for Euripides, a reviewer objected that this was “hypercriticism and learned chicane.”³⁶ Another reviewer admitted that the authenticity of many speeches recorded by ancient historians was doubtful. Dismissing all of them as unreliable, however, would be excessive: “That is obviously a hypercritical judgment!”³⁷ Also, in response to Johann David Michaelis’s hesitations regarding “the elect lady and her children” in 2

³¹Perhaps the best-known example, widely discussed in studies of Benjamin Franklin, is Nathaniel Gardner’s “To the Author of the New-England Courant,” *New-England Courant* 67 (5–12 Nov. 1722), 1–2. For examples from the *London Magazine*, some fifty years later, see Samuel Baudry, “The Reviewers Reviewed: Criticism in Eighteenth-Century Letters to the Editor,” *XVII–XVIII special issue 3* (2013), 301–12.

³²Simon Wagstaff [= Jonathan Swift], *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation ...* (London, 1738), lv–lvi; [Laurence Sterne], *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 2nd edn, vol. 2 (London, 1760), 55, 56.

³³Thomas Marshall, “On the Hypercritical Monthly Reviewers,” *Palladium Extraordinary*, 1763, 80–84, at 84, Marshall’s emphasis, quoting [Jonathan Swift], *A Tale of a Tub ...*, 2nd edn (London, 1704), 78 (which, however, has “*Augeas’s Dung*” instead of “*Augea’s Filth*”).

³⁴E.g. C. F. J. [= James Freeman Clarke], “Ars Critica: A Conversation on Modern Poetry,” *Western Messenger* 7 (1839), 105–12. On the genre more generally: Alexander Košenina, *Der gelehrte Narr: Gelehrten satire seit der Aufklärung* (Göttingen, 2004).

³⁵E.g. Johann Gottlieb Schummel, *Uebersetzer-Bibliothek zum Gebrauche der Uebersetzer, Schulmänner und Liebhaber der alten Litteratur* (Wittenberg, 1774), 227; Gotthilf Traugott Zacharia, *Philosophisch-theologische Abhandlungen als Beilagen zur biblischen Theologie zu gebrauchen*, ed. Christian Gottlieb Perschke (Lemgo, 1776), 24; Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 5 (London, 1788), 548 n. 1.

³⁶N.N., review of Gotthold Ephraim Lessings *Leben des Sophocles*, ed. Johann Joachim Eschenburg, *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, 1791, 2109–11, at 2111.

³⁷Gf., review of *Ueber den deutschen Styl* by Johann Christoph Adelung, *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* 73 (1787), 3–20, at 13.

John 1—why does the apostle not mention the lady’s husband?—the Jena theologian Samuel Gottlieb Lange responded, “This is real hypercriticism. Where would we end up if we were offended by something like this?”³⁸ Lange’s rhetorical question is an interesting one because of its implied slippery-slope argument. Although charges of hypercriticism were often prompted by small points of disagreement, they derived their force from the suggestion that an author’s interpretive habits would have devastating consequences if applied not to a single Bible verse or line of Horace, but to all of Scripture or the whole Horatian corpus.

This potential for presenting specific conjectures, often at the level of single words, as evidence of an unbounded Pyrrhonism with potentially dangerous implications for other texts became characteristic of *Hyperkritik* as used by classical philologists and biblical scholars in the decades around 1800. Was it appropriate (to give one more example from the German lands) for the editors of a medieval Latin abridgment of the *Iliad* to replace *corpus* by *pignus* or to emend *icta* into *laesa* for the sake of stylistic consistency? A reviewer of the *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* believed it was not. In his eyes, a combination of “exaggerated critical willfulness” and “hypercritical anxiety” had caused the editors to make “many very arbitrary changes in the text.” What was un-Latin about *Tydideus*? Why should *cerebrum revulsum* be regarded as corrupted? And on what grounds did the editors reject the perfectly sensible proposal to read *et Pirous una* for *Pigorius una*? At stake in these questions was more than Homer’s *Iliad*. Confronted with so many “useless conjectures heaped upon each other,” the reviewer could but wish that “the good genius of criticism” would prevent such hypercritical editing from becoming the norm—for otherwise, he feared, we would have to subject who knows how many other texts to similar surgical treatment.³⁹

Although the decades around 1800 saw the term being applied at ever larger scales, to the point that a German philologist in 1819 worried about “a hypercritical chasing ... especially in classical literature,” the term’s significance at this stage should not be overestimated.⁴⁰ Hypercriticism hardly played a role in the *Fragmentenstreit* of the 1770s or in the dispute unleashed by Friedrich August Wolf’s *Prolegomena zu Homer* (1795). Wolf himself only rarely used the term, though in a telling way. Commenting on “the people outside”—a rhetorical figure similar to the “mob” (*Pöbel*) in German Enlightenment discourse⁴¹—Wolf said to harbor no illusions about the fate of his Homer criticism: the unenlightened public will dismiss it “as a web of vain subtleties, as a learned chiromancy.” Indeed, ignorant readers will engage in “mockery about hypercritical questions,” using the vice term hypocritically, without knowledge of the issues at stake, but determined to

³⁸Samuel Gottlieb Lange, *Die Schriften Johannis des vertrauten Schülers Jesu*, vol. 3 (Weimar, 1797), 161.

³⁹Fw., review of *Incerti auctoris (vulgo Pindari Thebani) Epitome Iliados Homericae* by Theodorus van Kooten and Henricus Weytingh, *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* 9 (1812), 145–63, at 155, 148, 155, 156.

⁴⁰Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen, *Die Nibelungen: Ihre Bedeutung für die Gegenwart und für immer* (Breslau, 1819), 185.

⁴¹Roman Widder, “Streit, Infamie, Hass: Figuren der Kritik im Fragmentenstreit,” in Jürgen Brokoff and Robert Walter-Jochum, eds., *Hass/Literatur: Literatur- und kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zu einer Theorie- und Diskursgeschichte* (Bielefeld, 2019), 261–89, at 267–71.

counter this perceived attack on their beloved poet.⁴² Clearly, Wolf associated *Hyperkritik* with a sense of mistrust that men of learning would provoke by prioritizing philological criticism over aesthetic appreciation of classical texts—which in retrospect was an accurate prophecy of things to come.⁴³

If hypercriticism played only a limited role in the controversies of the day, how can we explain that the term nonetheless became part of scholars' repertoire of vice terms? What, if anything, did hypercriticism add to existing terms like "skepticism" and "Pyrrhonism"? Perhaps most decisive was the ascendancy of *Kritik* in the study of literature, philology, and philosophy. As Giorgio Tonelli and others have shown, by the time Immanuel Kant published his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781, *Critique of Pure Reason*), criticism had become a buzzword in the entire world of learning.⁴⁴ It captured the aspirations of literary reviewers just as those of source-critical philologists and philosophers dissatisfied with Wolffian or Leibnizian modes of thinking. Although *Kritik* in these various contexts meant very different things, the near ubiquity of the term offers a clue as to why hypercriticism was added to scholars' repertoire of terms. In most of the examples surveyed so far, *Hyperkritik* was presented as a vice of men who took pride in their *Kritik*. Charges of hypercriticism were responses to scholars' fascination with criticism.⁴⁵ Compared to skepticism or pedantry, then, hypercriticism had the advantage of conveying that a Momus-like questioning of each and everything was criticism gone too far—a perversion of something good. In the context of scholarly controversy, this was an attractive feature of the term. While objections to *Kritik* as such could easily prompt countercharges of *Unkritik* or dogmatism, *Hyperkritik* presupposed at least rhetorically a commitment to sound criticism. Hypercriticism, in other words, allowed authors to reject conjectures or arguments that they perceived as excessively critical while presenting themselves, in line with the demands of *Wissenschaft*, as advocates of "healthy" criticism.⁴⁶

⁴²Friedrich August Wolf to Christian Gottlieb Heyne, 18 Nov. 1795, in *Briefe an Herrn Hofrath Heyne von Professor Wolf: Eine Beilage zu den neusten Untersuchungen über den Homer* (Berlin, 1797), 3–23, at 18, 13.

⁴³For another occurrence of the term in Wolf see [Friedrich August] W[olf], "Anfang der Odyssee," *Literarische Analekten* 2 (1820), 137–66, at 152.

⁴⁴Tonelli, "Critique," 132–47; J. Colin McQuillan, *Immanuel Kant: The Very Idea of a Critique of Pure Reason* (Evanston, 2016), 3–20.

⁴⁵Kant's critical philosophy also prompted charges of hypercriticism, most notably from Johann Gottfried Herder, who preferred to keep away from "this region of hypercriticism of the sound understanding in which one builds without materials, exists without existence, knows without experience, and works without powers." J. G. Herder, *Gott: Einige Gespräche* (Gotha, 1787), 166–7; the English translation is taken from *God: Some Conversations*, trans. Frederick Burkhardt (New York, 1949), 153. Similarly, a Catholic critic judged that Kantian hypercriticism was too far removed from "healthy common sense" to be convincing. Benedikt Stattler, *Anhang zum Anti-Kant in Widerlegung der Kantischen Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (Munich, 1788), 92; see also Stattler, *Anti-Kant*, vol. 2 (Munich, 1788), 402. Following Kant himself, who had ranked Johann Gottlieb Fichte among his "hypercritical friends" (Immanuel Kant to Johann Heinrich Tieftrunk, 13 Oct. 1797, in *Kant's Briefwechsel* (ed. Rudolf Reicke), vol. 3 (Berlin, 1902), 205–7, at 205), others argued that they preferred Kant's criticism over Fichte's hypercriticism, with the prefix here as elsewhere expressing a sense of excess. See e.g. [Johann Otto Thiess], *Johann Otto Thiess: Geschichte seines Lebens und seiner Schriften ...*, vol. 1 (Hamburg, 1801), 383–5; [Johann Gottfried Gruber], "Ueber den Geist und die Tendenz der neueren Aesthetik [I]," *Neue Leipziger Literaturzeitung* 4 (1804), 2289–2304, at 2291.

⁴⁶See e.g. Fr. C. H. Kruse, *Blicke auf die alten Völker und Städte des östlichen Germaniens ...* (Leipzig, 1822), xiv–xv.

Peerlkamp and Strauss

If we interpret the 1830s controversies with which we started against this background, the first thing to note is that charges of hypercriticism as leveled against Peerlkamp and Strauss broadly followed the patterns identified above. When Peerlkamp's reviewers complained about hypercriticism—"a work of hypercriticism," "the editor's hypercriticism," "the newest conspicuous instance of bold hypercriticism"—they did so, first of all, because of perceived excesses.⁴⁷ Peerlkamp judged large parts of Horace's *Odes* inauthentic because they failed to meet the impossibly high standard of what Peerlkamp regarded as Horace's own Latin. The ironic result, as one commentator put it, was that Peerlkamp "drove out Horace with Horace himself" ("Horatium ex Horatio ipso expulit").⁴⁸ One line of defense against this mistreatment of a beloved poet was to say that stylistic consistency had been Horace's priority no more than it had been Shakespeare's or Goethe's.⁴⁹ "Horace is not a pedant or a pedantic and hypochondriac Dutch schoolmaster," wrote the *Gymnasium* teacher Eduard Döhler; "he is a poet, a true poet at that, who enthusiastically writes for receptive minds, not for cold rational beings."⁵⁰ Another argument, brought forward by Gottfried Bernhardy, was that Peerlkamp's hypercriticism was too subjective and arbitrary to qualify as *Wissenschaft*.⁵¹ Last, but not least, there was the *reductio ab absurdum*, or the argument "that such a procedure can lead to nothing but bottomless criticism."⁵² It was in the context of this argument that "the dominance of a certain critical feeling ... which recognizes nothing as true and genuine except that which meets its own subjective requirements" appeared most threatening to the sociopolitical order. As Obbarius rhetorically asked, "What would happen to our school system, what would happen to our ancient, revered authors if no authority ... appears as sacred anymore?"⁵³ Although Lucian Müller exaggerated in reporting that Peerlkamp's book was treated as "a sign of ever-increasing moral corruption and the imminent end of the world," he correctly saw that the critics' real point of concern was not the textual integrity of Horace's *Odes* but the Pandora's box opened by critics who dared to call even the most venerable traditions into question.⁵⁴

⁴⁷Obbarius, review, 355; [Gottfried] Bernhardy, review of *Q. Horatii Flacci carmina* by P. Hofman Peerlkamp, *Jahrbücher für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, 1835, 737–42, 745–56, at 749; Karl Wilhelm Justi, *Hiob: Neu übersetzt und erläutert* (Kassel, 1840), xi.

⁴⁸Johann Casper von Orelli, quoted in John Edwin Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, 1908), 277.

⁴⁹This argument would also be made repeatedly against Karl Lachmann's criticism of Homer, e.g. in N.N., "Homerische Literatur," *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung*, 1844, 501–7, 509–16, at 514; H. Düntzer, "Ueber Lachmann's Kritik der homerischen Gesänge," *Allgemeine Monatsschrift für Literatur*, July–Dec. 1850, 273–95, at 277–8; [Wilhelm] Bäumlein, "Betrachtungen über Homer's Ilias: Zweiter Artikel," *Zeitschrift für die Alterthumswissenschaft* 8 (1850), 145–74, at 165–6.

⁵⁰Eduard Döhler, review of *Q. Horatii Flacci epistola ad Piones* by P. Hofman Peerlkamp, *Neue Jahrbücher für Philologie und Paedagogik* 16 (1846), 440–48, at 441.

⁵¹Bernhardy, review, 742.

⁵²Obbarius, review, 355.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 355, 362.

⁵⁴Müller, "Besuch," 171, echoing Peerlkamp's own retrospective on the reception of his book ("Ad arma, clamabatur, ad arma") in P. Hofman Peerlkamp, *Q. Horatii Flacci carmina*, 2nd edn (Amsterdam, 1862), xxix.

As Marilyn Chapin Massey has argued, moral–political concerns played a role also in the debate provoked by *Das Leben Jesu*. Although Strauss’s criticism of the Gospels was hardly more radical than that of Reimarus and Lessing in the 1770s,⁵⁵ his argument that Jesus was a product of the mythic imagination of his early followers had explosive potential in the political context of the 1830s. As the Young Hegelian philosopher Arnold Ruge pointed out in 1839, Strauss’s replacement of the “genius” of Jesus by the “spiritual democracy” of Christian congregations that recognized, or created, Jesus as a figure of religious significance amounted to a democratization of Christianity.⁵⁶ This leads Massey to suggest that the Life of Jesus controversy was, among other things, a proxy for a debate on political freedom—allowing the educated middle classes to discuss democracy and revolution in the same veiled manner in which Karl Gutzkow’s controversial novel *Wally, die Zweiflerin* (Wally the Sceptic) (1835), opened up a space for imagining alternatives to the existing religious–political order.⁵⁷

True as this may be, the dozens of commentators who accused Strauss of *Hyperkritik* mostly worried about other perceived impertinencies. The most important of these was the sacrilege that Strauss committed by applying his critical tools to the holy of holies, “condemning and torturing the most sacred life story to the most shameful death.”⁵⁸ Many a reviewer felt that Strauss’s “tearing down of thousand-year-old sanctuaries” justified a tone of holy indignation.⁵⁹ Insofar as Strauss, like Peerlkamp, was charged with “immoral Sansculottism of the highest kind,” this was not so much an accusation of political radicalism as a declaration of protest against the profanity of ridiculing “the sanctuary of religion with bitter mockery.”⁶⁰ Second, reviewers spoke about hypercriticism in relation to Strauss’s method, which many perceived as “negative,” “destructive,” or only engaged with “negating and contradicting.”⁶¹ This referred not merely to Strauss

⁵⁵A point emphasized by Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Kritische Untersuchungen über die kanonischen Evangelien, ihr Verhältniß zu einander, ihren Charakter und Ursprung* (Tübingen, 1847), 46–7.

⁵⁶Arnold Ruge, review of *Zwei friedliche Blätter*, by David Friedrich Strauss, *Hallsche Jahrbücher für deutsche Wissenschaft und Kunst* 2 (1839), 985–8, 993–1004, at 1002.

⁵⁷Marilyn Chapin Massey, *Christ Unmasked: The Meaning of “The Life of Jesus” in German Politics* (Chapel Hill, 1983), esp. 34–7. See also, more cautiously, Michael Ledges-Lomas, “Strauss and the Life of Jesus Controversy,” in Grant Kaplan and Kevin M. Vander Schel, eds., *The Oxford History of Modern German Theology*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 2023), 614–32, at 615–6; and, on the Gutzkow controversy, Erwin Wabnegger, *Literaturskandal: Studien zur Reaktion des öffentlichen Systems auf Karl Gutzkows Roman “Wally, die Zweiflerin” (1835–1848)* (Würzburg, 1987).

⁵⁸Johann Ernst Osiander, *Apologie des Lebens Jesu gegen den neuesten Versuch, es in Mythen aufzulösen* (Tübingen, 1837), 322.

⁵⁹C. Ullmann, review of *Das Leben Jesu* by David Friedrich Strauss, *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 2 (1836), 770–816, at 773; N.N., review of *Bemerkungen über “Das Leben Jesu”* by Christoph Benj. Klaiber, *Literatur-Blatt*, 1836, 398–400, at 398.

⁶⁰Weingart, “Religiöse Gegenstände,” 3213.

⁶¹Christoph Benj. Klaiber, *Bemerkungen über “Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet von D. Fr. Strauss”* (Stuttgart, 1836), 39, 55; Otto Krabbe, *Vorlesungen über das Leben Jesu für Theologen und Nichttheologen* (Hamburg, 1839), 14; Osiander, *Apologie*, 434. Similarly, [Karl Gottfried Wilhelm] Theile, “Zur Biographie Jesu,” *Repertorium der gesammten deutschen Literatur* 12 (1837), 173–6, at 174; Ferdinand Florens Fleck, *Die Vertheidigung des Christenthums: Mit Hinblick auf Strauss und die geistesverwandte Richtung* (Leipzig, 1842), 220; Wilhelm Böhmer, *Die christliche Dogmatik oder Glaubenswissenschaft*, vol. 2 (Breslau, 1843), 29, 147, 299.

failing to offer a convincing alternative to the views he demolished—the author’s modest attempts in that direction did not satisfy even his closest sympathizers⁶²—but also, more importantly, to Strauss’s rejecting the historicity of the Gospel narratives without giving serious consideration to historical sources that commentators believed to testify to the reliability of the Gospels. Along these lines, Ferdinand Guericke argued that Strauss’s ignoring of positive witnesses (e.g. Eusebius and Papias of Hierapolis, in the case of Mark) was evidence of “a hypercriticism that destroys all historical ground, turning everything upside down.”⁶³

The superlative expressions used by many of Strauss’s critics confirm that hypercriticism was a vice of excess. Time and again, critics spoke about “the most decisive hypercriticism” or “the most audacious and most malicious hypercriticism.”⁶⁴ A sense of excess also speaks from the adjective *zügellos* (“unrestrained”), as well as from Johann Ernst Osiander’s portrayal of Strauss as a modern Icarus, plummeting down out of “the aerial region of myth and the ether of speculation.”⁶⁵ Perhaps the most intriguing testimony to Strauss’s perceived excessiveness can be found in satirical accounts of the sort written by Julius Friedrich Wurm. This Protestant theologian took Strauss’s methods *ad absurdum* by applying them to Luther, suggesting that the reformer had been but a figment of the sixteenth-century imagination.⁶⁶ Others even called the existence of Strauss himself into question: “The fact that in newspapers, critical journals, and literary magazines there is a lot of talk back and forth about a certain Dr Strauss, evaluating, praising, and blaming him, does not prove anything about the real existence of Dr Strauss. Dr Strauss is probably just the idea, the legend, the allegory of rationalism.”⁶⁷ Although not all satires on Strauss explicitly mentioned the vice of hypercriticism, the Dorpat theologian Carl Friedrich Keil was presumably not the only one who read them as parodic illustrations of the “absurdity” of Strauss’s “hypercriticism.”⁶⁸

While the Life of Jesus controversy propelled the vice of hypercriticism to the center of attention, none of the connotations of the term reviewed so far were

⁶²Ledges-Lomas, “Strauss,” 623.

⁶³Heinrich Ernst Ferdinand Guericke, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Leipzig, 1843), 263–4.

⁶⁴Johannes von Kuhn, *Das Leben Jesu, wissenschaftlich bearbeitet*, vol. 1 (Mainz, 1838), 51; Ferdinand Florens Fleck, *Philosophie und christliche Theologie im Widersprache und höheren Einklange* (Leipzig, 1846), 335.

⁶⁵Osiander, *Apologie*, 322, 424. On the trope of Icarus in the nineteenth-century discourse on scholarly vices see Sjang ten Hagen and Herman Paul, “The Icarus Flight of Speculation: Philosophers’ Vices as Perceived by Nineteenth-Century Historians and Physicists,” *Metaphilosophy* 53/2–3 (2023), 280–94.

⁶⁶Julius Friedrich Wurm, *Auszüge aus der Schrift: Das Leben Luthers kritisch bearbeitet von Dr. Casuar, Mexiko 2836* (Tübingen, 1836).

⁶⁷[H. W. E.?] v[on] Keyserlingk, “Des Doctor Strauß ‘Das Leben Jesu’: Eine Sage des 19ten Jahrhunderts,” *Literatur-Blatt*, 1836, 313–6, at 313. Another specimen of the genre was Samuel Robert Geier, “Die Alexander-Mythen verglichen mit den sogenannten evangelischen Mythen: Ein Beitrag zur Kritik über die Schrift von Strauss: *Das Leben Jesu*,” *Zeitschrift für die historische Theologie* 8 (1838), 119–58. Also, Richard Whately’s persiflage of David Hume’s critique of miracles, *Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte* (1819), was translated into German and applied to Strauss’s book: *Das Leben Napoleon’s kritisch geprüft: Nebst einigen Nutzenwendungen auf ‘Das Leben Jesu, von Strauss’* (Leipzig, 1836).

⁶⁸[Carl Friedrich] Keil, “Beurtheilende Uebersicht der in neuester Zeit über das Leben Jesu Christi erschienenen Schriften [II],” *Mittheilungen und Nachrichten für die evangelische Geistlichkeit Russlands* 1 (1838), 54–83, at 69.

new. Excessiveness and absurdity were established layers of meaning, while mockery and *reductio ad absurdum* also belonged to scholars' existing polemical repertoire. Even the fact that Peerlkamp and Strauss, each in their own way, came to be seen as personifications of hypercriticism was not new: Julius Caesar Scaliger and Pierre Harduin had enjoyed such reputations too.⁶⁹ What was new, however, was that several commentators took Strauss's book as evidence of a hypercriticism that was gaining ground among biblical scholars or in the world of learning at large. Osiander, for one, stated that historical criticism, with its "eccentric negations," had initially made "bold attacks in the profane field," then "ventured even bolder ones on more authentic works, such as Plato's and Cicero's," before entering the field of biblical scholarship.⁷⁰ Likewise, Strauss's archenemy, the conservative church politician Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, believed that the "unlimited arbitrariness" of Straussian criticism reflected a "general tendency of the age towards historical skepticism," which had manifested itself in the study of Homer before gaining a foothold in biblical scholarship.⁷¹ What is noticeable about these arguments is that they came close to attributing agency not to scholars with vicious habits, but to the vice of hypercriticism itself. By the 1830s, such reification was still rare.⁷² Most commentators wrote in a more personal register about "Straussian hypercriticism" or about the *Hyperkritiker* that Strauss had become.⁷³ In retrospect, however, those who warned against the reified threat of "modern hypercriticism" or "newfangled hypercriticism" paved the way for things to come.⁷⁴

Classical philology

What, then, happened in the half-century after Peerlkamp and Strauss? Most conspicuously, hypercriticism transformed from a personal vice, to which only

⁶⁹In his response to Peerlkamp, Obbarius, review, 362, explicitly recalled Harduin's warning example, as did several contributors to the Life of Jesus debate: e.g., G. C. Adolf Harless, *Die kritische Bearbeitung des Lebens Jesu von Dr. Dav. Friedr. Strauß nach ihrem wissenschaftlichen Werthe beleuchtet* (Erlangen, 1836), 22; Johannes Zeller, *Stimmen der deutschen Kirche über das Leben Jesu von Doctor Strauß: Ein Beitrag zur theologischen Literaturgeschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts für Theologen und Nichttheologen* (Zurich, 1837), 65; Carl Ludwig Willibald Grimm, *Die Glaubwürdigkeit der evangelischen Geschichte mit Bezug auf Dav. Friedr. Strauß und Bruno Bauer und die durch Dieselben angeregten Streitigkeiten* (Jena, 1845), 32.

⁷⁰Osiander, *Apologie*, 58.

⁷¹Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Die Authentie des Pentateuches*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1836), 124, xxiv, xxi.

⁷²See, however, Friedrich Kruse, who as early as 1822 spoke about "our sublime hypercriticism, which does not, like the bee, arduously suck and extract honey from all flowers but rather, like the wasp, prefers to destroy or gnaw on the noblest fruits without producing anything worthwhile itself." Kruse, *Blicke*, 59.

⁷³E.g., "Schriften gegen das Leben Jesu von Strauß," *Kritische Prediger-Bibliothek* 17 (1836), 829–65, at 856; [Ludwig?] Geyer, review of *Das Leben Jesu*, vol. 1, by Johannes Kuhn, *Literarische Zeitung* 6 (1839), 29–30, at 29; Osiander, *Apologie*, 127; N.N., review of *Das Leben Jesu* by K. Hase, *Zeitschrift für die gesammte lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 1 (1840), 154. The term *Hyperkritiker* was used in [Philip Schaff], "Ein Wort über die theologische Kritik [II]," *Literarische Zeitung* 10 (1843), 969–75, at 972; Osiander, *Apologie*, v.

⁷⁴N.N., "Blick auf die Revolutionen der Schweiz in der neuesten Zeit überhaupt, und auf die Züricher vom 6. September dieses Jahres insbesondere [II]," *Minerva* 4 (1839), 345–400, at 373, 378 n. 1. The revolution discussed in this article was the *Züriputsch*, prompted by Strauss's 1839 appointment in Zurich, on which see Frederick C. Beiser, *David Friedrich Strauß, Father of Unbelief: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford, 2020), 132–9.

individuals were prone, into a pejorative that could denote entire fields or schools of thought. Hypercriticism became shorthand for traditions of scholarship that commentators believed to be excessively suspicious of the textual integrity of the *Iliad*, the Pentateuch, or the Pauline epistles. More specifically, “the sharp knife of hypercriticism” became a metonymical symbol of academic researchers who, in the eyes of their critics, denied the aesthetic qualities of Homer’s poetry or the divine inspiration of the Bible.⁷⁵ In tandem with this, the term assumed an agency of its own, to the extent that “the hypercriticism,” with a definite article, came to be depicted as a force intent on destroying aesthetic education and Christian faith. Such reification, finally, was most common among nonspecialists; that is, among *Gymnasium* teachers and conservative Protestants whose love of Homer and the Bible exceeded their confidence in the critical work of academic scholars. These overlapping trends, however, did not manifest themselves with equal force everywhere: significant differences existed between fields as well as between confessions.

At first sight, the trends just mentioned largely seemed to bypass the field of classical philology. In the decades following the 1830s, the word “hypercriticism” appeared primarily in book reviews and in the small print of footnotes. In most cases, the term denoted artificial distinctions as between Anaea and the Anaeans in Sophocles’ *Antigone* or unwarranted emendations like the substitution of *brutis* for *mutis* in Tacitus’ *Histories*.⁷⁶ Also, following established usage, classical philologists used cautious phrases like “shouldn’t we be allowed to assume, without being hypercritical” to justify a conjecture or, alternatively, to keep an interpretational problem unresolved in the absence of conclusive evidence (“Who dares to decide here ...? Only hypercriticism could want to do it”).⁷⁷ Along similar lines, Friedrich von Raumer, writing about Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, declared that “only a hypercriticism that puts small, insignificant things under the magnifying glass and ignores everything larger, could find another author for the *Anabasis*.”⁷⁸ In all of these cases, charges of hypercriticism referred to how individual philologists dealt with individual texts—not to an entire field or tradition of scholarship.⁷⁹

⁷⁵Johann Christoph Matthäus, *Die evangelischen Pericopen des christlichen Kirchenjahres ...*, vol. 1 (Ansbach, 1844), 155.

⁷⁶*Des Sophokles Antigone, Griechisch und Deutsch*, ed. August Böckh (Berlin, 1843), 203; Cornelius Tacitus, *Der Freiheitskampf der Bataver unter Claudius Civilis*, ed. Carl Christ. Conr. Völker, vol. 2 (Elberfeld, 1863), 52.

⁷⁷Ferdinand Hauthal, *Beiträge zur Geschichte, Verbesserung, Feststellung und Erklärung des Textes der Satiren des Persius*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1837), 446; H. Düntzer, *Rettung der aristotelischen Poetik: Ein kritischer Versuch* (Braunschweig, 1840), 157.

⁷⁸Friedrich von Raumer to August Boeckh, 23 Dec. 1849, in Raumer, ed., *Antiquarische Briefe* (Leipzig, 1851), 30–36, at 33–4.

⁷⁹This is true also for other uses of the “hyper-” prefix, as in *Hyperhermeneutik* (a term coined by the historian Ernst Bernheim), *Hyperontologie* (of which the philosopher Eduard Hartmann found himself accused in the Pessimism Controversy), and the *Hyperscharfsinn* and *Hypercriticismus* that the economist Gustav Schmoller detected in Max Lehmann. See Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode: Mit Nachweis der wichtigsten Quellen und Hülfsmittel zum Studium der Geschichte* (Leipzig, 1889), 418; R. Haym, “Die Hartmann’sche Philosophie des Unbewußten [III],” *Preußische Jahrbücher*, 31 (1873), 257–311, at 258; Gustav Schmoller (1893) quoted in Waltraut Reichel, *Studien zur Wandlung von Max Lehmanns preussisch-deutschem Geschichtsbild* (Göttingen, 1963), 78–9.

This personal focus of the vice term is confirmed by textbooks like August Boeckh's *Encyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften* (Encyclopedia and Methodology of the Philological Sciences) (1877). For Boeckh, hypercriticism was a "wandering path" on which "exaggerated doubt" led critical minds astray. He ranked it as a vice of excess, in the company of uninhibited political passion and "unbridled phantasy."⁸⁰ Following in Boeckh's footsteps, the Homer specialist Arthur Ludwich associated hypercriticism with an "unbridled lust for divination" (*effrenata divinandi libido*), with all the ambiguous connotations with which this ancient philological term was imbued.⁸¹ Additional evidence of hypercriticism retaining its personal focus is the fact that Peerlkamp's treatment of Horace remained a point of reference. Until at least the late nineteenth century, his name served as a byword for hypercriticism.⁸² Tellingly, in 1899, a reviewer of a new Horace edition could declare that the editor's impertinences were reminiscent of Peerlkamp's "hypercritical subtlety," even to the extent that "such a provocation to subjective criticism ... has not been heard of since the days of Peerlkamp."⁸³

Although none of this implied the existence of a hypercritical school, philologists had been hinting at this possibility ever since the Peerlkamp controversy, most concretely by delineating the philologist's task with Scylla and Charybdis metaphors or with the quasi-Aristotelian argument that criticism must steer a course between *Unkritik* and *Hyperkritik*.⁸⁴ Hermann Köchly, for example, wrote in 1842 that philologists must navigate between a faithful ("orthodox") clinging to received texts and a "supposedly genial hypercriticism," which "with contempt for everything that has been handed down historically, according to the subjective norm of aprioristically constructed principles, and even according to momentary whims molds the writings of the ancients in the most arbitrary way, especially by excising what is supposedly unauthentic." Although Köchly only mentioned "the paradoxes of a Hoffmann–Peerlkamp" as an illustration of the latter, his rhetoric suggested that hypercriticism was a real-existing power that could make its impact felt across the discipline.⁸⁵ In 1873, Germany's leading classical philologist, Friedrich Ritschl, conveyed the same idea in arguing that research on ancient Jewish–

⁸⁰August Boeckh, *Encyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, ed. Ernst Bratuscheck (Leipzig, 1877), 340.

⁸¹Arthur Ludwich, *Aristarchs Homerische Textkritik nach den Fragmenten des Didymos*, vol. 2 (Leipzig, 1885), 466; Anthony Grafton, "Divination: Towards the History of a Philological Term," in Gian Mario Cao, Anthony Grafton, and Jill Krave, eds., *The Marriage of Philology and Scepticism: Uncertainty and Conjecture in Early Modern Scholarship and Thought* (London, 2019), 47–69.

⁸²H. Düntzer, *Kritik und Erklärung der horazischen Gedichte*, vol. 1 (Braunschweig, 1840), 313; J. Könighoff, review of Q. *Horatius Flaccus*, ed. Franciscus Ritter, *Zeitschrift für Alterthumswissenschaft* 14 (1856), 460–72, at 468; Wilhelm Freund, *Trienium philologicum oder Grundzüge der philologischen Wissenschaften, für Jünger der Philologie zur Wiederholung und Selbstprüfung* (Leipzig, 1874), 104; Th. Fritzsche, "Studien über Horaz," *Philologus* 35 (1876), 477–92, at 477.

⁸³[Josef] Häußner, review of Q. *Horati Flacci carmine* by Lucian Müller, *Berliner Philologische Wochenschrift* 19 (1899), 174–7, at 176.

⁸⁴For some glimpses on the popularity of Scylla and Charybdis metaphors in the discourse of scholarly virtues and vices see Werner Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilkritik: Studien zur Geschichte der Vorurteilstheorie* (Stuttgart, 1983), 8, 133, 144.

⁸⁵H. Köchly, review of *Emendationes in Sophoclis Trachinias and Sophoclis Tragoediae*, vol. 2, by Eduard Wunder, *Zeitschrift für die Altherthumswissenschaft* 9 (1842), 747–802, at 748.

Roman relationships had recently swung back and forth between “credulity” and “almost fanatical scepticism,” with the latter having reached an extreme in the “radical hypercriticism” of Heinrich Graetz. While Ritschl did not refute Graetz’s arguments in detail, he, too, argued for a “golden middle road” between uncritical and hypercritical thinking.⁸⁶

Such depersonalized uses of the term circulated especially among *Gymnasium* teachers who were worried about a growing chasm between neo-humanist education (*Bildung*) and philological research (*Forschung*). As Bas van Bommel has shown, this concern manifested itself most markedly in the second half of the century, in response to academic philologists who seemed to care more about the scientific status of their field than about the exemplary function of the classics.⁸⁷ When Classics teachers complained about “disparaging hypercriticism” or a “more and more unbridled, all-consuming hypercriticism,”⁸⁸ they referred to an overdose of “book learning,” which treated classical authors as “mummies” and thereby contributed to students losing “the enjoyment of the Homeric poems” and the “desire and love of studying them.”⁸⁹ “The hunt for variants that emerges out of philological hypercriticism,” explained a *Gymnasium* teacher, is a “useless torment” for students: it gives them stones for bread by discussing copying errors instead of timeless beauty.⁹⁰ According to another teacher, such mind-numbing hypercriticism had its roots in Wolf, whose “extremely negative-critical” attitude in source-critical matters had “not only bequeathed itself to many philologists but also seeped into the *Gymnasien* of northern Germany.” As a result, Greek and Latin classes had been turned into propaedeutic philological seminars, in which the study of the Classics was pursued as an end in itself rather than as a means for familiarizing the youth with “the model of a public and private life built on the most exalted ideas.”⁹¹

⁸⁶F. Ritschl, “Eine Berichtigung der republicanischen Consularfesten: Zugleich als Beitrag zur Geschichte der römisch-jüdischen internationalen Beziehungen,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 28 (1873), 586–614, at 587–8 n. 2, in response to H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, vol. 3 (Leipzig, 1856), 500, 503.

⁸⁷Bas van Bommel, *Classical Humanism and the Challenge of Modernity: Debates on Classical Education in 19th-Century Germany* (Berlin, 2015), 64–93, esp. 68.

⁸⁸Hermann Bender, *Grundriss der römischen Literaturgeschichte für Gymnasien* (Leipzig, 1876), 41; R. Merkel, “Die Gedichte des Hesiodus [II],” *Philologus* 17 (1861), 307–20, at 311. See also [Heinrich Ludolf] Ahrens, “Ueber die Mischung der Dialekte in der griechischen Lyrik,” in *Verhandlungen der dreizehnten Versammlung deutscher Philologen, Schulmänner und Orientalisten in Göttingen von 29. September bis 2. October 1852* (Göttingen, 1853), 55–80, at 75; A. Deuerling, “Ueber die Lesung der alten Klassiker an Gymnasien,” *Blätter für das bayerische Gymnasialschulwesen* 2 (1866), 287–98, at 291; *Des Q. Horatii Flaccus Oden und Epoden*, ed. Theodor Kayser (Tübingen, 1877), vii.

⁸⁹[August] Geffers, “Humanismus und Realismus, in historischer Entwicklung und Folge,” in K. A. Schmid, ed., *Encyclopädie des gesammten Erziehungs- und Unterrichtswesens*, vol. 3 (Gotha, 1862), 589–644, at 639; Ernst Neissner, “Der Kampf des Horaz für eine bessere Geschmacksrichtung in der römischen Poesie,” in *Programm des Gymnasiums zum heiligen Kreuz in Dresden ...* (Dresden, 1867), 1–49, at 4; Chr. Bähr, review of *Homer’s Odyssee and Anhang zu Homer’s Odyssee* by Karl Friedrich Ameis, *Heidelbergsche Jahrbücher der Literatur* 58 (1865), 548–52, at 551.

⁹⁰Ludwig Noiré, *Pädagogisches Skizzenbuch* (Leipzig, 1874), 25.

⁹¹G. M. Pachtler, *Die Reform unserer Gymnasien* (Paderborn, 1883), 91, 89. In addition to Wolf, Lachmann was sometimes singled out as responsible for this trend: A. J. Mordtmann, “Zur Homer-Literatur [I],” *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung*, 1885, 681–5, at 683; [Johann Nepomuk]

In short, while classical philologists continued to use hypercriticism as shorthand for a personal vice, a growing number of authors began to use hypercriticism as the proper name of a scholarly approach or academic trend. Prominent among these authors were schoolteachers who worried about the destructive effects of excessive philological criticism on neo-humanist education. Without exaggerating the distance between academic philologists and *Gymnasium* teachers in this period,⁹² one might say that hypercriticism came to represent a threat that was felt especially by men entrusted with teaching the very texts that philologists were scrutinizing for discrepancies and inconsistencies.

Protestant biblical scholarship

In this respect, the field of biblical scholarship resembled that of classical philology.⁹³ When biblical scholars were accused of hypercriticism, the charges also came primarily from readers whose attitude towards the texts at stake was one of reverence more than suspicion. Also, most of these readers were no academic specialists. Although biblical scholars, just like classical philologists, used hypercriticism as a *terminus technicus* for unwarranted conjectures or exaggerated doubt,⁹⁴ the term found its widest application outside the pages of specialist journals, in the writings of pastors and others who felt that excessively critical scholarship was thwarting readers' ability to read the Bible as God's Word. There was, however, a difference of intensity: complaints about "Old and New Testament hypercriticism" were more numerous and often also more emotional than teachers' objections to the newest hypotheses in Horatian studies.⁹⁵ Tellingly, an 1893 gathering of Protestant clergy in Saxony featured several speakers who pulled out all the stops in cautioning that the authority of Scripture was "undermined more and

Sepp, "Die Abkunft der heutigen Griechen von den alten Hellenen [I]," *Der Sammler* 56/79 (1887), 3–5, at 3.

⁹²See Stefan Kipf, "Der Schulmann als vir doctissimus: Preußische Schulprogramme im Spannungsfeld von Wissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit," *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 23/2 (2013), 259–75.

⁹³Although Wolf-style Hellenism had pushed the Hebrew world beyond the purview of most German *Altertumswissenschaftler*—a point made by Anthony Grafton, "Juden und Griechen bei Friedrich August Wolf," in Reinhard Markner and Giuseppe Veltri, eds., *Friedrich August Wolf: Studien, Dokumente, Bibliographie* (Stuttgart, 1999), 9–31—Irene Peirano Garrison ("Source, Original, and Authenticity") rightly emphasizes that philologists and biblical scholars drew on largely similar methods. Also, around mid-century, border traffic between the two fields had not yet become unusual: both Peerlkamp and Lachmann made forays into New Testament criticism. See Bart L. F. Kamphuis, *New Testament Conjectural Emendation in the Nineteenth Century: Jan Hendrik Holwerda as a Pioneer of Method* (Leiden, 2018), 70–80; Winfried Ziegler, *Die "wahre strenghistorische Kritik": Leben und Werk Carl Lachmanns und sein Beitrag zur neutestamentlichen Wissenschaft* (Hamburg, 2000).

⁹⁴E.g. Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Paulus, der Apostel Jesu Christi ...*, ed. Eduard Zeller, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1866), 89; Paul Wilhelm Schmidt, *Neutestamentliche Hyperkritik, an dem jüngsten Angriff gegen die Aechtheit des Philipperbriefes auf ihre Methode hin untersucht: Nebst eine Erklärung des Briefes* (Berlin, 1880).

⁹⁵The quote comes from [Hermann Friedrich Hugo] Schlemm, "Die Autorität des göttlichen Wortes gegenüber der wissenschaftlichen Kritik der heiligen Schrift, insbesondere des alten Testaments, in der Gegenwart," *Kirchliche Monatsschrift* 12 (1893), 737–71, at 766. Notably, few commentators distinguished between hypercritical treatment of the Old and New Testaments, even though the Gospels and the Pauline epistles were for many Protestants a "canon within the canon."

more” by “negative criticism,” while simultaneously assuring their audience that, nonetheless, God’s Word will outlive “the critical heroes of our days.”⁹⁶ That conference was not unique: there were plenty of occasions on which church members could hear pastors or theology professors defend “the glory of the Bible against the attacks of its critics” or sound a note of alarm about “what remains of the Old Testament” in the hands of Julius Wellhausen.⁹⁷ Perhaps the uncrowned king of the genre was the Greifswald theologian Otto Zöckler, who from the early 1860s to his death in 1906 issued a steady stream of warnings against “hypercritical skepticism,” “hypercritical arbitrariness,” and “hypercritical exaggeration,” especially, but not only, in biblical scholarship.⁹⁸ One wonders: what made the vice of hypercriticism such an attractive polemical device for conservative Protestants in Zöckler’s generation?

To some extent, their criticism continued a tradition inaugurated with the Life of Jesus controversy. Although clear demarcations between liberal and conservative Protestants had not existed at that time, hypercriticism and related pejoratives, such as *Afterkritik*, had been used most frequently by authors suspicious of modern biblical criticism.⁹⁹ More generally, the term had always resonated most strongly among authors with high views of Scripture.¹⁰⁰ However, what had changed between the 1830s, when the debate had focused on “the hypercritical enterprise of Dr Strauss,” and the 1870s, when Zöckler found himself fighting a whole army of “hypercritical enemies of Christianity,” was the emergence of a theological

⁹⁶Schlemm, “Autorität des göttlichen Wortes,” 741, 740; [Karl?] Seidenstücker, “Die Autorität des göttlichen Wortes gegenüber der wissenschaftlichen Kritik der heiligen Schrift, insbesondere des Alten Testaments, in der Gegenwart,” *Kirchliche Monatsschrift* 12 (1893), 521–42, at 542.

⁹⁷Gottfried Hasenkamp, *Die Herrlichkeit der Bibel gegenüber den Angriffen ihrer Kritiker: Ein Zeugnis aus der Gemeinde für die Gemeinde* (Gotha, 1888); R. F. Grau, *Was bleibt vom Alten Testament? Vortrag am 16. Februar 1891 in Berlin gehalten* (Gütersloh, 1891).

⁹⁸Otto Zöckler, *Kritische Geschichte der Askese: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte christlicher Sitte und Cultur* (Frankfurt am Main, 1863), v; Zöckler, *Die Sprüche Salomonis theologisch-homiletisch bearbeitet* (Bielefeld, 1867), 23, 25; Zöckler, *Das Hohelied und der Prediger theologisch-homiletisch bearbeitet* (Bielefeld, 1868), 168. Interestingly, Zöckler was one of few who detected hypercriticism in the natural sciences, too: *Theologia naturalis: Entwurf einer systematischen Naturtheologie vom offenbarungsgläubigen Standpunkte aus*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main, 1860), 146. On Zöckler’s lifelong fight against hypercriticism see Svenja Meindl, *Otto Zöckler: Ein Theologe des 19. Jahrhunderts im Dialog mit den Naturwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), 123–5.

⁹⁹*Afterkritik* (“spurious criticism”) was a term popularized in Lessing’s *Laokoon* (1766). It was used on a modest scale throughout the early nineteenth-century world of letters. Unlike *Hyperkritik*, with its connotations of excess, *Afterkritik* denoted a “criticism that appears to aim at the truth but acts according to false principles,” especially insofar as it aims to reach an “intended result” or prove an a priori truth. See Wilhelm Hoffmann, ed., *Vollständigstes Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, vol. 1 (Leipzig, 1861), 94; Ludwig Clauss, *Beiträge zur Kritik und Exegese der Psalmen* (Berlin, 1831), viii; Moritz Drechsler, *Die Unwissenschaftlichkeit im Gebiete der alttestamentlichen Kritik belegt aus der Schriften neuerer Kritiker besonders der Herren von Bohlen und Vatke* (Leipzig, 1837), 43, 59, 92, 106. Nonetheless, the terms were also used combined or interchangeably. See e.g. Franz Schettler, *Der Protestantismus des Herrn Professor Dr. L. Lange zu Jena, kritisch beleuchtet* (Magdeburg, 1845), 47 (“hyper- or pseudo- or after-critical”).

¹⁰⁰The church historian Philipp Schaff is a case in point: see Philipp Schaff, *Geschichte der apostolischen Kirche nebst eine allgemeinen Einleitung in der Kirchengeschichte*, 2nd edn (Leipzig, 1854), 600; Schaff, *Germany: Its Universities, Theology, and Religion ...* (Philadelphia, 1857), 101; Schaff, *Geschichte der alten Kirche: Von Christi Geburt bis zum Ende des sechsten Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg, 1867), 22.

and political divide between liberal and conservative Protestants.¹⁰¹ By the early years of the Wilhelmine era, this divide had become broad enough for clergy and theologians to speak about distinct “parties” or “currents” (*Richtungen*) in the Protestant world.¹⁰² Although liberals and conservatives were not the only parties—there were influential *Vermittlungstheologen* aiming for middle-ground positions—the religious press gave ample space to the opposed extremes of “traditional dogmatists” and “modern rationalists.”¹⁰³ A periodical like *Der Beweis des Glaubens*, to which Zöckler was a listed contributor, provided endless variations on the latter image, constantly warning its readers against “accusers and opponents of the faith,” whose “sharply negative criticism is trying to shake the historical facts of the Christian faith.”¹⁰⁴ It was especially in contexts like this, where suspicion of biblical criticism served as a shibboleth of orthodoxy, that hypercriticism came to serve as a rhetorical weapon, similar to how “dogmatism” was employed by liberal critics against conservative Protestants.¹⁰⁵

One reason why hypercriticism became a weapon of choice was that it allowed conservative biblical scholars to counter the liberal argument that their work was “unscientific.” If biblical scholars in the liberal camp made themselves guilty of a vice that was widely seen as violating scholarly standards, then conservatives could return the compliment by denying liberal theologians their exclusive claim to *Wissenschaftlichkeit*. This is precisely what Zöckler did. In an 1887 defense of the “scientific” aspirations of conservative theology, prompted by Emil Schürer’s dismissive remark that Zöckler *cum suis* were advocating a relapse into seventeenth-century biblicism, he argued that “the principle of critical arbitrariness, fantastic guessing, and estimations based on subjective whims” that he saw at work in liberal biblical scholarship was at odds with established methodological standards.¹⁰⁶ Notably, this was not a charge of doctrinal heresy but of scholarly deficiency. Zöckler presented himself as a custodian of scientific criticism, committed to a virtuous mean between uncritical thinking and a “pseudoscientific

¹⁰¹[Karl Gottfried Wilhelm] Theile, “Zur Biographie Jesu,” *Repertorium der gesammten deutschen Literatur* 12 (1837), 173–6, at 174; [Otto] Z[öckler], review of *Christliche Apologetik auf anthropologischer Grundlage* by Christian Eduard Baumstark, *Der Beweis des Glaubens* 15 (1879), 263–6, at 265.

¹⁰²Carl Schlager, *Zur Charakteristik der zwei religiösen Richtungen in der protestantischen Kirche nach ihren Unterscheidungs- und Berührungspunkten* (Aarau, 1872); A. H. Braasch, *Ist ein Zusammenwirken der verschiedenen Richtungen innerhalb der evangelisch-protestantischen Kirche möglich?* (Berlin, 1878); Paul Wilhelm Schmidt, *Was trennt “die beiden Richtungen” in der evangelischen Kirche? Ein Beitrag zur Schätzung der kirchlichen Gegensätze* (Berlin, 1880).

¹⁰³For a survey of German Protestant *Richtungen* at the time see Johannes Wallmann, *Kirchengeschichte Deutschlands seit der Reformation*, 6th edn (Tübingen, 2006), 211–28.

¹⁰⁴[Otto Zöckler et al.], “Vorwort,” *Der Beweis des Glaubens* 1 (1865), 1–5, at 1, 2.

¹⁰⁵Stephen Holthaus, *Fundamentalismus in Deutschland: Der Kampf um die Bibel im Protestantismus des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd edn (Bonn, 2003), 140–325; Caroline Schep and Herman Paul, “Denial of Coevalness: Charges of Dogmatism in the Nineteenth-Century Humanities,” *History of European Ideas* 48/6 (2022), 778–94, at 783–6.

¹⁰⁶E. Schürer, review of *Kurzgefasster Kommentar zu den heiligen Schriften Alten und Neuen Testaments*, vols. 1–2, ed. Hermann Strack and Otto Zöckler, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 11 (1886), 532–9, at 534; O. Zöckler, *Wider die unfehlbare Wissenschaft: Eine Schutzschrift für konservatives theologisches Forschen und Lehren* (Nördlingen, 1887), 27.

hypercriticism” that was destroying “healthy and normal critical work” with an “overload of source-destroying perspicacity [*quellenschneidende Scharfsinn*].”¹⁰⁷

Second, although the vice of hypercriticism was occasionally attributed to individual authors, it was more common to speak generically about “the newer hypercriticism,” “omniscient hypercriticism,” or a “hypercritical current” (*Richtung*) in modern biblical scholarship—with the last of these phrases almost explicitly alluding to the *Streit der Richtungen* in German Protestantism.¹⁰⁸ At one point, Zöckler even discussed “the developmental phases of modern hypercriticism,” thereby turning an individual vice term into a long-term scholarly trend.¹⁰⁹ This was not without precedents. If hypercriticism had initially been attributed to individuals like Strauss, the rise to dominance of New Testament criticism as practiced in Tübingen by Friedrich Christian Baur and others prompted talk of a “hypercritical school,” “the hypercritical opinions of the Tübingen school,” and “Tübingen hypercriticism.”¹¹⁰ By the 1870s, hypercriticism was no longer attributed only to figures “at the extreme left” but associated to a wide range of scholars, from Karl Heinrich Graf and Ferdinand Hitzig in Germany to Abraham Kuenen and Édouard Reuss elsewhere in Europe.¹¹¹ Increasingly, it was their names that epitomized the vice, in characteristic combinations like “Hitzig–Olshausian” or “Graf–Kuenenian” hypercriticism.¹¹² From there, it was only a small step to argue that a hypercritical attitude was characteristic of the whole “liberal army force” that Zöckler was fighting.¹¹³

All this is strikingly reminiscent of how *Gymnasium* teachers depersonalized the vice of hypercriticism. In both cases, skepticism regarding traditional authorship claims or the textual integrity of canonical writings was not merely read symptomatically, as evidence of an excessively critical zeitgeist, but elevated into a defining mark of modern scholarship. As such, hypercriticism ceased to be an accusation requiring careful textual analysis: it became close to an emotionally charged “-ism,” overlapping with reified images of “liberalism” and “modernism” and used primarily for confessional boundary work.

Catholic and Jewish voices

As much as these internal Protestant quarrels contributed to hypercriticism becoming a polemical device, the term also resonated among Jewish and Catholic

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 56, 26. Similarly: Z[öckler], review, 265.

¹⁰⁸Carl Friedrich Keil, *Commentar über das Evangelium des Johannes* (Leipzig, 1881), 18; Franz Delitzsch, *Neuer Commentar über die Genesis* (Leipzig, 1887), 140; [Otto] Z[öckler], review of *De Elohista Pentateuchi sermone* by Carolus Victor Ryssel, *Der Beweis des Glaubens*, 15 (1879), 151.

¹⁰⁹[Otto] Zöckler, “D. Nösgen’s ‘Geschichte der Offenbarung,’” *Der Beweis des Glaubens* 30 (1894), 71–4, at 74.

¹¹⁰[H. E. F.] G[uericke], review of *Das Markus-Evangelium ...* by Adolf Hilgenfeld and *Das Markusevangelium nach seinem Ursprung und Charakter* by F. Chr. Baur, *Zeitschrift für die gesammte lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 12 (1851), 743–7, at 747; N.N., review of *Das Johanneische Evangelium* by Christoph Ernst Luthardt, *Theologisches Literaturblatt*, 1854, 1097–1102, 1105–8, at 1100.

¹¹¹The “extreme left” was invoked in Schaff, *Geschichte der apostolischen Kirche*, 117.

¹¹²[Felix] Himpel, review of *Die Psalmen* by August Rohling, *Theologische Quartalschrift* 54 (1872), 148–61, at 151; N.N., “Zur apologetischen Literatur der katholischen Kirche [II],” *Theologisches Literaturblatt* 9 (1888), 303–4, at 304.

¹¹³Zöckler, *Wider die unfehlbare Wissenschaft*, 16, 39.

scholars, albeit in slightly different ways. Although a detailed comparison across confessional borders cannot be undertaken here, I will briefly attend to some Catholic and Jewish voices, if only to correct the impression that *Gymnasium* teachers and conservative Protestants were the only ones who worried about hypercriticism.

Catholic authors had a long history of dismissing Protestant scholarship as hypercritical. As early as 1817, a German Catholic polemicist railed against “modern philologists and hypercritical Bible researchers ... who turn the comforting factual truths of revelation into myths.”¹¹⁴ Strauss and the Tübingen school provided Catholic authors with even more reason to distance themselves from the “Protestant hypercriticism of our time.”¹¹⁵ In Catholic cultural criticism, this Protestant hypercriticism became a trope that could easily be combined with “rationalism,” “Darwinism,” and “modern unbelief.”¹¹⁶ This Protestant aberration, moreover, was seen as manifesting itself not only in biblical scholarship but also among church historians who dared to question the reliability of saints’ lives or the authenticity of relics.¹¹⁷ While some authors associated hypercriticism with Protestant or Protestant-inspired assaults on the Catholic tradition,¹¹⁸ others adopted the Protestant habit of measuring hypercriticism against the standard of “healthy criticism” rather than the authority of tradition.¹¹⁹ In all cases, however, the threat of hypercriticism was located outside the Catholic community, among Protestants and nonbelievers. It was only in the so-called modernist crisis of the early 1900s, when Catholic biblical scholars like Alfred Loisy were diagnosed with heresies formerly reserved to liberal Protestants, that hypercriticism became a polemical device for internal use, though without losing its Protestant connotations.¹²⁰ Writing in 1905, the Breslau theologian Joseph Pohle spoke for many when he presented Loisy as a sad example of a Catholic scholar who had fallen under the spell of “Protestant hypercriticism.”¹²¹

¹¹⁴[Karl Moritz Eduard] Fabritius, *Spiegel eines wahrhaft-christlichen Kirchen-Aufsehers ...* (Stuttgart, 1817), 77.

¹¹⁵[Guido Görres], “Vorwort der Redaction,” *Historisch-politische Blätter für das katholische Deutschland* 28 (1851), 780–85, at 780.

¹¹⁶Fr[anz] Kaulen, “Leben der Heiligen,” *Theologisches Literaturblatt* 2 (1867), 161–3, at 163; N.N., review of *Göttliches Wissen und göttliche Macht des Johanneischen Christus* by Karl Müller, *Schlesisches Pastoralblatt* 3 (1882), 118–19, at 118; B.S., review of *Der Kaiser in Vorarlberg* by Adolf von Berlichingen, *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach* 24 (1883), 321–4, at 322.

¹¹⁷F. J. Clemens, *Der heilige Rock zu Trier und die protestantische Kritik* (Koblenz, 1845), 93.

¹¹⁸Joseph Schiferle, *Zweite Pilgerreise nach Jerusalem und Rom, in den Jahren 1856 und 1857 unternommen*, vol. 2 (Augsburg, 1859), 421, 488; Hugo Weiss, *David und seine Zeit: Historisch-exegetische Studien vornehmlich zu den Büchern Samuel’s* (Münster, 1880), 4; [Paul Keppler], “Bilder aus dem Orient [II],” *Historisch-politische Blätter für das katholische Deutschland* 114 (1894), 180–91, at 183.

¹¹⁹Joh. Bapt. Wirthmüller, *Encyclopädie der katholischen Theologie: Eine propädeutische Einleitung in ihr Studium* (Landshut, 1874), 701; Heinrich Kihn, *Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Theologie* (Freiburg, 1892), 295.

¹²⁰Around the same time, “Catholic hypercriticism” emerged as a polemical tag in a debate over the perceived cultural inferiority of German Catholicism: Justus Benevolus [= E. M. Hamann], *Katholische Kritik und Hyperkritik: Auch eine Antwort auf “Veremundus”* (Munich, 1899); N.N., “Katholische Hyperkritik,” *Pastor Bonus* 18 (1906), 281–3.

¹²¹Joseph Pohle, *Lehrbuch der Dogmatik in sieben Büchern*, vol. 1 (Paderborn, 1905), 249. See also Johannes Kübel, *Geschichte des katholischen Modernismus* (Tübingen, 1909), 78.

The Jewish case was different insofar as charges of hypercriticism were made internally at a much earlier stage. Initially, it was Protestant biblical scholars who exemplified the dangers of hypercriticism.¹²² Heinrich Graetz, the Jewish historian whom Friedrich Ritschl had criticized for his hypercritical views, preferred to attribute the vice to “philologists of other faiths.”¹²³ In the early 1860s, however, he changed his mind. “For a decade,” Graetz wrote, Jewish exegetes have “started to emendate without end,” thereby creating a “hypercritical movement” almost as radical as the Tübingen school around Baur.¹²⁴ Most likely, this criticism was targeted at Abraham Geiger and Samuel David Luzzatto, two key representatives of the emerging “science of Judaism” (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*). In the 1850s, both of them had published controversial studies in biblical scholarship.¹²⁵ A decade later, Ludwig Philippson, the long-time editor of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums*, echoed Graetz in observing that “Jewish scholars, too,” were falling prey to “confused and confusing hypercriticism” in the study of the Pentateuch. Philippson, too, was referring to biblical scholarship as pursued under the aegis of the science of Judaism (of which, in passing, he denied the claim to scientific status with the argument that hypercriticism “is no science” but a mixture of “hazardous interpretation” and “arbitrary criticism”).¹²⁶

How hypercriticism reflected the changing entanglements of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish biblical scholarship, each with its own internal dynamics and investment in boundary work, is a topic for another occasion. For the purposes of this article, the examples just mentioned suffice to demonstrate that hypercriticism also found its way outside the Protestant world. More specifically, they show that for Catholic and Jewish authors, just as for most Classics teachers and biblical scholars of conservative Protestant inclination, hypercriticism was less a personal vice than a polemical shorthand for a skeptical attitude in matters of source

¹²²M. Kalisch, *A Historical and Critical Commentary on the Old Testament, with a New Translation*, vol. 2 (London, 1855), ix–x, 382. Just how much Kalisch abhorred “that school of Biblical critics which dismembers the sacred writings, quite as arbitrarily and blindly as many hypercritical philologists of the last century dissected Homer’s songs into incoherent fragments” (*ibid.*, ix–x) is apparent from one of his later books, in which a fictional character named Arthur Berghorn embodies a criticism “perverted” into hypercriticism. M. A. Kalisch, *Path and Goal: A Discussion on the Elements of Civilisation and the Conditions of Happiness* (London, 1880), 7.

¹²³H. Grätz, “Die talmudische Topographie [I],” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 2 (1853), 106–13, at 106. On Graetz’s aversion to hypercriticism see also Grätz, *Geschichte der Juden von den ältesten Zeiten bis auf die Gegenwart*, vol. 5 (Leipzig, 1860), 538; Graetz, trans., *Schir Ha-Schirim oder das Salomonische Hohelied* (Vienna, 1871), 126; Kerstin von der Krone, *Wissenschaft in Öffentlichkeit: Die Wissenschaft des Judentums und ihre Zeitschriften* (Berlin, 2012), 70 n. 53.

¹²⁴H. Grätz, “Zur hebräischen Sprachkunde und Biblexegese,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 10 (1861), 20–28, at 20. As early as 1845, Moritz Steinschneider had raised his voice against the *Hyperkritik* of the Jewish orientalist Salomon Munk: M. Steinschneider, “Theologie und Philosophie,” *Zeitschrift für die religiösen Interessen des Judenthums* 2 (1845), 118–20, at 118, 120.

¹²⁵Chanan Gafni, “Samuel David Luzzatto and Abraham Geiger on the Textual Criticism of the Bible: Continuity or Conflict?,” in Daniel Vorpahl, Sophia Kähler, and Shani Tzoref, eds., *Deutsch-jüdische Bibelwissenschaft: Historische, exegetische und theologische Perspektiven* (Berlin, 2019), 161–70. On Graetz’s attitudes towards biblical criticism see also Ran HaCohen, *Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible: German-Jewish Reception of Biblical Criticism*, trans. M. Engel (Berlin, 2010), 170–81.

¹²⁶[Ludwig Philippson], “Die Wissenschaft des Judenthums,” *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* 36 (1872), 221–4, at 223.

criticism that was perceived as threatening canonical texts. Several Jewish and Catholic authors, moreover, followed Protestant models by criticizing hypercriticism, not on religious grounds, but with the argument that its exaggerations were detrimental to real science. It was a way of fighting the enemy camp with a weapon of its own, rejecting its iconoclasm in terms pretending to be “scientific.”¹²⁷

Conclusion

What this history of hypercriticism shows is that the vice term almost without exception conveyed more than unease about a specific emendation or conjecture. Even philologists objecting to something as detailed as the substitution of *corpus* by *pignus* used hypercriticism, not as shorthand for errors at the level of individual words, but as a diagnostic label for a spirit of revisionism that might have dangerous implications for other canonical texts. This was a context in which symptomatic readings of controversial studies like Peerlkamp’s and Strauss’s could flourish. Both books were read as manifesting not only their authors’ lack of virtue but also, more disturbingly, an iconoclastic attitude that reviewers feared was gaining ground in scholarship and politics alike. Among other things, such symptomatic readings enabled authors in subsequent decades to speak in even more generic terms about hypercritical schools and trends. The article has shown that such broad uses of the term were especially prevalent among *Gymnasium* teachers and Protestant clergy of conservative inclination who worried about the corrosive effects of critical scholarship on canonical texts, be it the *Iliad* or the Bible. In the second half of the century, the *Streit der Richtungen* among German Protestants even turned *Hyperkritik* into a polemical device, used for aims far removed from those of philologists hesitating between *corpus* and *pignus*. Nonetheless, the term’s scientific connotations remained crucial for Protestant scholars as well as for most Catholic and Jewish authors: these connotations allowed them to challenge hypercriticism on “scientific” rather than confessional grounds. What this suggests is that hypercriticism found its way into the arena of religious controversy precisely because it was a scholarly vice, codified in philological manuals and used in learned periodicals.

These vicissitudes of the term fall outside the scope of praxeological approaches to the history of scholarly virtues and vices as advocated by Daston and Krajevski. As helpful as it is to examine the relationships between scholars’ catalogs of virtue and their day-to-day research practices, this article has shown that research practices capture only part of the story. Scholars’ talk of virtue and vice also drew on

¹²⁷In his posthumously published *Kirchengeschichte des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Eduard Zeller (Tübingen, 1862), 370, Ferdinand Christian Baur countered such charges with the question “whether so-called hypercriticism is not actually the true and necessary criticism.” Perhaps the most elaborated response to conservative “vice charging” came from the Dutch New Testament scholar William Christiaan van Manen, who devoted no less than two essays to his critics’ habit of rejecting the newest scholarly findings as a mere “wave of hypercriticism”: W. C. van Manen, “Hyperkritiek,” *De Tijdspiegel* 52 (1895), 158–73; Van Manen, “A Wave of Hypercriticism,” *Expository Times* 9 (1898), 205–11, 257–9, 314–19. See also, in the same years, Gotthard Deutsch, “The Share of the Jewish People in the Culture of the Various Nations and Ages,” in *Judaism at the World’s Parliament of Religions: Comprising the Papers on Judaism Read at the Parliament, at the Jewish Denominational Congress, and at the Jewish Presentation* (Cincinnati, 1894), 175–92, at 175.

and contributed to broader, societal discourses of virtue and vice, while serving as intellectual ammunition in controversies at the intersection of science, religion, politics, and morality. This is why the praxeological approach should be supplemented with a rhetorical one, attentive to how scholarly virtues and vices were invoked in and outside the academic realm, by specialists and nonspecialists alike, as an idiom imbued with the authority of *Wissenschaft*. Such a rhetorical approach may help situate scholarly vocabularies in their societal contexts and elucidate the cross-fertilization between scholars' standards of virtue and those circulating in other segments of society.¹²⁸ Moreover, in ways reminiscent of Raphael's "scientification of the social," it may trace how scholarly virtues and vices found their way outside the walls of academia, as traveling concepts that challenge simple binaries between "insiders" and "outsiders" in the history of the humanities.¹²⁹

Drawing on such a rhetorical approach, follow-up research may want to carry the story of hypercriticism into the twentieth century. It may examine how hypercriticism was invoked in controversies like the *Babel-Bibel-Streit*,¹³⁰ used by influential scholars like Benedetto Croce and Johan Huizinga,¹³¹ gradually gave way to other pejorative phrases like "historicism,"¹³² yet persisted in historical methodology manuals and even came to enjoy renewed interest from postwar French thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and Jacques Derrida.¹³³ Just as interesting, however, would be a rhetorical analysis of other scholarly virtues and vices, such as dogmatism. A rhetorical approach may elucidate how critics of dogmatism from Immanuel Kant to anticommunists in Cold War America drew on a discursive repertoire established by seventeenth-century authors (Thomas Hobbes, Joseph Glanvill, Thomas Spratt) and codified in eighteenth-century Enlightenment texts. It is well equipped to explain why, in the post-Darwinian controversies of the 1870s and 1880s, accusations of dogmatism went back and forth, with "the Haeckels, the Spencers, and the Huxleys of the present day" being depicted as dogmatists just as routinely as opponents of Darwin found themselves accused of "narrow-minded dogmatism."¹³⁴ A rhetorical approach may demonstrate, in other words, that

¹²⁸As in Jamie Cohen-Cole, *The Open Mind: Cold War Politics and the Sciences of Human Nature* (Chicago, 2014); and Gayle Rogers, *Speculation: A Cultural History from Aristotle to AI* (New York, 2021).

¹²⁹Raphael, "Verwissenschaftlichung des Sozialen"; Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto, 2002).

¹³⁰J. Lieblein, "Aegypten, Babel und Bibel," *Deutsche Revue* 28 (1903), 284–97, at 293; Leopold Goldschmied, *Der Kampf um Babel-Bibel im Lichte des Judentums* (Frankfurt am Main, 1903), 4, 21; A. Meyenberg, *Ist die Bibel inspiriert? Orientierende Wanderungen durch die Gebiete der modernen Bibelfragen* (Luzern, 1907), 8, 55, 58.

¹³¹Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, 2nd edn (Bari, 1920), 24–5, 123; J. Huizinga, *De wetenschap der geschiedenis* (Haarlem, 1937), 19, 128.

¹³²Annette Wittkau, *Historismus: Zur Geschichte des Begriffs und des Problems*, 2nd edn (Göttingen, 1994); on the term's pejorative uses also Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen, eds., *Historicism: A Travelling Concept* (London, 2021).

¹³³Gilbert J. Garraghan, *A Guide to Historical Method*, ed. Jean Delanglez (New York, 1946), 45–6, 190; Hans Nabholz, *Einführung in das Studium der mittelalterlichen und der neueren Geschichte: Den Studierenden der Geschichte zugeordnet* (Zurich, 1948), 41; Léon E. Halkin, *Éléments de critique historique* (Liège, 1960), 49–51; Rodolphe Gasché, *The Honor of Thinking: Critique, Theory, Philosophy* (Stanford, 2007), 21–37.

¹³⁴Joseph Hassell, "Evolution by Natural Selection Tested by Its Own Canon, and Shown to Be Untenable," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 19 (1885), 53–67, at 55; G. G. Zerffi,

scholarly virtues and vices not only mattered to academics but also found their way into sometimes unexpected corners of public attention.

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Dogma and Science: A Lecture Delivered before the Sunday Lecture Society ... (London, [1876]), 18. Cf. Bernard Lightman, "The Creed of Science and Its Critics," in Martin Hewitt, ed., *The Victorian World* (London, 2012), 449–65.

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