

WEIGHING CONTEXT AND PRACTICES:
THEODOR MOMMSEN AND THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF
NINETEENTH-CENTURY HUMANISTIC KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the history of knowledge, especially when applied to humanistic knowledge making, ought not to study practices of knowing to the exclusion of the peculiarities of individuals and the specifics of the wider contexts in which they operate. It uses the life and work of the Roman historian Theodor Mommsen as a case study, sketching first his qualities as a writer and political actor formed by the particularities of the post-Romantic era. Showing that Mommsen belongs to the world of realist writers and liberal nationalist reformers, this essay then demonstrates how much these aspects of his thought-world resonated with and informed the ways in which he practiced as a scholar. This essay aims to remind historians of the humanities that a focus on practices of knowing might bring us into exciting conversations with historians of science, but we ought not to lose touch with our colleagues in general and intellectual history.

Keywords: Theodor Mommsen, history of knowledge, realism, liberal nationalism, Roman historians, history of the humanities

For some time, those of us who call ourselves historians of the humanities have taken a great deal of inspiration from scholars in the history of science, most of whom, until recently, have focused on the history of technology and the natural sciences. The relatively new attempt to blend these two subfields more formally in the pursuit of what Europeans refer to as *Wissensgeschichte* or *histoire de savoir* has, in my view, potential for advancing both. But I am not so sure that we should take this blending too far, something that might entail distancing ourselves more extensively from general history or from intellectual history proper in favor of analyses that emphasize practices, instruments, and institutions and that displace close consideration of cultural and political contexts. To put it bluntly, I worry that we might indulge so extensively in the study of *Wissen* that we skimp on the *Geschichte*. I am also concerned that, as presently practiced, *Wissensgeschichte* may continue to partake of one of the aspects of Foucauldian structuralism that I could never abide: its erasure of individual biographies and

1. I would like to thank Carsten Dutt, Anthony Grafton, Helge Jordheim, Herman Paul, and David Gary Shaw for extremely helpful suggestions that resulted in the overhauling of this piece.

intentions.² This essay, then, is a bit of an experiment and a *cri de coeur*: is there room in the history of knowledge for an approach that privileges not the knowledge making as such but the wider context and the peculiarities of the knowers?

Focusing on the knowledge produced and ignoring the individual knowledge producer was, of course, a deliberate tactic on Foucault's part, and it was central in his quest to understand the transdisciplinary "rules of discourse" and the social functions of knowledge, which always involve power relations.³ But we must not forget that Foucault was a philosopher, one whose main purpose, in my view, was to critique a series of modern institutions and disciplines that had grown all too smug, unreflective, and inhumane in the application of their expertise. This critique was enormously generative for historians as well as other humanists in the 1960s through the 1990s. But work in this vein has become all too predictable. With respect especially to the history of the humanities, this approach also fails to appreciate knowledge's creative, liberating, and self-critical powers, something we need to stress more than ever at a time of anxieties about the future of the humanities, or of the university itself.⁴ This observation provokes me to pose several questions to those leaning in the direction of a Foucauldian *Wissensgeschichte*: does what we want to know about knowledge in the past really boil down to its rules and its social functions, both of which are generally not derived from the actors themselves but invented by us afterward? Doesn't the attempt to find common norms and rules end up washing out the individual particularities (in competence, in intention, in charisma) that we as humanistic scholars know make such a difference in the constitution of particular communities or fields? If an important part of the historian's task is to analyze the social functions of knowledge from the standpoint of the critical outsider, then ought we not also to appreciate what knowledge making was like and what purpose it served for a particular generation, community, or individual? Would it not be fair to add, as Constanze Güthenke has recently argued, an analysis of the emotional and affective forces that made certain forms of knowledge meaningful to certain people at certain times?⁵ We practicing humanists might also think through the empathy question by asking ourselves if such a history applied to us by a later generation of historians wouldn't seem more likely to grasp the nuances of our ideas, to get at the wellsprings of our actions, and to accurately access the concrete, socio-political impact of our institutions than an analysis that subsumes everything into a critique of a purportedly all-encompassing power/knowledge regime?

In many ways, the history of the humanities has developed along the same lines as the history of the natural sciences. Older versions of it, with a few exceptions,

2. For a longer assessment of *Wissensgeschichte*, see my "How Much Knowledge Is Worth Knowing? An American Intellectual Historian's Thoughts on the *Geschichte des Wissens*," *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 42, no. 2-3 (2019), 126-149.

3. See, for instance, Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, transl. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 25-27, 181-184, 215-237.

4. As I described elsewhere, I think we needed to pass through a period of Foucauldian critique of knowledge; but now it is time to remind ourselves of what that critique dismissed. See my "Has the History of the Disciplines Had Its Day?" in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 131-152.

5. Constanze Güthenke, *Feeling and Classical Philology: Knowing Antiquity in German Scholarship, 1770-1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

suffered from the same problems that plagued earlier histories of science: a focus on great men and their almost unaided feats—that is, a teleological narrative in which those who got it right, by our lights, were the heroes and all others were ridiculed or simply ignored. Many, if not most, of these histories—of philology, for example, or history, or Egyptology—were also often written as late-career larks by practitioners in the field, meaning that authors tended to validate and heroize their teachers or likeminded ancestors and to ignore wider contexts. These histories did, however, have great virtues in that their authors generally knew their fields intimately enough to understand which ideas were new or implausible given the techniques and evidence at the time, something a general intellectual historian might not appreciate in writing about, for example, the history of Assyriology. That these histories were written in the biographical mode was generally a help rather than a hindrance, as I firmly believe that biography, like no other genre, allows us to take into consideration the affective and emotional forces that shaped individuals' commitments to particular topics of study or methodological approaches. But of course, biography often blinds us to the sociopolitical and institutional factors that frame individuals' works and lives, and teleology prevents us from appreciating the meandering streams of human thought. We could, and we did, do better in expanding our scope, adding an examination of practices, introducing critical analyses of the social and political functions of knowledge, and examining the contributions of women, non-Western actors, and other subordinate persons employed as lab assistants, data collectors, local informants, and the like. The magnificent work of Anthony Grafton, Dmitri Levitin, and Lorraine Daston (just to mention a few!) shows us how far we have come.

Yet even this work in analyzing practices requires so much erudite effort that little room is left for the general context or—occasionally—the ideas themselves. This is partly the result, I think, of increasing specialization and the absolutely convincing ethos among historians of science that one needs a strong grasp of specific knowledge in the field in order to understand its history. Having worked at least partly in this way for many years, I know just how difficult it is to write the history of a discipline without immersing oneself in its technicalities; I also know how hard it is to contextualize succinctly and convincingly. But I worry that the more we focus on the internal technicalities and dynamics of each discipline, the more we speak a language opaque to nonspecialists and lose touch with wider political, social, and cultural contexts.⁶ As relates to the history of the humanities, I worry that an emphasis on the making and functions of knowledge will crowd out an appreciation of the embeddedness of the knowers in their wider worlds, washing out individual habits of mind and biographical factors such as family relations, religious beliefs, class status, and aesthetic tastes. Just as historians of science need deep familiarity with concepts of nature in the periods in question, we need to comprehend contemporary understandings and portrayals of the human, which means becoming familiar with the histories of political thought, pedagogy, philosophy, and the arts. We have so much to gain by staying in touch

6. This, I think, is particularly a danger for twentieth- and twenty-first-century history of science, where the technical details are often difficult for general historians to grasp. See, for instance, Paula Findlen, "The Two Cultures of Scholarship?" *Isis* 96, no. 2 (2005), 230-237.

with the works of intellectual and cultural historians such as Lionel Gossman, Caroline Winterer, Carl E. Schorske, or Anthony J. La Vopa, for whom the making of knowledge is not the key concern to be addressed. All of this is to say that it would, in my view, be a major loss were we to further emphasize *Wissen* to the detriment of *Geschichte*.

I wonder, then, if we might try an experiment in *Wissensgeschichte* that deemphasizes the practices of knowing in favor of the biographical and generational contexts in which certain kinds of knowledge were made. I have chosen a world I know well, the mid-nineteenth century, and a scholar, Theodor Mommsen, whose career was long and influential but whose interests ranged far beyond the academy. A massively productive ancient historian and legal scholar, Mommsen worked across several disciplines and initiated numerous collaborative “big science” projects. Mommsen himself coined the term “big science,” which refers to collaborative research projects based on divided labor and meant to endure beyond their initiators’ lifetimes; perhaps correspondingly, he was not known for fostering his students’ intellectual or scholarly independence.⁷ He was elected to the Prussian Landtag and then German Reichstag and fathered twelve (surviving) children, who learned to file Latin inscriptions as soon as they were able to read.⁸ He was widely known to his contemporaries within and beyond Germany, and in old age, like Goethe and Charles Darwin, he became something of a national institution; even Mark Twain marveled when he sat down to dinner.⁹ In 1902, Mommsen was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for his *Roman History*, which he had completed almost fifty years before. He died the following year, having almost never missed a day of work or the opportunity to expound on current political events.¹⁰

The more I learn about Mommsen, the more convinced I am that his worldview and his achievements must be understood in the context of a particular set of generational experiences. He was born in the Danish duchy of Schleswig in 1817, a year of Europe-wide hardship in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars and

7. The term *Grosswissenschaft* appears in Theodor Mommsen, “Antwort an Harnack, 3. Juli 1890,” in *Reden und Aufsätze* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1905), 209. On Mommsen’s attitude toward students, see Stefan Rebenich, “*Exercitationibus interfui historicis*: Carl Friedrich Lehmann-Haupt, Theodor Mommsen und die Alte Geschichte,” in *Carl Friedrich Lehmann-Haupt: Ein Forscherleben zwischen Orient und Okzident*, ed. Sebastian Fink, Klaus Eisterer, Robert Rollinger, and Dirk Rubpnov (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 2015), 45. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are my own.

8. Lorraine Daston, “The Immortal Archive: The Nineteenth Century Imagines the Future,” in *Science in the Archives: Pasts, Presents, and Futures*, ed. Lorraine Daston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 174.

9. Anthony Grafton, introduction to *A History of Rome: From the Foundation of the City to the Sole Rule of Julius Caesar*, by Theodor Mommsen, ed. C. J. Shepherd, transl. W. P. Dickson (London: Folio Society, 2006), xi.

10. This very short sketch of Mommsen should be sufficient for our purposes, especially as his life and work have been carefully examined in numerous biographies and biographical essays. Most notable among these are Lothar Wickert’s extensive *Theodor Mommsen: Eine Biographie*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1959–1980), and Stefan Rebenich’s highly insightful and more recent work, *Theodor Mommsen: Eine Biographie* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002). Rebenich has also written many other provocative essays on Mommsen and his contemporaries, some of which are cited below. I have also drawn extensively on several other recent collections of essays on Mommsen and his contemporaries that are cited below.

the harvest-destroying “year without a summer.” His orientation toward the world was formed, I will argue, in the post-Romantic, hardscrabble 1830s and 1840s; early hardships, combined with a cynical view of human nature, inclined him to a realism and sense of his own inadequacies that bear more than a passing resemblance to the output of many literary writers of his day, and he possessed a liberal nationalist outlook that was common to the numerous middle-class, well-educated men across Europe who took part in, and were disillusioned by, the revolutions of 1848.¹¹ These externalist factors, I believe, were instrumental in shaping his life as a *Wissenschaftler*, from the specific career path he adopted to the subjects he studied and his approaches to them. We can see the impact of his generational and personal experiences in the moral “markers of devotion”—to use Herman Paul’s helpful term—in his scholarly ethos and his work habits.¹² In this way, Mommsen, I will argue, is best understood in the round, not just as a maker of knowledge but as a constituent part of a world that included non-Germans and nonclassicists, including Darwin and Hermann von Helmholtz, and even writers and artists such as Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Courbet.¹³

Thus, what this essay tries to do with Mommsen is to show how much we learn about nineteenth-century knowledge making by combining a rather old-fashioned intellectual history approach with an analysis, in the concluding section, of Mommsen’s qualities and endeavors as a knowledge maker. Rather than treating him primarily as a knower, I start by fleshing out Mommsen’s intellectual biography, describing him as a writer in the age of realism and then a political activist in the age of high liberalism. The point is to get to know Mommsen as a person and a member of a particular generation of intellectuals before we meet him as a maker of knowledge. I mean this to be a synthetic, evocative essay that draws on biographical materials but seeks to convey the attitudinal, institutional, and epistemological contours of the much-maligned nineteenth century. By treating Mommsen as a nineteenth-century writer and actor *before* treating him as a maker of knowledge, I hope to illuminate his world of humanistic scholarship in ways that a history focused on his scholarly practices might miss.

PART ONE: REALISM

Humanistic scholars must, of course, have exceptional technical skills, as Mommsen did; his knowledge of Latin, and especially of Latin inscriptions, was unsurpassed in a generation of highly skilled philologists. He was also a ferocious reader and blessed with a prodigious memory. But humanistic scholars must also be writers. In the case of Mommsen, it is significant that he learned to read and write in a period of waning Romanticism, a period in which he and his brother Tycho (later a literary scholar and gymnasium director) read not theological

11. For comparison, see Ben Hutchinson’s wonderful early chapters in his *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

12. Herman Paul, “A Sense of Duty: Virtues as Markers of Devotion” (forthcoming book on virtues and vices in nineteenth-century German historiography), 3; quoted with author’s permission.

13. Daston has already beautifully sketched similarities between his collaborative *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and the natural scientific (and French-initiated) *Carte du Ciel*. See Daston, “Immortal Archive,” 158-184.

treatises but poetic works. In 1843, together with the aspiring novelist Theodor Storm, they even published a book of their own poetry, *Liederbuch dreier Freunde* (*Songbook of Three Friends*), featuring poems by the not-yet historian with titles such as “And thou art dead as young and fair” and “Spring’s Arrival.”¹⁴

Family circumstances, however, dictated that Mommsen, the eldest son, could not choose poetry as a career. He would have to choose a breadwinning profession, and as he seems to have lost his faith before entering university, he did not consider following his father into the church. Mommsen opted instead for the study of law, and more specifically Roman law, which still held an important place in Central Europe’s legal quilt. Although Romanticism certainly inflected the legal-historical work of one of Mommsen’s heroes, Friedrich von Savigny, the discipline, critical skills, and perhaps cynicism required of students of the law made purple prose impossible for Mommsen the scholar, though as a reader he seems to have retained his juvenile tastes. An English friend remembered Mommsen’s enthusiasm for *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*: even as an elderly man, “in fiction [Mommsen] loved best what was romantic and nervous.”¹⁵

The young Mommsen was capable of lyricism, but even some of his early poetry resonates with a sense of *Epigonentum*, or simply the post-Romantic ennui of Alexander Pushkin’s hero Eugene Onegin, and of many real-life members of the generation that came of age in the 1830s and early 1840s, and not just in the German states. This generation belonged to the world of self-defined epigones sketched by Alan Barrie Spitzer and, more recently, by Ben Hutchinson: the members of this generation were self-conscious of their arrival *after* the age of revolution and revolutionary wars, *after* the age of Byron, Goethe, and Hegel, and *after* the age of the so-called great monarchs—namely, Napoleon, Frederick II, Joseph II, Alexander I.¹⁶ This generation felt itself prematurely old, not because, like Faust and Byron, it had tasted all the wonders and delights the world had to offer but because it had known too early that all experiments and dreams end only in disillusionment. The poetry characteristic of this era tended to be ironic and bitterly self-conscious (think Heinrich Heine or Baudelaire) rather than lyric or comedic; the latter genres had become, apparently, too difficult to write with conviction, too likely to be shot through with silly sentimentality. An unpublished poem of 1837 shows how much Mommsen, too, had begun to exude the world-weariness of an Onegin:

I too am a son of the nineteenth century
And have suffered, child and youth, there from
That’s the way it goes. And yet—I wonder
How day after day I can live this way.

I am too clever for my twenty years
Too early did my stupidity escape me

14. Theodor Mommsen, Theodor Storm, and Tycho Mommsen, *Liederbuch dreier Freunde* (Kiel: Schwers’sche Buchhandlung, 1843).

15. W. Warde Fowler, “Theodor Mommsen: His Life and Work,” *History* 2, no. 3 (1913), 130.

16. Alan Barrie Spitzer, *The French Generation of 1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); Hutchinson, *Lateness*.

Life's game of fools ends only with the bier
That I know—and thus am I the Zeitgeist's child.

.....
A little reading, a little thought, remains
But long ago I thought myself sore and sapped
O, even if I wanted to throw away my life
I would still be scornfully derided.¹⁷

The obvious (if not already financially necessary) conclusion was to give up poetry and grand ambitions in favor of a self-effacing immersion in the “real,” whatever that might be. At exactly the same time, the young Karl Marx—who, like the young Mommsen, had dabbled in writing poetry and novels—was making a similar decision. When in 1837 Marx's father begged his son to make his fame (and perhaps fortune) by writing an epic poem on the subject of the Battle of Waterloo rather than devoting himself to Young Hegelian philosophy, Marx must have laughed aloud.¹⁸ Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Goethe, Schiller: they were all dead. For Mommsen, as for Marx, the time for verse and, in the words of Mr. Blackadder, “big blousy shirts” had passed.

Instead, Mommsen took up the study of Roman law and constitutional history, and in 1844, he received a fellowship to travel to Italy to record Roman inscriptions. He began to write specialized pieces, and in the course of his lifetime he published something on the order of 1,600 items of varying lengths.¹⁹ But Mommsen probably never would have become widely known as a writer if not for the exceptional circumstances of 1848–1850, when he found himself out of a job and in need of fulfilling, speedily, a commission to write a scholarly but accessible *Roman History*. The first three volumes of this history (published in 1854–1856) made Mommsen's fame and justified his receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1902. He never published a fourth volume, which should have covered Caesar's assassination and the rise of Augustus; a less reader-friendly volume 5, treating the Empire's provinces, appeared in 1885. Aside from occasional lectures—in which his realism is again on display—the remainder of his prose was composed not for general readers but for his scholarly peers, for reasons the final section of this essay will make clear.

Mommsen's *Roman History* was written in a style that we could term “historical realism,” one that displays striking similarities to other forms of midcentury realism, from Balzacian literary realism to Giuseppe Verdi's *Verismo* and Otto von Bismarck's (or even Marx's) *Realpolitik*. These figures were, in fact, almost exact contemporaries: Bismarck and Marx were born in 1815 and 1818, respectively. If we think in artistic terms, we can name several more almost exact contemporaries: Verdi, Courbet, and Gustave Flaubert were born in 1813, 1819, and 1821, respectively. Or sticking to the Germans, we can think of Adolf Menzel (1815), Gustav Freytag (1816), and Theodor Fontane (1819). Another parallel

17. Mommsen's unpublished poem is reproduced in Wickert, *Theodor Mommsen*, 1:129 (my translation).

18. Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (New York: Norton, 2013), 24.

19. Alexander Demandt, “Theodor Mommsen—Zur Einführung,” in *Theodor Mommsen: Wissenschaft und Politik im 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Alexander Demandt, Andreas Goltz, and Heinrich Schlange-Schöninghen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 5.

might be drawn with Henri Murger (1822), who gave up poetry to write about Bohemian life in his midcentury Paris and subsequently inspired Puccini's *La Bohème*, a painfully realist portrayal of artistic dreams snuffed out by tuberculosis.²⁰ One of Murger's friends, the early photographic genius Nadar (1820), after capturing his native city's infelicities by air, turned to recording its catacombs and its main sewer, which he described as "the supreme synthesis of all of our Parisian life."²¹ For Mommsen and his generation, the metaphor of the sewer seemed entirely apt: it captured the unsightly, inescapable reality of the human condition, which writers felt duty bound to explore.

Though their technical practices differed greatly, what all of these figures, from Marx to Murger and from Menzel to Nadar, had in common was a particular way of construing and depicting the world (past and present), one that eschewed all utopias, consolations of religious faith, and aesthetic flights of fancy in favor of clear-eyed, unromantic descriptions of the contemporary (or ancient) world. In one way or another, all of these figures were convinced of the inescapable fallenness of humankind and committed to the proposition that *il faut être de son temps*;²² coming to maturity in the age of mass-circulation newspapers, they also felt, keenly, the inevitable disappointments of living squarely in one's time and knowing its dirty secrets.²³ Gone were Romanticism's exotic locations and exceptional experiences; in the novels as well as the histories of the day, great men move off stage and structural (especially economic) factors create a sense of collective culture and uniform causality. Decisions taken at a distance impact all participants, and a small number of real drives (chiefly money, power, revenge) do battle with ideal ones (love, virtue, justice). In the more cynical novels (*Cousin Bette*, *Dead Souls*), the former win; in the more polite stories (*Barchester Towers*, *A Christmas Carol*), the latter triumph, just as more and less Whiggish histories offer similarly mixed conclusions.

One of the more cynical of the histories, Mommsen's *Roman History* offered unsentimental analyses of Roman class structure and power dynamics; his great men were only great because they made things happen, not because they were moral models. Cicero, even Julius Caesar, were men of their time, not out of time, and by studying social forces, their greatness could be explained. If, as M. Norton Wise has described, the star-studded Berlin Physical Society (founded in 1845) saw its mission as "rid[ding] the natural sciences of anything that smacked of mysterious and unanalyzable forces,"²⁴ so too did Mommsen and his fellow realists feel it was their duty to portray human beings—past and present—as they

20. See Jerrold Seigel's lovely portrait of Murger in *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 31–58.

21. Félix Nadar, *Le Paris souterrain de Félix Nadar, 1861* (Paris: Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques et des Sites, 1982), 42.

22. I am aware that a period of French literary and historical studies generally dubbed Romantic is often said to begin in about 1830, just as Romantic poetry and philosophy was dying out in England and Germany. But I also think some of these French works exhibit more realism than is usually noted. As Hutchinson notes, they too were marked by a very clear understanding of the authors' epigonal status (*Lateness*, 33, 62–94).

23. Lorraine Daston speaks elegantly of the melancholy of the later positivists in particular ("Immortal Archive," 175–176).

24. M. Norton Wise, *Aesthetics, Industry, and Science: Hermann von Helmholtz and the Berlin Physical Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 247.

are, not as they should be. These realists in turn expected their readers to recognize in those depictions the often-unpalatable world they had, perforce, to live in.

Realism, as we know from literature, is about observation and description above all, and it is characteristic that one of this generation's "markers of devotion" (to use Herman Paul's term) was a commitment to invest exhaustively, and sometimes exhaustingly, in both.²⁵ More precisely, this generation noted and preserved information about things that most others might consider insignificant or inconsequential, and they worked *en plein air* whenever possible. From an early age, for example, the painter Adolf Menzel reputedly sketched everything he saw, including his own feet. Dickens, writes biographer Claire Tomalin, "was always looking, listening to the voices and reacting to the dramas, absurdities and tragedies of London life"; the writer could not do without long walks through the city's diverse neighborhoods, and even when traveling made a habit of visiting prisons, workhouses, and circuses.²⁶ His novels abound with acutely observed details, many of them—such as Fagin's "greasy flannel gown" in *Oliver Twist*—insalubrious. The same can be said of Wilhelm Leibl's and Ilya Repin's paintings. The Grimm brothers, wrote the eminent midcentury Germanist Wilhelm Scherer, devoted themselves to collecting the smallest details about the history of the German *Volk*; whereas Romantic-era critics had decried their "reverence for the insignificant," Scherer wrote, his own generation had turned this intended insult into "an honorable epitaph."²⁷ For Mommsen, too, the salvaging and preserving of what might or might not be the future's adiaphora would become an article of faith.²⁸ And his contemporaries saluted him, as they did the Grimms, for being *im kleinen treu*, or painstakingly devoted to the humblest thing.²⁹

There is an affective quality to this realism that we might profitably tease out. It is abundantly clear from their biographies that realist novelists and midcentury historians—including Mommsen—still felt a deep current of longing for emotional and expressive excess.³⁰ But as we have seen, Mommsen was one of those who had silenced his inner poet by devoting himself to the law and to the study of arcane facts and figures. There is something in this of Courbet's commitment to painstakingly painting all the plain faces of the rural nobodies in *Burial at Ornans* or his self-ironizing *Painter in His Studio*. Similarly, too, Flaubert, on reaching the age of reason, self-consciously strangled his own purple prose and lived to parody himself in his two great masterpieces as the gormless Romantics Emma Bovary and Frédéric Moreau. Marx, one might say, had to stifle grand aspirations numerous times, in turning from Hegelian philosophy to journalism, and later in

25. Paul, "A Sense of Duty: Virtues as Markers of Devotion."

26. Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 36.

27. Wilhelm Scherer, *Rede auf Jacob Grimm* (Berlin: Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1885), 11.

28. The foundation of historical science, he wrote on July 8, 1858, was the creation of the archive, and the archivist does not ask if every item that he saves is worth saving (Mommsen, "Antrittsrede, 8. Juli 1858," in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 37-38).

29. Otto Seeck, "Zur Charakteristik Theodor Mommsens," *Deutsche Rundschau* 118 (1904), 79.

30. One can see this in Balzac and Flaubert, in Gustav Freytag and Gogol, in Ranke and in the historian of Greece Ernst Curtius (who put much of his lyricism into his public lectures), as well as in many of the British historians profiled by Ian Hesketh in *The Science of History in Victorian Britain: Making the Past Speak* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011). In France, one could get away with more Romanticism in historical writing, as evidenced by the work of Jules Michelet.

immersing himself in the economic arcana of *Das Capital* after the failures of the 1848 revolutions. In any event, among leading members of this generation we see reflected a very peculiar combination of dedication to detail and disillusionment with mere detail, the will to revolution and the cynical conviction in the futility of revolution, the commitment to live in one's own time and a deep loathing of one's contemporaries, and perhaps, of one's self.

What made this realism work in the mid-nineteenth century? Certainly after 1848 middle- and upper-class reading publics continued to read Romantic poetry and idealist philosophy, and the enduring power of Romantic music and the strong undertow of myth could free some, like Richard Wagner (born in 1813), at least briefly, from the horrors of the present. But among the intellectual elite, there was a strong sense, too, that the time for lyricism was over, and Hegelian ideas and Byronic laments were not very helpful to people who needed to get things done—things like German unification, the beautification of Paris, or the pacification of India, to name just a few major projects carried out with pragmatic, cynical hard work and very little Romantic bombast. In this fallen world, maintaining one's hold on what Benjamin Disraeli called "the greasy pole" had become an all-consuming enterprise and love seems largely a construct cherished by credulous young women. The title of Balzac's great trilogy, *Lost Illusions*, says it all. Mommsen's condemnation of Cicero and the emptiness of late republican rhetoric as well as his heroization of Julius Caesar, the warrior-realist, fits neatly into this anti-idealistic age.³¹ What use was bombast when what was real was poverty, hard work, power, and money?

As Elsie Michie has shown in a wonderful analysis of heiresses in nineteenth-century British novels, midcentury people were obsessed with "the vulgar question of money."³² Money-talk was everywhere—in marriage negotiations, institution-founding debates, and everyday household existences. Money's centrality to Balzac's novels made them dear (despite Balzac's monarchism) to Friedrich Engels; it is the sine qua non of Freytag's *Debit and Credit* and of countless other fictional, and perhaps actual, happy endings in the mid-nineteenth century. For Mommsen, Rome's success was grounded in its economic power, development of commerce, subordination of new provinces, and exploitation of slaves and peasants. He exposes the greed of the Roman landowners and the interest-politics of the commercial factions. Although political power seeking is also central to the narrative, one might call Mommsen's account a materialist history of Rome—that is surely one reason why Engels also read it so carefully.³³ Marked by post-1848 anger at the failure of reforms to address corruption, structural inequalities, and economic injustice, this was by no means an objective history, and some readers may indeed have found it vulgar. As a fellow classicist reflected on the

31. One British commentator was struck by Mommsen's savage portrait of the gifted but unstable Cicero: "Probably he had met his Cicero: there were many in 1848 who talked admirably and acted feebly" (F. Haverfield, "Theodor Mommsen," *English Historical Review* 19, no. 73 [1904], 84). One scholar terms Mommsen and Weber "Machiavellians" in their treatment of Rome (G. H. Mueller, "Weber and Mommsen: Non-Marxist Materialism," *British Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 1 [1986], 2).

32. Elsie B. Michie, *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novels of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

33. Mueller, "Weber and Mommsen," 7.

effect of his *Roman History* several years after Mommsen's death, "the audacity of some of his judgments of men and institutions almost paralysed criticism, and we have only begun in recent years to shake ourselves free from the spell he laid upon us."³⁴

Eventually, however, Mommsen's spell did begin to wear off. By the 1880s, in literary, artistic, and even political circles, the age of realism began to be eclipsed by other tendencies—namely, naturalism, symbolism, decadence, and post-Bismarckian hyperimperialism. This would be the age in which Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche, Bergson, Böcklin, Cézanne, and Ibsen earned large followings and Gustave Le Bon and Sigmund Freud explored the individual and collective subconsciousness. In the hands of Mallarmé, Hofmannsthal, and Stefan George, poetry revived; Hardy and Kipling turned from writing novels to writing poetry. This period generated a wealthier, less self-effacing Europe, one tiring of banalities and bourgeois values. When Mommsen was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1902, the list of other nominees included Ibsen, Yeats, Tolstoy, Zola, Gerhart Hauptmann, and, improbably, Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Herbert Spencer. The choice of Mommsen had political implications; whereas the judges felt that Tolstoy, the literary favorite, was dangerously socialist, Mommsen—judged by his half-century-old *Roman History*—seemed to champion old-fashioned values, particularly the patriarchal family and the monarchical state. (Ironically, at the time of the award the elderly liberal was denouncing his own Kaiser for contravening the constitution by favoring Junker interests above the German common good.³⁵) Above political considerations, however, the prize paid tribute to Mommsen's very grim and gritty view of life and its struggles, which he had shared with so many of his contemporaries for the better part of a half century. On the eve of the modernist break, the great realist carried home the laurels. Characteristically, he refused to come to the prize ceremony.

PART TWO: NATIONALISM

Many a member of the nineteenth-century German philological *équipe*, Lord Acton remarked in 1886, "had risen, by mere energy and conduct, from crushing poverty, had gone barefoot to school, or had begged his way like [Carl Benoit] Hase across the Fatherland; and he remained frugal and austere, cultivating humble obscurity and the golden gift of silence."³⁶ Mommsen, too, grew up in straightened circumstances in a restored Danish kingdom that had become a backwater. He and his four siblings were inculcated with the virtues of hard work, austerity, and self-improvement and the horrors of the purportedly Franco-aristocratic-Catholic sins of sloth, hubris, and forgiveness. Thanks to the Napoleonic Wars, his native Denmark had lost much of its former clout and cosmopolitanism; thanks to Metternichian reaction, legal reforms had been halted. This was the world in which Mommsen became, first (and out of necessity), a

34. Fowler, "Theodor Mommsen," 135-136.

35. Heinrich Schlange-Schöningen, "Mommsen und die Hohenzollern," in Demandt, Goltz, and Schlange-Schöningen, *Theodor Mommsen*, 36, 54.

36. Lord Acton, "German Schools of History," *English Historical Review* 1, no. 1 (1886), 26.

student of the law and, later, a historian. It was also the world in which he became a German nationalist of a particular type. He was no Fichtean dreamer; he would never become a Wilhelmine jingoist. As Rebenich has argued, Mommsen's pre-1848 experiences stamped him, rather, as a "small German" nationalist of the *Vormärz*, for whom the establishment of a culturally united, constitutional *Rechtsstaat* was the highest end.

In surveying the Germanic conditions in which Mommsen came of age, one can perhaps better empathize with his longing for a larger and more powerful German nation. We must remember that in the post-Napoleonic German Confederation of the 1820s and 1830s, nationalism was an oppositional, liberal force. Its (brave) proponents championed freer trade, a stronger central state, and equality under the law in a world in which particularist monarchs, guild privileges, and quasi serfdom continued to dominate. The Grimm brothers, in this era, were considered dangerous radicals; Mazzini had to champion "Young Italy" from abroad. Mommsen might well be forgiven for thinking that Roman and German republicanism were not so different and that nationalism, or even Caesarism, might be necessary weapons in the battle against a corrupt and backward landed oligarchy.

This may be the proper place to remind readers that Mommsen was trained not as a historian—Leopold von Ranke's (informal) historical seminar only dated to 1825—but as a Roman lawyer in a world in which Roman law still applied to significant portions of the German Confederation and in which the question of a unified German law was anything but uncontroversial. The French, of course, also had the Romans in mind; the example of the Gracchi's campaign to return agricultural land to the peasantry lay so close at hand that François-Noël Babeuf, who campaigned for the abolition of private property, actually received the moniker "Gracchus."³⁷ Napoleon's expropriations and *Code Civil* did not, of course, go so far, but they brought legal transformations and property transfers to many parts of the Holy Roman Empire, inspiring also reactive schools of thought such as Friedrich von Savigny's historical school of law. Savigny's work—another product of the Romantic generation against which Mommsen had to define himself—inspired the young Dane in its locating of law in the *Volksgeist*. But Mommsen the liberal realist also understood clearly that Savigny's opposition to reformist codification stood in the way of overcoming German provincialism and protected the oligarchic and exploitative landed elite.³⁸ Mommsen's training in law in the Janus-faced Restoration era prepared him for much more than the study of Roman history; it made clear to the young Dane the ways in which society-structuring inequalities could be made, or unmade, in a few strokes of the legislator's pen, and it framed his devotion to a progressive form of patriotism.

It was this sort of nationalism that Mommsen took to Italy, where he spent the hunger years of 1844–1847 copying inscriptions and fleeing bandits in the

37. The question of agricultural reform was of central importance to Niebuhr (who championed the liberation of the peasantry) as well as to Savigny (who opposed revolutionary appropriations), and it would later be important to Max Weber as well. For more on this, see Mueller, "Weber and Mommsen," 8–12.

38. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Clio the Romantic Muse: Historicizing the Faculties in Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 111–115, 122–126.

countryside. By the time he returned, however, it was no longer possible to think of reform as an exclusively political matter. The pace of commerce and small-scale manufacturing was increasing, and the plight of the starving peasantry was all too evident. In this decade, Engels—closely familiar with and passionately incensed by the Mancunian “satanic mills”—met Marx, and the two forecast capitalism’s inevitable apocalypse. When Mommsen returned to Kiel, he joined in journalistic campaigns for reforms that addressed not only political but also economic inequalities, and his *Roman History* demonstrates a keen understanding of ancient class relations and the material foundations of Roman power; it also deploys concepts that he and Marx derived independently from their common milieu: *Kapitalismus*, *Proletariat*, *Klasse*.³⁹ Mommsen’s was certainly no ivory-tower ancient history, backed as it was with a sense that, all heroics and fine phrases aside, the past was like the present. Perhaps more cynical or simply less radical than Marx, Mommsen seems to have come to the rather depressing conclusion that the struggle to temper the greed of the powerful was nothing new, and almost impossible to win.

Like Marx, Mommsen was not one to keep his mouth shut. In 1848, despite receiving a highly desirable position at the University of Leipzig, the young scholar, who, according to one elegist, “could never hold his tongue or his pen when his feelings were deeply moved,” turned his venom on the Saxon authorities.⁴⁰ It was no accident that he devoted an 1849 public lecture to the agrarian reforms of the Gracchi and that it was this lecture that inspired the liberal Leipzig publishers Karl Reimer and Salomon Hirzel to commission his *Roman History*. In May 1849, he witnessed the brutal dashing of his hopes, as 250 rebels died for the cause, more than 700 suffered imprisonment, and an untold number (including Wagner and Gottfried Semper) fled into exile.⁴¹ When he refused to desist from journalistic activities, he lost his job and was compelled to resettle in Switzerland, where he survived on the generosity of his friends in the book trade (one of whose daughters—Marie Reimer—he would later marry) until he obtained a professorship in Roman Law at the University of Zurich in 1852.

In the wake of the disappointments and defeats of 1848–1849, Mommsen, like Tocqueville, Wagner, and so many others, experienced bitter disillusionment and, for a time at least, renounced political activism. A self-proclaimed “political animal,” Mommsen only returned to the political fray in 1863, when his election to the Prussian Landtag provided him with a ringside seat from which to watch and deplore Bismarck’s Caesarist expropriation of the nationalists’ playbook.⁴² Yet in terms of his career, the 1850s turned out to be banner years for Mommsen, as they were for Wagner. Despite his teaching obligations at Zurich and then Breslau,

39. These terms would make Mommsen’s analysis especially useful for the young Max Weber while he was writing on the subject of Roman agrarian policy. Karl Christ also notes that Mommsen was one of the few nineteenth-century historians to recognize the centrality and horror of Roman slavery; see his “Theodor Mommsen und die ‘Römische Geschichte,’” in *Römische Geschichte und Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Karl Christ, vol. 3, *Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 48.

40. Fowler, “Theodor Mommsen,” 135.

41. Rebenich, “Theodor Mommsen, die deutschen Professoren,” 24.

42. Mommsen describes himself as always having been an “*animal politicum*” in his last will and testament (Theodor Mommsen, “Last Wishes,” *Past & Present* 1, no. 1 [1952], 71).

Mommsen completed the first three volumes of his *Roman History* swiftly; they appeared to great acclaim in 1854–1856. Among his admirers were the reform-minded king of Bavaria, Maximilian II, and quite uncomfortably, Napoleon III.⁴³ In 1853, the Berlin Academy of Sciences finally approved funding for his *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (CIL) and he took up a post at the University of Berlin, where in 1861 he obtained the full professorship that signified scientific apotheosis. The German archaeological institute that he coveted was founded in Rome; he received a *Pour le Mérite*, was made an honorary citizen of Rome, and became the trusted advisor of the powerful Prussian bureaucrat Friedrich Althoff, “the Bismarck of university matters.”⁴⁴ The struggling youth, so afflicted by his century, had, in middle age, become its hero.

Mommsen’s nationalism, of course, deeply imprinted his *Roman History*, which tells the story of the unification of the Latin tribes without wasting much time on their debts to or similarities with other nations. In writing such a history, he was in good company: many of the scholars of the previous generation who had been trained as universal historians and had taught universal history (including Leopold von Ranke, Friedrich Schlosser, and F. C. Dahlmann) by now had given up the course and pledged themselves to teaching national political histories. Among the many national histories to appear in the 1840s and 1850s, one could mention Michelet’s *History of France*, Thomas Macaulay’s *History of England*, George Bancroft’s *History of the United States*, František Palacký’s *History of the Czech Nation*, and the major histories of Greece written by George Grote and Ernst Curtius. Mommsen’s *Roman History* was the history of a special people whose spirit was expressed in laws and whose historical mission it was to incorporate others into an entity united by foundational, universally applied, principles. It was Rome’s special destiny, as Werner Jaeger would put it in 1917, “to bring subjugated peoples the blessing of a far superior legal system without damaging their own particular cultures.”⁴⁵ The Gauls—and, for that matter, the *Germanen*—might have begged to differ. But Mommsen, even though he championed excavations along the German *Limes*, was too sober a scholar (and perhaps too much a believer in Rome’s destiny) to shed many tears for the losers. It was right that, in order to earn greatness and freedom, these men subjugated their particularities to the law and its executor, the state.⁴⁶

Yet Mommsen remained a hard-bitten progressive rather than a pig-headed or racist nationalist. He denounced Bismarck in such bitter terms that he was threatened with a libel suit, and he opposed German overseas adventures. He deplored publicly his erstwhile friend Heinrich Treitschke’s anti-Semitism because he thought Treitschke’s racism endangered the future of the German liberal state—and for the same reason, he hoped Jews would convert, forestalling a clash like that of the Roman-Jewish War of 66–73 CE, which he claimed had been brought

43. Christ, “Theodor Mommsen und die ‘Römische Geschichte,’” 27–29, 32, 56

44. Rebenich, “*Exercitationibus inter fui historicis*,” 59.

45. Werner Jaeger, untitled essay in *Der Tag*, November 30, 1917, quoted in Hans Kloft, “Die Nachrufe auf Theodor Mommsen,” in Demandt, Goltz, and Schlange-Schöninghen, *Theodor Mommsen*, 306.

46. Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, vol. 1, 6th ed. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1874), 29.

about by the Jews' adherence to their "national exclusivity and the priests' shackling of their minds" (*priesterliche Geistesfesselung*).⁴⁷ He was even more contemptuous of Catholics, who he believed were not only exclusionary and mentally shackled but also numerous and politically powerful. Mommsen pled for a *Leitkultur*, but only because he thought cultural pluralism would destroy political stability and, with it, freedom and equality under the law.

Mommsen's *History* was especially no-nonsense, partly because it was not a history of the Danes or Germans and partly because it was not a history of Greece, where more elegiacal rhapsodizing was allowed. Although he included sections on art and religion in his *Roman History*, he emphasized Rome's economic, rather than its cultural, power. As one reviewer commented in contrasting Curtius's rather purple prose to Mommsen's writing style in the *Preussischer Jahrbücher*, "[t]he Greece whose history Curtius tells lies a long way away from the Roman Empire of Mommsen, where the wind blows and bad weather dominates, and which reminds one of today's prosaic national economy."⁴⁸ At the time, it was conventional to treat Rome with more realism—indeed, as Eduard Norden would later put it, Greek culture was to Roman culture as pure spring water was to schnapps.⁴⁹ But as we have seen, Mommsen's vulgar view struck contemporaries as especially hard-bitten and unforgiving; one reader rather generously compared it to stripping away the false overpainting to reveal the true nature of the characters depicted.⁵⁰ It tells us a great deal that this sort of realism read to contemporaries as *wissenschaftlich* and that this sort of science was what the Germans and many of their international colleagues thought admirable. That J. J. Bachofen, lonely in backwater Basel, despised Mommsen for imposing on Rome "the favorite ideas of the shallowest modern Prussian chamber-liberalism" tells us just as much.⁵¹

By the time Mommsen won his Nobel Prize, Germany had become an imperial power and an industrial powerhouse; under Wilhelm II, it became increasingly demanding of its place in the sun. Some younger colleagues were recognizing Mommsen's blindspots and calling for ancient histories with more attention to the eastern Mediterranean, late antiquity, and religion.⁵² Jacob Burckhardt's *Cultural History of Greece* (1895), not to mention Nietzsche's much earlier *Birth of Tragedy*, demanded a more aestheticizing and less rationalist approach to the ancients. Just as realism had been eclipsed, so too had liberal nationalism had its

47. Christhard Hoffmann, "Die Verteidigung der liberalen Nation. Mommsen gegen Treitschke im 'Berliner Antisemitismusstreit' 1879/1880," in Demandt, Goltz, and Schlange-Schöningen, *Theodor Mommsen*, 77-81. The quotation comes from Mommsen's section entitled "Judea und die Juden," in *Römische Geschichte*, vol. 5 (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1885), 487.

48. Herman Grimm, "E. Curtius über Kunstmuseen," *Preussische Jahrbücher* 25 (1869), 616.

49. Eduard Norden, *Die Bildungswerte der lateinischen Literatur und Sprach auf dem humanistischen Gymnasium* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlag, 1920), 5.

50. Karl Johannes Neumann, "Theodor Mommsen," *Historische Zeitschrift* 92, no. 2 (1904), 213.

51. J. J. Bachofen to Heinrich Meyer-Ochsner, January 24, 1862, in *J. J. Bachofens Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 10, *Briefe*, ed. Fritz Husner (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 1967), 252.

52. See, for instance, Kloft, "Die Nachrufe auf Theodor Mommsen," 302; Suzanne Marchand, "From Liberalism to Neoromanticism: Albrecht Dieterich, Richard Reitzenstein and the Religious Turn in Fin de Siecle German Classical Studies," in *Out of Arcadia: Classics and Politics in Germany in the Age of Burckhardt, Nietzsche and Wilamowitz*, ed. Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Ruehl (London: Institute of Classical Studies, London, 2003), 129-160.

day. Rather desperately, an aged Mommsen expressed the hope that the young Max Weber, whose dissertation on the ancient Roman economy Mommsen grudgingly appreciated, would, on his death, pick up his spear.⁵³ Weber cherished the Mommsonian vales of cleared-eyed realism, liberal nationalist advocacy, and scholarly modesty, but his generation, having matured in a world that had long since left liberal nationalism behind, were already engaged in their own, more aggressive and less self-effacing, crusades.

PART THREE: *WISSENSCHAFT*

In letters Mommsen frequently referred to himself as the “servant” or “apprentice” of science, but of course our workaholic realist had a particular sort of science in mind, one that we are now in a position to better contextualize and understand.⁵⁴ Indeed, we can be quite clear about what sort of science it was *not*. Mommsen’s science was not the theologically inflected science of the seventeenth century; it was not the universalizing science of the eighteenth century. Most emphatically, it was not the Romantic science of Mommsen’s immediate predecessors. Despite having had a pastor for a father, Mommsen lacked the sensitivities for religious feeling that drove Chateaubriand and Benjamin Constant, or even K. O. Müller; he was, as Max Weber would later say of himself, “in religious matters absolutely ‘unmusical.’”⁵⁵ He seems not have cared much about mythology or about Roman, Greek, or Eurasian prehistory. Nor was he interested in universal laws, universal history, or *doux commerce*, a now-outdated Enlightenment concept that had little place in later nineteenth-century negotiations over cartels, labor unions, and tariffs. Despite his closeness to leading students of material culture such as Otto Jahn and Eduard Gerhard, and despite his great interest in archaeological work in Italy and Germany, Mommsen does not seem to have been interested in symbols, images, art, or music. And he didn’t think much of Roman poetry. Virgil, he thought, was right to consider burning *The Aeneid* before his death; the poem was useful as political propaganda for the new imperial regime and became “an excellent schoolbook” on which commentaries could be written, but that was the best that he could say about it.⁵⁶ The focus, to use nineteenth-century German parlance, was on the study of *Realien*, not of *Ideale*—or, as Marx would have put it, the material conditions of reality and not the ephemera of ideas or beliefs.

To highlight just how strange these exclusions from science were, we have only to compare Mommsen to Friedrich Creuzer, the great early nineteenth-century Hellenist whose *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker* (1810–1812) traced

53. Mueller, “Weber and Mommsen,” 2.

54. Mommsen to Otto Jahn, May 16, 1845, in *Theodor Mommsen–Otto Jahn: Briefwechsel, 1842–1868*, ed. Lothar Wickert (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1962), 25.

55. Weber made this famous comment in a letter to Ferdinand Tönnies, February 19, 1909, in *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6, *Briefe 1909–1910*, ed. Horst Baier, M. Rainer Lepsius, Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Wolfgang Schluchter, and Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1994), 65.

56. Mommsen, *Römische Kaisergeschichte Nach den Vorlesungs-Mitschriften von Sebastian und Paul Hensel 1882/86*, ed. Barbara Demandt and Alexander Demandt (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992), 113, quoted in Michael Armstrong and William M. Calder III, “The ‘Damnatio’ of Vergil in Theodor Mommsen, *Römische Kaisergeschichte*,” in *Vergilius* 40 (1994), 90.

the prehistorical westward migration of Indian and Persian myths and symbols, which, in his view, laid the foundations for Greek and Christian civilizations. A Romantic devoté of Herodotus and the Hellenistic Greek writers, Creuzer had called for a philological Renaissance, one that would reveal the great secrets of human history, demonstrate the primeval origins of universal religious unity, and bring about a reunion of scholarship and poetry.⁵⁷ By no means was this the sort of science Mommsen pledged to serve.

The generation of Mommsen's teachers, even the younger ones, might have flirted with Romanticism as young men; but by about 1830, Creuzerian universal mythography, like *Naturphilosophie* in the natural sciences, had become embarrassingly speculative. The highly respected diplomat cum scholar B. G. Niebuhr gave good reasons to declare all late accounts of Roman prehistory admissible only as legends (though he still tried to extract facts from them), and Müller's 1825 *Prolegomena to a Scientific Mythology* laid down Kantian limits for interpreting Greek myths and cults. Afterward, scholars seeking to reconstruct early histories, including the Grimm brothers, Niebuhr, and Müller, drew clear lines between mythical and historical periods and stuck to purely national inquiries, specializing their language skills and leaving the *unwissenschaftlich* Mr. Casaubons to seek the keys to universal knowledge.⁵⁸ It is certain that many of these scholars continued to put broader, more subjective, and perhaps even more poetic material into their lectures, but print increasingly called for asperity. Skepticism, too, was the order of the day. Of the philologist Karl Lachmann, who was one of Mommsen's great heroes, his admiring nineteenth-century biographer, Martin Hertz, wrote, "[e]very sort of guessing, groping for and arguing about half-baked facts was an abomination to him." When his students complained that their enormous efforts ended only in the recognition that the facts remained dubious, Lachmann rebuked them and reminded them "what an achievement it was to clearly recognize what one needed to investigate in order to achieve knowledge."⁵⁹

Somewhere along the way, speculation and universalizing dilettantism became sins worthy of the stocks. Niebuhr's skepticism and the moral indignation he leveled at antagonists played an especially powerful role. Although much of what he wrote was very specialized and opaque, in highly popular public lectures given in 1825 and 1830, Niebuhr vigorously denounced the glossing over of minor details or taking of others' words as tantamount to scholarly treason. He pronounced, for instance, that "he who allows himself to make less than truthful claims about indifferent things or [makes claims] as if he was fully convinced, is a liar, a shameful liar."⁶⁰ Tellingly, Niebuhr's insistence on philological virtuosity and mercilessly honest critiques of both ancient and modern historians earned him lavish encomia from the generation of the 1830s, against which complaints

57. On Creuzer, see Stephen Larsen's excellent dissertation, "Friedrich Creuzer and the Study of Antiquity" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2008); and Suzanne Marchand, "Herodotus and the End of Universal History" (unpublished essay).

58. See Colin Kidd's excellent *The World of Mr. Casaubon: Britain's Wars of Mythography, 1700–1870* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

59. Martin Hertz, *Karl Lachmann: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1851), 83–84.

60. B. G. Niebuhr, "Aus der Einleitung zu den *Vorträge über römische Alterthümer*," in *Über das Studium der Alten Geschichte*, ed. Wilfried Nippel (Munich: Deutsche Taschenbuch, 1993), 126.

about his inability to provide a comprehensible historical narrative sounded only a feeble note of complaint. And somehow, across Europe and extending to the New World, the lure of this sort of science, and the abhorrence of Romantic speculation, became the order of the day. In the natural sciences, similarly, Romantic *Naturphilosophie* fell into very bad odor. The young Hermann von Helmholtz went so far as to attack Goethe's scientific intuition as "esoteric" and "senseless."⁶¹ In this no-nonsense era, Victor Frankenstein would have been sent to a spa for his nerves.

As recent work has shown definitively, neither skepticism nor historical criticism can be put down as nineteenth-century (or German) inventions. The pyrrhonism of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries touched many, including nitpicking antiquaries such as Louis-Jean L vesque de Pouilly, who presented a thoroughly skeptical "Dissertation sur l'incertitude de l'Histoire des quatre si cles premiers de Rome" to the Acad mie des Inscriptions in 1723, anticipating Niebuhr by nearly a century.⁶² The great gap between ancient and the modern mentalities, too, was already being plumbed by Biblical accommodationists such as Siegmund Jakob Baumgarten and Johann Salomo Semler. Nor were nineteenth-century scholars the first to champion autopsy. Even before Bossuet made sacred geography so crucial to his universal histories, on-the-ground scholars were busily measuring and fact-checking in Jerusalem, at Persepolis, and in Rome.⁶³ But Mommsen's generation, and particularly German scholars of this generation, responded in ways highly significant for the form, content, and many of the affective dimensions of the sciences as we know them today.

It is instructive to hear the twenty-year-old Mommsen voicing his own pyrrhonist anxieties in a review of a friend's essay on the great Enlightenment question of the origins of language: "It turns out," Mommsen wrote, "that we always proceed with our scholarly investigations in the same manner as the voyages of discovery to the North Pole. We occasionally get a little bit nearer to the goal than most do, but then also have to turn back and count ourselves fortunate, if in this border zone of human knowledge we do not falsely reposition the magnetic needle of human understanding."⁶⁴ It is quite striking that a member of Mommsen's cadre would even attempt an essay on so speculative a subject; the philological experts of the period, Niebuhr, Lachmann, Franz Bopp, and M ller, would never have countenanced such an endeavor. Mommsen certainly would not, and as he transitioned from law student to scholar, the ex-poet committed himself ever more to a post-Romantic paring down of science and the hard-bitten Kantian

61. Wise, *Aesthetics, Industry, and Science*, 246.

62. Louis-Jean L vesque de Pouilly, "Dissertation sur l'incertitude de l'Histoire des quatre si cles premiers de Rome," *M moires* 6 (1729), 14-29. On historical pyrrhonism in the eighteenth century, see Anton M. Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 233-264.

63. See Zur Shalev, *Sacred Words and Worlds: Geography, Religion, and Scholarship, 1550-1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Pierre Briant, *The First European: A History of Alexander in the Age of Empire*, transl. Nicholas Elliott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 43-49, 81-90, 203-212.

64. Mommsen, review of an essay by his schoolmate Johann Heinrich Theodor Meyer (1837), quoted in Wickert, *Theodor Mommsen*, 1:97.

commitment to sticking to one's own linguistically limited sphere. This was made more attractive, too, by the habit of thinking in national units spurred by the Restoration liberalism examined above; in this way, nationalism could be usefully, if often inadvertently, deployed in the making of humanistic *Wissenschaft*.

For the German scholars of this generation, however, even national histories needed to be approached with a sober commitment to the knowable and the real. In writing his *Roman History*, Mommsen's approach was to bracket questions about origins and borrowings, subjects that earlier historians had investigated with fervor, and to focus on real things—things that exhibited, to use the often-repeated term of the day, *Wirkung*, or demonstrable effects. Already in 1837, Mommsen had written in his diary, "It is clear that only the so-called pragmatic history, which strives to follow the causes and consequences [*Wirkung*], can be considered [worthy of being called history]."⁶⁵ This approach, which was common to Mommsen, Ranke, and Eduard Meyer, among others, drove historical causation out of the land of genius and accident, throwing it onto the territory of economic, geographical, and political necessity. This was to honor as a historical forebearer the hard-nosed realist Thucydides over the ethnographic and universalist Herodotus, darling of the *siècle des lumières*.⁶⁶ Today, we can certainly see the limitations of the Thucydidean model—its focus on war, men, secular events, power, politics, and one (linguistically defined) nation. But we can still appreciate what this pragmatic approach did for Mommsen's generation, and how it spoke to their realist-nationalist worldviews.

If one response to Faustian speculation was linguistic specialization and historical pragmatism, another was autopsy—of an exhaustive and unselective sort. One might even say that this generation committed itself to *Autopsie als Beruf*, for the commandment to go there and stay until the whole landscape was surveyed and described formed for them something of a Calvinist calling, demanding untold (and untellable) personal sacrifices and exhaustive, un- or anti-poetic cataloging. We can demonstrate this in comparing Mommsen's conception of the CIL—formed in the 1840s—with August Boeckh's CIG (Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum), imagined in the 1810s and 1820s. Whereas the latter depended on compiling previous texts recorded by others, and its overseer never stepped foot in Greece, Mommsen's project employed large numbers of onsite investigators (including himself), who were instructed to copy precisely or take squeezes (impressions made with wetted paper) of every inscription, no matter how trivial or fragmentary. Only in this way, in Mommsen's view, was a "revolution in the antiquarian and historical literature to be effected."⁶⁷ Mommsen's antiselective method has perhaps its most obvious descendant in modern archaeological excavations, in which every roof tile is cataloged in the

65. Mommsen's (unpublished) diary, quoted in Wickert, *Theodor Mommsen*, 1:97.

66. It has often been noted that Ranke's famous admonition to write history, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, strongly resembles Thucydides's equally famous injunction to look into the truth of things and not to report unvetted facts, no matter how pleasant they might be (see, for instance, Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22). Ranke was closely familiar with this text, as he wrote his now lost dissertation on Thucydides.

67. Mommsen describes his conception of the CIL in his letter to Otto Jahn, May 2, 1845, in Wickert, *Theodor Mommsen—Otto Jahn: Briefwechsel*, 20.

hopes of some future puzzle master swooping in to make everything make sense. It has its advantages, to be sure, but it also delays the gratification of synthetic understanding, sometimes far into the future.

All-out autopsy was particularly important for a generation of scientists who looked on themselves as epigones—or put differently, who were driven by fear that the world held a limited number of new findings and that those who did not seek out novelties and document them exhaustively would lose science's great race. How could the young man—think Darwin on *The Beagle*—make a breakthrough as a zoologist if he did not have new animals to study and categorize? How to prove one's worth as a geographer if not by finding the sources of the Nile or crossing the heretofore uncrossable Taklamakan Desert?⁶⁸ That this was enabled by the age of European imperialist hubris is obvious; that it made for the massive heaping up of artifacts, fossils, plants, and inscriptions that no one thought particularly beautiful or interesting, or even had time to study, is perhaps less so. That it was accompanied by a self-suppressing ethos of dedication to enabling future research has almost entirely been forgotten.⁶⁹

For this generation, it was imperative—even a matter of personal honor—that all these facts be accurate, an article of faith that filled the order books of the professional instrument makers and the pages of an increasing number of book-reviewing journals. E. A. Freeman, who saw it as his mission to police the writing of history in Britain, produced more than 700 articles and reviews for *The Saturday Review* in a single decade (1860–1869), severely admonishing authors who failed to live up to his standards of accuracy.⁷⁰ For Mommsen, too, accuracy was perhaps the supreme scholarly value, and to attain it through painstaking effort was one of the few satisfactions he allowed himself. He allowed himself to feel that he had surpassed Niebuhr, not because of his genius or even his superior writing style but because he was one of those who exhibited true “banausic patience for grunge [*grob*] work,” a phrase which resonates interestingly with Max Weber's insistence that politics “is a strong and slow boring of hard boards.”⁷¹ As Mommsen's student Otto Seeck testified, the Roman historian unrelentingly impressed upon his seminar students the virtues of showing oneself *im kleinen treu*.⁷² Not surprisingly, Mommsen's incisiveness played a central role in his contemporaries' laudations: “His control over detail, his aptitude for drudgery were supreme. . . . In particular his accuracy was almost infallible,” said one writer.⁷³ We can feel sure that this, at least, was a compliment Mommsen would have gladly accepted.

68. See, for instance, Cornelia Essner, *Deutsche Afrikareisende im neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985).

69. It has not, however, been forgotten by Lorraine Daston. See her “Immortal Archive,” especially 175–176, for more on this.

70. Hesketh, *The Science of History in Victorian Britain*, 134.

71. Mommsen, “Rede bei Antritt des Rektorates, 15. Oktober 1874,” in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 14; Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and transl. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 128.

72. Seeck, “Zur Charakteristik Theodor Mommsens,” 78–79.

73. Haverfield, “Theodor Mommsen,” 82. Haverfield underscored Mommsen's power of praise and blame, brilliant portraiture, and unforgettable epigram, but these were really only on view in his *Roman History*.

Like the slightly older Leopold von Ranke, Mommsen put enormous emphasis on scholarly work; indeed, Ranke's motto, *labor ipse voluptas* (the pleasure is in the work itself),⁷⁴ itself encapsulates a post-Romantic renunciation of genius and of masterpieces, which, the motto acknowledges, might as well always remain unfinished. The pleasure, instead, lay in avoiding the opprobrium heaped, deservedly, on dilettantes whose subjective guesswork undermined what might otherwise be slow and steady progress toward the Pole. In paying tribute to his great friend Otto Jahn, Mommsen clearly articulated his deep contempt for, and perhaps fear of, any sort of speculation or sloppiness; far better was a kind of truthfulness (*Wahrhaftigkeit*) purchased through painstaking philological devotion to details. Despite never having completed a synthetic work,

Jahn extended his research and activity far beyond the boundaries of his discipline and intervened outside of it as well in truly transformative and epoch-making ways. He did so by applying the so-called strict philological method—that is simply the ruthlessly honorable pursuit of truth [*Wahrheitsforschung*], unafraid of any effort even in small matters, bowing to no doubts, permitting no whitewashing of gaps in tradition or his own knowledge, and for which he held himself and others accountable—to areas which until then were considered the property of dissolute and mendacious dilettantes and overlain with cant and swindles.⁷⁵

Jahn, for Mommsen, was the antidote to Creuzer and the hero of the new *Wissenschaft*. It was on such foundations that his generation could repackage lost dreams of full knowledge in its Colossus-sized, “big science” projects: the editing of *all* Roman inscriptions; the translating of *all* of the sacred texts of the East; the mapping of *all* of the stars.⁷⁶ If individuals could be induced to settle, as had Mommsen and Ranke, for pleasure in the work itself, the collective might one day hope to reach that elusive Pole.

The fears, pleasures, and commitments sketched above shaped humanistic as well as natural scientific work as the century entered its final decades; they also shaped scholars' sense of their own worth and achievements. Writing synthetic works, and especially those that pleased both scholars and the general public, grew more challenging; it is striking that Mommsen, Ernst Curtius, and Eduard Meyer all produced their general histories as relatively young men and then faced the need for endless revisions over the course of their lives. Writing a general national history (or a historical novel or opera) based on rigorous and exhaustive use of primary sources was no easy trick in 1854; it would be even more challenging for a scholar who already experienced “pangs of conscience” in completing the third volume of his *Roman History* in 1858.⁷⁷ An increasing horror of potentially unscientific generalizations constitutes another reason that Mommsen's long-anticipated fourth volume was never completed. Writing to his

74. Citing this motto, an unnamed elegist said of Ranke: “Work was certainly his only delight” (“Leopold von Ranke,” in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 22 [May–Dec. 1886], 556).

75. Mommsen, “Otto Jahn,” in *Reden und Aufsätze*, 459.

76. Flaubert brilliantly parodied such lofty ambitions in his unfinished novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, in which two copy clerks set about recording all of human knowledge and end up with a dictionary of received ideas.

77. Seeck, “Zur Charakteristik Theodor Mommsens,” 83. Mommsen's *History* would go through eight editions in his lifetime.

daughter from an inspiring Neapolitan villa in 1882, Mommsen claimed that it was not age-related weakness that kept him from writing “what people want to read.” Rather, “the holy hallucination of youth is gone, and unfortunately I now know how little I know, and divine immodesty has been taken from me. Divine drudgery, in which I can always do a little something, is a poor substitute.”⁷⁸

Mommsen, as we have seen, was never given to immodesty, but one contemporary noted that after 1856 “[h]e preferred, instead, the problems in which certainty seemed approachable, and thought he would best help his successors if he left to them more accurately studied and edited materials and if he indicated the means of understanding it.”⁷⁹ He devoted himself essentially to antiselective, unheroic source criticism, though doing so resulted in the completion of two monumental compilations, his *Römisches Staatsrecht* (1871–1885) and *Römisches Strafrecht* (1899). In his endless pursuit of specialized research, he resembled not at all the elderly Ranke, who produced a much-criticized *Weltgeschichte*, but rather Darwin, who spent his sunset years writing specialized monographs on climbing plants and earthworms. But Mommsen enjoyed far better health than Darwin did, and he consequently exhibited superhuman *Sitzfleisch*, turning up at the Bodleian, for example, at seven o’clock in the morning, only to fly into a rage when he learned it opened at nine o’clock.⁸⁰ In addition to his voluminous publications, Mommsen devoted extensive attention to advocacy and organizational work for the many big science projects in which he was engaged. The CIL, by the time of his death, comprised an eight-foot-long row of folios and included 130,000 individually verified inscriptions.⁸¹

And yet, the mounting list of his publications and his increasing international renown was not enough for the old man’s satisfaction. There were the political disappointments of his later career, including the loss of his Reichstag seat when Bismarck swept out his remaining liberal critics in 1884. Perhaps Mommsen would even have agreed with a social democratic elegy: “He remained a child of an era and a class that did not fulfill its historical mission, that did not live fully in its own present, that recast its complaints about the present in historical images from the past.”⁸² But his malaise went deeper and was more personal than this. In a codicil to his will, which was published in 1948, Mommsen expressed a deeply melancholic sense of his own inadequacies and insecurities, what we today might call “imposter syndrome”:

Despite outward successes my life has fallen short of its fulfillment. External accidents placed me among historians and classical scholars, although my training, and also, I suppose, my talent, was not sufficient for these two disciplines. The painful feeling of the inadequacy of my achievement, of seeming to be more than I was, has never left me in life and is neither to be veiled nor brought to light in a biography.⁸³

78. Mommsen’s letter was edited and published in German by Jürgen Malitz in “Nachlese zum Briefwechsel Mommsen-Wilamowitz,” *Quaderni di storia* 17 (1983), 127. Mommsen’s last phrase (“is a poor substitute”) appears in English.

79. Haverfield, “Theodor Mommsen,” 85.

80. Fowler, “Theodor Mommsen,” 130.

81. Haverfield, “Theodor Mommsen,” 88.

82. Anonymous author in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, November 3, 1903, quoted in Kloft, “Die Nachrufe auf Theodor Mommsen,” 289.

83. Mommsen, “Last Wishes,” 71.

He asked that the public “not concern itself with my person,” a dying wish that reads like Richard Newson’s (of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*) parting hope that he would be forgotten.⁸⁴ The force of destiny and of circumstances—not genius, nor even hard work—had made him celebrated, but he remained “the Zeitgeist’s child,” well aware that he had not reached the Pole or moved many steps nearer to what might be, after all, an unreachable goal.

These poignant late-career reflections reveal the melancholic aspect of Mommsen’s character, his belief that the “holy hallucination[s] of youth” were only that, and would not return. They further enhance our understanding of Mommsen as a knower, making it possible to appreciate his affective attachments to his work. He was a producer of knowledge for whom doing the grunge work was a moral imperative, essential to purging the archive for future generations. Rejecting the self-aggrandizing Byronic pose, his post-Romantic generation wanted to know and portray the real and to be appreciated for something that was real: the sweat of their brows. Both the form and the content of the scholarship he produced bore the marks of mid-century liberal nationalism, at first brave in its reformist aspirations but gradually disillusioned and content with pragmatic interventions. The generational framework offers us important insight into Mommsen’s proclivities and pursuits, but as I hope this essay has made clear, he must also be appreciated as an individual who renegotiated relations between power and knowledge in his own way, using the latter to critique the former, with respect to the past as well as the present. By getting to know him as a writer, as a political activist, and as a person, we understand not only the wellsprings of his practices but also their meaning for him and for many of his students, colleagues, and admirers.

It was certainly my purpose here to say something about humanistic knowledge making in a critical moment of its modern formation. But the larger goal has been to show how much we gain by deepening the intellectual and social context and by appreciating the sometimes admirable, sometimes unpalatable, qualities of the individual knower. No other nineteenth-century scholar or intellectual was exactly like Mommsen, but for several decades, he exemplified virtues that many others, too, at least cultivated: self-suppressing industry, idolization of exacting observation (or *Autopsie*), commitment to reforming the liberal fatherland, and hard-bitten dedication to portraying the world as he saw it. Getting to know him gives us purchase on his world, and gives a concrete and embodied point of departure to examine its values, virtues, and limitations. The biographical approach, for all of its faults, helps us remember and compare what we have learned. As individual knowers, we surely find it easier to identify with people than with abstract discourses; the contextualized biography also makes it harder for those who come after to overgeneralize and condemn out of hand all of our predecessors, which I believe is a vital necessity for historians of the humanities today. As the field of *Wissensgeschichte* takes shape, historians will make choices about how to study the production and circulation of knowledge. This essay is simply a plea for us not to forget

84. *Ibid.*

to keep the knowers—with all their warts and wondrous particularities, in all of the ways their wider worlds shaped their ways of thinking, acting, and writing—firmly in our view.

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