LINGÜÍSTICA TEÓRICA/THEORETICAL LINGUISTICS

THE THEORY OF NON-KNOWLEDGE: A FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING PHILOSOPHICAL CHALLENGES IN PHILOLOGY

Corrigendum

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Abstract

This essay explores the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK) as a conceptual tool for grappling with longstanding philosophical issues in philology, such as the interpretation of texts, the pursuit of authenticity, and the normativity of methods. By introducing the idea of nullification—a process that suspends the demand for justificatory certainty—TNK escapes the interpretive uncertainties inherent in philological work. Drawing on ancient, modern, and contemporary authors from philosophy and philology, the essay suggests that TNK can complement traditional methods by encouraging a more flexible engagement with texts. While philology has historically relied on rigorous standards of evidence and argumentation, TNK invites reflection on the limits of these standards, potentially enriching the discipline without rejecting its foundations. The discussion highlights contributions from Plato and Aristotle in ancient times, Nietzsche and Saussure in the modern era, and Gadamer and Foucault in contemporary studies, illustrating how TNK intersects with ongoing debates.

Keywords: Non-Knowledge, Nullification, Philology, Interpretation, Authenticity.

LA TEORÍA DEL NO SABER: UN MARCO PARA ABORDAR LOS DESAFÍOS FILOSÓFICOS EN LA FILOLOGÍA

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Resumen

Este ensayo explora la Teoría del No-Saber (TNK) como herramienta conceptual para abordar cuestiones filosóficas de larga data en la filología, como la interpretación de textos, la búsqueda de autenticidad y la normatividad de los métodos. Al introducir la idea de la anulación —un proceso que suspende la exigencia de certeza justificatoria—, la TNK elude las incertidumbres interpretativas inherentes al trabajo filológico. Basándose en autores antiguos, modernos y contemporáneos de la filosofía y la filología, el ensayo sugiere que la TNK puede complementar los métodos tradicionales fomentando una interacción más flexible con los textos. Si bien la filología se ha basado históricamente en rigurosos estándares de evidencia y argumentación, la TNK invita a la reflexión sobre los límites de estos estándares, enriqueciendo potencialmente la disciplina sin rechazar sus fundamentos. El análisis destaca las contribuciones de Platón y Aristóteles en la antigüedad, Nietzsche y Saussure en la era moderna, y Gadamer y Foucault en los estudios contemporáneos, ilustrando cómo la TNK se entrelaza con los debates actuales.

Palabras clave: No-conocimiento, Anulación, Filología, Interpretación, Autenticidad.

Introduction
Philology's Philosophical Underpinnings

Philology, as the study of historical texts through linguistic, cultural, and contextual analysis, has deep roots in both philosophy and scholarly practice. From its ancient origins in Greek scholarship, where figures like Aristotle examined texts for rhetorical and logical insights (Aristotle, 2005), to its modern development as a systematic discipline, philology has always been intertwined with philosophical questions. Aristotle, for instance, in his *Poetics*, analyzed literary texts to understand mimesis and catharsis, laying groundwork for interpretive methods that philologists still employ (Aristotle, 1999). In modern times, Friedrich Nietzsche, himself a trained philologist, critiqued the discipline's pretensions to objective truth, observing texts as products of cultural power dynamics (Nietzsche, 1999). Contemporary scholars like Hans-Georg Gadamer have further complicated this by emphasizing the hermeneutic circle, where understanding a text involves a fusion of historical and contemporary horizons (Gadamer, 2004).

In this essay, the term philology is used in its traditional sense—as the historical and linguistic study of texts concerned with their transmission, reconstruction, and interpretation—but it also extends to the broader field of literary-philological inquiry, where textual meaning, form, and reception intersect with philosophy and cultural theory. This dual scope is deliberate.

The philosophical challenges in philology arise from its dual role: as a method for reconstructing and interpreting texts, and as a reflection on the nature of language and meaning. Plato, in *Cratylus*, debated whether language is conventional or natural, a question that echoes in philological efforts to trace etymologies and semantic shifts (Plato, 2001). Modern linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure shifted the focus to the arbitrary sign, arguing that meaning is relational within a system,

influencing philological approaches to comparative linguistics (Saussure, 2006). In the contemporary era, Michel Foucault viewed philology as part of discursive formations that construct knowledge and power, questioning the neutrality of textual analysis: "discourses are not about objects; they constitute them" (Foucault, 2008).

This essay introduces the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK) as a framework to address these challenges. TNK posits that the insistence on absolute justificatory certainty in philological work often leads to interpretive impasses. By proposing "nullification"—a suspension of the need for unassailable justification — TNK allows for a more provisional and dynamic engagement with texts. This approach draws on skeptical traditions, such as those in ancient philosophy from Pyrrho (though not directly documented, influenced later skeptics like Sextus Empiricus), and modern critiques from Nietzsche, while aligning with contemporary interdisciplinary developments in digital humanities. The goal is to complement philological methods, not supplant them, by highlighting their philosophical boundaries and potentials for innovation.

While the TNK is first applied to the classical philological concern with authenticity and justification, its principles also resonate with later developments in literary theory. Russian Formalism (Shklovsky, 1976), (Tynyanov, 1977), Reception Theory (Iser, 1978), (Jauss, 1982), and Functionalist approaches (Even-Zohar, 1990), (Bourdieu, 1992) all challenged essentialist models of textual value, replacing them with dynamic, relational, and pragmatic ones. These traditions, like TNK, emphasize contingency and context over immutable foundations.

Thus, the present analysis should be read as both a critique of traditional philology and a dialogue with its modern transformations. The aim is not to subsume these diverse methodologies but to reveal, through TNK's principle of nullification, how the persistent demand for justificatory certainty—whether in textual reconstruction or interpretive theory—can be suspended to yield a more flexible and reflective engagement with texts.

The Regress Problem in Philological Interpretation

Interpretation lies at the very core of philology. To engage in philology is to engage in the activity of reading, contextualizing, and elucidating meaning in texts transmitted across time. Yet this act is fraught with a fundamental philosophical difficulty: the regress problem. Each interpretation demands justification, yet every justification itself requires further justification, potentially leading to an infinite regress or to dogmatic closure. This problem is not marginal but rather central, since philology, unlike purely technical sciences, is always entangled with questions of meaning, authority, and legitimacy.

The roots of this issue are ancient. Plato, in the Theaetetus, raised the problem by defining knowledge as "justified true belief." If justification is essential, however, one must ask what justifies the justification, and so on ad infinitum (Plato, 1995). Aristotle sought to halt this regress in the Posterior Analytics by positing first principles (archai) as the foundation of demonstration (Aristotle, 2002). For philologists, this Aristotelian solution translates into the reliance on basic assumptions about language, transmission, and historical context. Yet these principles often prove to be unstable, since philological evidence is fragmentary and historically contingent.

In the modern era, Karl Lachmann's *stemmatic method* (a stemma being the genealogical tree of manuscript transmission). provides a striking example of the regress problem. His genealogical approach presupposes the existence of an archetype, yet reconstructing that archetype requires interpretive decisions about variants, which in turn require further contextual justification (Lachmann, 1850). The justification of one stemma is never final, since it depends on a chain of comparative readings, conjectures, and historical reconstructions. Similarly, Erich Auerbach's "mimesis" demonstrates how philological analysis often moves in a circular fashion: one text is explained through another, and the justification of interpretation is endlessly deferred (Auerbach, 2003).

Contemporary hermeneutics has embraced this difficulty rather than denying it. Gadamer, for example, acknowledges the hermeneutic circle, where understanding always presupposes prior prejudices that must themselves be re-interpreted in light of the text (Gadamer, 2004). This circularity is not a flaw but a productive dynamic. Yet, even here, the regress issue persists: the interpreter must justify her own horizon of understanding, but that horizon is itself historically situated, requiring further justification. As Gadamer reminds us, "understanding is always interpretation, and hence involves the constant movement of the whole and the part" (Gadamer, 2004). This formulation grounds TNK's notion of suspension within the hermeneutic process: nullification acknowledges the same circularity but refuses to demand its closure.

Concrete cases make this clearer. The interpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh, reconstructed from fragmentary cuneiform tablets, illustrates how regress operates in practice. Each proposed translation of a damaged line requires linguistic justification, which is based on comparative evidence from Akkadian or Sumerian, which in turn requires further assumptions about proto-languages and cultural context. At some point, the justificatory chain must be halted—either arbitrarily, through scholarly consensus, or by dogmatic appeal to authority. Edward Said's critique of Orientalist philology exposes how cultural and political biases often fill this gap, reinforcing that regress is not merely epistemic but also ideological (Said, 2003).

Here the TNK introduces a significant innovation. By means of nullification, TNK suspends the demand for absolute justificatory closure. Instead of pursuing an impossible ultimate foundation, it treats interpretations as provisional engagements, valid within their contextual limits but not binding beyond them. This does not imply arbitrariness or relativism; rather, it recognizes that philological work operates within horizons of possibility rather than absolute certainty.

Nullification thus reconfigures the regress problem: the chain of justifications no longer needs to terminate in dogma or extend infinitely. It is instead interrupted by suspension—an acknowledgment that interpretation can be both rigorous and limited. In digital humanities, for instance, Franco Moretti's method of "distant reading" provides large-scale patterns without requiring exhaustive justification of each micro-level decision (Moretti, 2013). Under TNK, such methods can be appreciated without anxiety about their lack of absolute foundation.

In sum, the regress problem reveals the tension between the philosophical demand for justification and the practical limits of philological work. While traditional approaches either attempted to end the regress through first principles (Aristotle, Lachmann) or embraced its circularity (Gadamer), TNK proposes nullification as a way out of the dilemma. By suspending the

demand for unassailable justification, TNK provides philology with a flexible but non-dogmatic framework for engaging texts —one that is especially relevant in the plural, digital, and globalized landscape of contemporary humanities.

Authenticity and the Limits of Textual Reconstruction

The pursuit of authenticity is one of the most enduring concerns in philology. From antiquity to the present, philologists have sought to recover the "true" or "original" form of texts transmitted through copies, translations, and revisions. Yet authenticity itself is a deeply problematic concept: it presupposes a stable essence of the text, but the historical reality of transmission suggests constant change, adaptation, and reinterpretation. This raises the philosophical question: what does it mean for a text to be authentic?

Ancient philologists already faced this tension. Cicero, in *De Oratore*, emphasized fidelity to the author's intent as the guiding criterion of authenticity (Cicero, 2002). Aristotle, in his Rhetoric, also treated authenticity as the accurate preservation of communicative acts (Aristotle, 2005). These early reflections framed authenticity as rooted in the authorial origin. However, textual transmission in antiquity was already fluid—oral traditions, scribal interventions, and rhetorical adaptations made it difficult to isolate an "original."

Modern philology sought to resolve this problem through systematic methods. Lachmann's stemmatics (Lachmann, 1850) constructed genealogical trees of manuscripts, assuming a recoverable archetype from which extant versions derived. This method gave philology its scientific aura, but it also revealed its limits: stemmas rely on conjecture, and the supposed archetype is itself a hypothesis, never fully accessible. Ernst Robert Curtius challenged this obsession with originals, emphasizing instead the historical evolution of literary forms, where authenticity resides not in a static origin but in cultural continuity (Curtius, 1990). As Curtius observed, "literary forms do not die; they change their function" (Curtius, 1990, p. 30). This dynamic understanding of form parallels TNK's rejection of a static authenticity and its embrace of functional historicity.

From a broader literary-theoretical perspective, the search for authenticity mirrors what later critics identified as *essentialist bias*—the belief in a recoverable, self-identical origin. Russian Formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky and Yuri Tynyanov reframed this issue by emphasizing technique and transformation rather than origin or essence, while Reception theorists like Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss located authenticity in the act of reading itself. TNK's nullification aligns with these shifts: it releases interpretation from the fixation on an unassailable source and treats textual reality as historically and pragmatically constituted.

Philosophical critiques pushed this further. Jacques Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, destabilized the very concept of origin, showing that texts are marked by *différance*—a perpetual deferral of meaning (Derrida, 1976). For Derrida, authenticity is an *illusion*, since the text never closes upon itself but is always open to reinterpretation. He already destabilized the notion of an origin by insisting that "the origin of meaning is already affected by the trace, by the movement of *différance*" (Derrida, 1976, p. 61). TNK radicalizes this insight by treating origin not as deferred but as nullified — suspended without loss of interpretive activity.

Umberto Eco, in *The Limits of Interpretation*, offered a mediating view: while over-interpretation should be avoided, authenticity must be treated as semiotic and pragmatic rather than metaphysical (Eco, 1990). Echoing TNK's pragmatism, Eco maintained that "interpretation is not the search for an ultimate meaning but the tracing of a path of use" (Eco, 1990, p. 27).

Concrete cases again illustrate the dilemma. The multiple folios of Shakespeare's plays, for example, present variant lines, stage directions, and even endings. Which version is authentic—the First Folio, the Quartos, or a hypothetical "lost" manuscript? Similar challenges arise in classical texts like Homer's Iliad, where oral tradition resists any notion of a single original. *The Dead Sea Scrolls* also exemplify how multiple textual traditions coexist, undermining the idea of one authoritative version.

Here, the TNK intervenes with nullification. Instead of seeking absolute authenticity, TNK suspends the demand for an unassailable "original." Texts are engaged as dynamic entities—plural, layered, and historically contingent. This does not diminish philological rigor but liberates it from the impossible task of ultimate recovery. Under TNK, authenticity is treated as contextual authenticity: a working construct for specific scholarly aims rather than a metaphysical truth.

Digital philology provides a practical example. The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) encodes multiple layers of textual information, allowing scholars to represent variant readings, annotations, and historical shifts simultaneously (TEI Consortium, 2021). Instead of choosing a single authentic text, editors create digital editions that embrace plurality. TNK's nullification aligns with this practice: rather than striving for a definitive original, it validates authenticity as a provisional construct, useful but not absolute.

This perspective also converges with Larry Laudan's pragmatic account of *scientific progress*, which evaluates theories not by their resemblance to reality but by their *problem-solving capacity* (Laudan, 1977). Laudan redefines scientific progress as a process of problem-solving rather than truth-approximation. He argues that science evolves through the capacity of its theories to resolve both empirical and conceptual difficulties, rather than by approaching an objective representation of reality. This view anticipates the logic of the TNK, which similarly measures the success of a conceptual framework by its ability to dissolve contradictions rather than reflect an external — absolute — truth. Similarly, TNK judges philological methods by their capacity to clarify and engage texts within contextual limits, rather than by their fidelity to an absolute original

Beneath this discussion lies a persistent philosophical tension between literary essentialism and its various alternatives. Essentialist traditions—from classical philology to structuralist reconstruction—presuppose the existence of a stable textual essence or origin to be recovered through interpretation. In contrast, the TNK rejects such assumptions, aligning instead with approaches that expose the contextual and pragmatic arbitrariness of textual foundations. Accordingly, this study employs traditional perspectives as a background against which to develop a meta-analytical framework of nullification, seeking to demonstrate how TNK dissolves the essentialist premise itself.

Russian formalism: Viktor Shklovsky (1976) argued that the value of literature lies not in any inherent or "essential" meaning, but in its formal operations — especially the technique of ostranenie (defamiliarization), which makes ordinary

perception strange and renews the reader's attention. Thus, the aesthetic function is procedural and relational, depending on how form disrupts automatized perception rather than on what the text "is". Also, Yury Tynyanov (1977) developed a systemic and evolutionary model of literature, emphasizing how each literary work functions within a dynamic literary system that interacts with other social systems. Literary value, for him, is determined by the relations among functions and devices that shift over time — not by intrinsic essence.

Reception theory: Wolfgang Iser (1978) redefined textual meaning as a product of reader interaction rather than a fixed property of the text. His notion of the "implied reader" situates interpretation as an act of concretization, where meaning emerges through the reader's active participation. This perspective rejects essentialism by locating textual value in pragmatic reception. Also, Hans Robert Jauss introduced the concept of the "horizon of expectations", arguing that the historical reception of works transforms their value. Literature evolves through dialogues between texts and audiences, not through timeless essences. Value is historical, relational, and subject to change.

Functionalist/Polysystem theory: Even-Zohar (1990) proposed the Polysystem theory, according to which literature operates within a network of interacting subsystems (genres, traditions, social institutions). Textual value depends on the function a text performs in this dynamic structure — for instance, whether it is central or peripheral within the system. Again, this is a relational and functional (not essentialist) approach.

Sociology of culture: Bourdieu's (1992) concept of the literary field explains cultural production as a system of positions and relations where agents (writers, critics, institutions) compete for symbolic capital. The value of a text results from its position within this field, not from intrinsic properties. This sociological perspective replaces essentialism with a relational and pragmatic model of value.

TNK's nullification mediates between these poles: it neither reaffirms essentialist certainty nor dissolves rigor into relativism, but situates interpretation within the *functional horizon of its own possibilities*.

Thus, TNK reframes authenticity: not as the recovery of an essence, but as the recognition of texts' ineluctable historicity. This frees philology from dogmatic claims and opens it to a richer, more exploratory engagement with textual traditions.

Normativity in Philological Methods

Philological practice is guided by methodological principles — standards of textual criticism, linguistic reconstruction, historical contextualization, and interpretive rigor. These methods ensure reliability and scholarly coherence, but they also raise fundamental philosophical problems: what justifies the methods themselves?

The history of philology shows how methods have always been both enabling and constraining. Aristarchus of Samothrace, in his work on Homer, applied critical marks (semeia) to guide emendation, establishing early standards of consistency and clarity (Pfeiffer, 1968). Yet even these marks presupposed assumptions about what counted as proper poetry or authoritative style. Plato, in Ion, already questioned whether philologists (then rhapsodes) truly had knowledge or merely opinion based on convention (Plato, 2000).

In modern times, Saussure's structuralism redefined philological methods by focusing on language as a synchronic system (Saussure, 2006). This introduced new methodological rigor but also sidelined diachronic and cultural aspects. Lachmann's stemmatic method exemplified normative strictness, but its rigidity invited criticism for imposing artificial structures on living traditions. Foucault later argued that such methods are not neutral but operate as power structures that discipline knowledge, shaping what counts as legitimate philology (Foucault, 2008). Edward Said extended this critique to cultural politics, showing how philological methods often encoded Eurocentric biases (Said, 2003).

The *circularity of normativity* becomes evident: methods require justification, yet justification is always carried out through other methods. In digital philology, for instance, algorithms for stylometry or authorship attribution (Juola, 2008) operate with built-in assumptions about statistical significance and linguistic regularity. The results are persuasive only within those normative frameworks, raising the same regress problem encountered in interpretation.

Comparable reflections appear in the philosophy of science, where (Kuhn, 1970) conceived theoretical change as successive paradigm shifts that redefine what counts as legitimate knowledge, while (Lakatos, 1978) proposed a more rationalist view of progress through competing research programs whose value lies in their heuristic success rather than simple accumulation of truths. Their insights echo TNK's view that norms and methods are *historically contingent* instruments, gaining legitimacy from their contextual efficacy. In this sense, TNK translates the lesson of epistemological pluralism into the philological domain: methodological rules are not abolished but recognized as *provisional* tools that evolve with the problems they address.

Here, TNK's nullification again provides a way forward. By suspending the demand for ultimate justification, TNK treats methods as provisional tools rather than absolute standards. This does not undermine philology's rigor but instead highlights the instrumental nature of methods—they serve specific scholarly goals and may evolve as those goals change.

Franco Moretti's "distant reading" illustrates this pragmatic orientation: by privileging quantitative over qualitative analysis, Moretti redefined literary-historical methods, challenging the centrality of "close reading" (Moretti, 2013). From the standpoint of TNK, such a shift is legitimate not because it can be justified against an ultimate standard, but because nullification releases the anxiety of foundational validation. Methods become adaptable, hybrid, and context-dependent.

In practice, this fosters a pluralist philology: traditional close reading and textual emendation coexist with digital corpus analysis and cultural critique. TNK does not abolish methods but liberates them from dogmatism, allowing philology to reinvent itself across new media and global contexts.

TNK in Digital Humanities: A Practical Application

The rise of the digital humanities has radically transformed philology. What was once a discipline centered on manuscripts, libraries, and textual criticism has now expanded into a vast field of computational analysis, corpus linguistics, and digital editions. This transformation has multiplied both the possibilities and the philosophical challenges of philological work. It is

here that the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK) shows its practical strength: by applying nullification, philologists can navigate the epistemological uncertainties of digital methods without collapsing into either skepticism or dogmatism.

The digital turn in philology can be traced to projects like the Perseus Digital Library (Crane, 1998), which sought to digitize ancient Greek and Latin texts, making them globally accessible. These projects expanded access but also raised questions about authenticity: does a digitized version of Homer's Iliad carry the same authority as a critical print edition? Does digitization preserve or distort the materiality of the original manuscript? In practice, digitization often involves editorial choices—decisions about encoding, markup, and translation—that shape the very nature of the "text." The philosophical problem is that justification for these choices easily slides into circularity: digital editions justify themselves by reference to digital standards, which themselves require justification.

Modern computational methods exacerbate this issue. Inspired by Saussure's structuralist emphasis on systems (Saussure, 2006), algorithms now model linguistic evolution, perform stylometric analysis, and trace intertextual patterns. Authorship attribution tools, for instance, use statistical measures to claim certainty in identifying an author (Juola, 2008). Yet their reliability depends on assumptions about the dataset, the representativeness of corpora, and the validity of statistical methods—all of which are contestable. Digital methods thus risk replacing one kind of dogmatism (the archetype of Lachmann's philology) with another (the algorithm as unquestioned authority).

Franco Moretti's "distant reading" provides a striking case of both innovation and controversy. By analyzing vast corpora computationally rather than focusing on individual texts, Moretti proposed a new paradigm for literary history (Moretti, 2013). While this method has revealed fascinating patterns, critics argue that it oversimplifies meaning, ignoring the richness of close reading. Here, again, the demand for justification—why distant reading should be privileged over traditional methods—leads to a regress of methodological defenses.

TNK intervenes by nullifying the demand for absolute justification. Instead of asking whether digital methods provide the "true" or "final" interpretation of a text, TNK suspends this demand and treats such methods as provisional tools, useful for exploring but never exhausting textual meaning. Under nullification, the digital edition of the *Vulgate Bible*, for example, need not claim to be more authentic than a manuscript-based edition. It is simply another provisional engagement with the text—one that enables new forms of analysis, such as natural language processing (NLP) to trace semantic shifts in biblical vocabulary across centuries.

Another application lies in multi-layered digital editions, where XML markup encodes not only a base text but also its variants, commentaries, and translations (TEI Consortium, 2021). These editions embody the TNK approach: they do not pretend to restore a single definitive text but present multiple possibilities simultaneously. Nullification allows scholars to engage with these variants without being burdened by the impossible demand of identifying the "one true original."

Furthermore, TNK addresses the biases of digital humanities. Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (Said, 2003) reminds us that corpora often reflect Western canons, marginalizing non-European traditions. Nullification helps here by suspending the claim that any corpus or method can be justified as complete or definitive. Instead, it encourages philologists to recognize the provisionality and partiality of their datasets and to expand them with awareness of their limitations.

Thus, TNK reconfigures digital philology in three ways:

– Authenticity: it suspends the demand for an ultimate original, validating multiple digital representations.

– Methodological justification: it nullifies the regress of defending computational methods, allowing digital tools to be used pragmatically.

– Bias and inclusion: it acknowledges the limits of corpora and encourages openness rather than dogmatic closure.

In this light, TNK does not compete with digital methods but provides a philosophical framework that liberates them from impossible justificatory burdens. Digital humanities, with its experimental and innovative spirit, becomes the perfect domain for TNK's practical application, since nullification not only clarifies its philosophical challenges but also empowers its creative potential.

Objections and Reflections

No theoretical framework can be applied to philology without facing objections, and the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK) is no exception. Nullification, as a suspension of justificatory demands, may appear to some scholars as liberating, but to others it risks undermining the very foundations of philology as a rigorous discipline. Engaging with these concerns is essential to avoid the impression that TNK simply replaces one dogma with another.

1. The relativism objection

One of the most pressing objections is that TNK collapses into relativism. If nullification suspends the demand for justification, what prevents philology from accepting any interpretation or edition as equally valid? For a discipline built on methodological rigor, this seems dangerous: without clear criteria, the difference between scholarly philology and arbitrary speculation would dissolve.

Response: TNK does not reject rigor; it rejects the absolute demand for justificatory closure. Interpretations and methods remain subject to evidence, comparison, and reasoned argument, but these are treated as provisional tools rather than final foundations. In this sense, TNK resembles the pragmatic stance of Curtius, who recognized the historical provisionality of literary forms (Curtius, 1990). By nullifying ultimate certainty, TNK does not abolish standards but situates them within a more flexible horizon.

2. The erosion of tradition objection

Another objection is that nullification undermines the philological tradition itself. Classical philology, from Aristarchus to Lachmann, has prided itself on its pursuit of authenticity and methodological precision. Suspending justificatory demands might appear to disrespect or weaken these traditions, reducing them to mere options among many.

Response: TNK is not a rejection of tradition but a framework for understanding its limits. Even Aristarchus's critical marks, though influential, involved interpretive decisions that cannot claim absolute certainty (Pfeiffer, 1968). By recognizing

this, TNK frees philology from dogmatic veneration of its past, while still valuing its rigor. Rather than eroding tradition, TNK allows it to coexist with new approaches, such as digital humanities, without being trapped by the illusion of final authority.

3. The applicability objection

Skeptics may argue that TNK is too abstract to have real practical value. Concepts like nullification may sound philosophically intriguing but risk remaining detached from the everyday tasks of philologists—collating manuscripts, producing editions, or analyzing linguistic shifts.

Response: On the contrary, TNK directly addresses practical challenges. Consider the production of critical editions: editors often face irreconcilable variants and must make judgment calls. TNK legitimates the acceptance of plurality through nullification, aligning with practices such as the TEI model for encoding multiple textual layers (TEI Consortium, 2021). In digital philology, nullification provides a philosophical rationale for using computational tools experimentally, without requiring ultimate justification of their epistemic validity. Far from being abstract, TNK clarifies the conditions under which philologists already work.

4. The rigor objection

A related concern is that TNK might diminish philology's scientific credibility in the broader academic landscape. Without a commitment to firm justification, philology could appear less rigorous compared to the natural sciences, which rely on empirical testing and repeatability.

Response: This objection presupposes that philology must mirror the natural sciences to be legitimate. Yet philology has always operated differently, navigating textual, cultural, and historical complexities that resist experimental verification. Nietzsche himself, as a philologist, criticized the illusion of objectivity in the humanities (Nietzsche, 1999). TNK acknowledges this difference, granting philology its own form of rigor—rooted not in unassailable foundations but in reflective awareness of its limits.

5. The conservatism objection

Conversely, some might object that TNK is too conservative, since nullification avoids the radical critique of meaning advanced by post-structuralists like Derrida. From this angle, TNK might be seen as a middle ground that neither fully embraces nor fully rejects philological traditions, and therefore lacks transformative force.

Response: TNK is neither conservative nor radical, but structural. It does not deny *différance* or cultural critique; instead, it situates them within a framework that avoids collapsing into either endless regress or dogmatic certainty. By redefining the conditions of justification, TNK provides philology with a durable conceptual foundation—not by eliminating contradictions, but by neutralizing them through nullification. In this sense, it offers transformation not by negation but by reorientation.

6. Broader reflection

Ultimately, objections to TNK highlight the discipline's own anxieties: fears of losing rigor, fears of relativism, and fears of marginalization in the era of digital humanities. TNK does not resolve these anxieties by offering a new absolute. Instead, it shows that these anxieties arise from the mistaken belief that philology requires ultimate justification. By nullifying this demand, TNK enables philology to embrace its provisionality with confidence.

In practical terms, nullification can serve as a methodological attitude within philological practice. When editors confront conflicting manuscript variants, TNK recommends suspending the demand for a single definitive justification and instead producing editions that transparently encode *plurality*—an approach already realized in TEI-based digital projects, where multiple textual states coexist without hierarchy. Likewise, when computational models or stylometric algorithms yield probabilistic results, nullification legitimates their use as heuristic rather than absolute. It allows scholars to employ such tools experimentally, acknowledging their partiality while exploiting their explanatory power.

More broadly, TNK offers a reflective discipline for moments of interpretive impasse. It transforms uncertainty from a methodological flaw into an epistemic virtue, enabling philologists to navigate between skepticism and dogmatism. By doing so, TNK converts the limits of justification into a resource for creativity and rigor alike.

In interdisciplinary contexts, this reflective stance allows philology to engage productively with linguistics, literary theory, and cultural studies. It bridges methodological divides—between close and distant reading, between traditional and digital philology—by affirming their legitimacy as provisional rather than final. TNK thus secures philology's relevance in the twenty-first century, not by insulating it from critique but by equipping it to face critique without fear of collapse.

While the preceding sections have established TNK as a philosophical response to the epistemological impasses of philology, it is equally important to consider its practical implications for textual analysis. The question is not merely whether TNK provides a coherent theoretical framework, but whether it can actively guide the interpretation of literary works. In this regard, the following section outlines how TNK's principle of nullification can operate as an analytical tool, reshaping the way literary texts are read, compared, and justified within the broader field of philological inquiry.

TNK and the Analysis of Literary Texts

Beyond its epistemological implications, TNK can also operate as a practical and *semi-logical* method of literary analysis, offering a new way to engage with texts without being constrained by the traditional demand for interpretive closure. A TNK reading proceeds by suspending the search for a final or "true" interpretation, focusing instead on the dynamics of justification that occur within both the literary work and its critical reception. Every interpretation—whether philological, structuralist, psychoanalytic, or deconstructive—is treated not as a solution but as a moment of assertion whose authority can itself be nullified, relativized, and recontextualized within broader historical and theoretical frameworks. The aim is not to deny interpretation but to recognize its contingency and to expose the circularity by which every theory eventually legitimates itself.

From a methodological standpoint, TNK's interpretive procedure can be described in quasi-logical terms. Each literary interpretation ($I_1, I_2, I_3\ldots$) may be regarded as a propositional statement whose validity depends on the framework that sustains it. Traditional logic demands that a proposition be either true or false within a fixed system; TNK, however, introduces a third logical operator—*nullifiaction* ($\emptyset$)—which *interrupts* the binary relation between affirmation and negation. Within literary

analysis, this means that when a critical claim reaches the limits of its justification, it does not collapse into contradiction but is momentarily nullified: held in suspension as a contingent expression of a larger interpretive system. This operation halts the infinite regress of justifications without appealing to dogmatic closure, turning interpretation into a finite yet open logical sequence. In other words, TNK constitutes a *logic of provisionality*, where the value of an assertion is measured not by its permanence but by its capacity to remain coherent under suspension.

This logical structure can be illustrated through practical examples. In approaching a classical tragedy such as Hamlet, a TNK analysis would not attempt to determine the definitive meaning of Hamlet's hesitation. Instead, it would examine how successive interpretive systems—*romantic* (melancholy as genius), *existential* (paralysis of will), *psychoanalytic* (repressed desire), *structuralist* (narrative deferral), and *historicist* (political paralysis)—constitute a recursive chain of propositions (P_1, P_2, P_3, …). Each seeks justification in relation to the others, but none can terminate the sequence without appealing to an external criterion of truth. TNK introduces nullification (Ø) as a procedural stop that reveals the underlying logic of justification itself. In this way, the interpretive history of Hamlet becomes *as significant as the play*, for it exposes the epistemological economy of literary criticism—the way meaning is continually produced, exhausted, and reborn through justification. That is, the system through which interpretive claims circulate, acquire authority, and are later nullified within successive theoretical frameworks.

The same mechanism applies to modernist composition. In T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land (1922), fragmentation is not merely stylistic but ontological: the poem's succession of incongruent voices, languages, and cultural codes continuously generates and revokes meaning. Each segment asserts a provisional coherence only to dissolve it through juxtaposition, thereby performing a structural logic of interruption. From the perspective of the TNK, however, this mechanism operates at a lower epistemic level: while The Waste Land exposes incongruence as intrinsic to human perception and cultural order, TNK advances a meta-analytic recognition of this very condition. It does not merely stage the collapse of coherence but assumes it as the fundamental measure from which all interpretation proceeds. Thus, whereas Eliot's poem dramatizes the fragmentation of meaning, TNK articulates the philosophical honesty of knowing that such fragmentation is inevitable. Similarly, in postmodern or digital texts—where authorship, textual integrity, and interpretive authority are decentralized—the TNK framework formalizes nullification as an analytical tool for mapping networks of partial coherence rather than hierarchies of truth.

In this sense, TNK transforms interpretation into *meta-interpretation*: it turns literary analysis into an inquiry about the very conditions under which interpretation claims legitimacy. Rather than adding another critical school, TNK functions as a *reflective* and *logical layer* through which any interpretive paradigm—formalism, hermeneutics, semiotics, or digital humanities—can examine its own limits without collapsing into relativism. By formalizing the act of nullification, TNK replaces the pursuit of final meaning with the disciplined recognition of meaning's provisionality, offering both a conceptual and a methodological contribution to literary study. It enables criticism to operate with rigor even when certainty is no longer the goal, thus redefining interpretation not as the fixation of truth but as the logical, ethical, and intellectual exercise of knowing how—and when—to suspend it.

Conclusion

Philology has always stood at the intersection of linguistic rigor and philosophical reflection. From Aristotle's analyses of mimesis to Nietzsche's critiques of scholarly pretension, from Lachmann's stemmatics to the experimental horizons of digital humanities, the discipline has sought to reconcile historical precision with the inescapable uncertainties of interpretation. This essay has argued that the Theory of Non-Knowledge (TNK) provides a powerful framework for addressing these perennial challenges.

By introducing the concept of nullification, TNK directly engages with the three great philosophical problems of philology: regress in interpretation, the quest for authenticity, and the normativity of methods. In each case, the demand for ultimate justification has historically generated impasses—whether through infinite regress, circularity, or dogmatic closure. Nullification does not solve these problems by providing new foundations; instead, it suspends the need for foundations altogether, opening space for a provisional, dynamic, and flexible engagement with texts.

In the case of interpretation, TNK prevents the regress problem from paralyzing philology, allowing interpretive practices to operate without the illusion of final certainty. Regarding authenticity, nullification reframes textual reconstruction not as a metaphysical recovery of an original essence, but as a historically situated negotiation among variants, traditions, and cultural contexts. With respect to normativity, TNK transforms methodological standards from rigid laws into pragmatic instruments, useful for specific purposes but never binding as absolutes.

The practical application of TNK becomes especially visible in the digital humanities. In this domain, philologists face new challenges: the authority of algorithms, the biases of corpora, and the problem of representing multiple textual traditions in digital form. Nullification legitimates digital methods as exploratory tools without forcing them into the role of absolute arbiters of textual truth. This philosophical support enables innovation while preserving philology's critical self-awareness.

The objections to TNK—whether charges of relativism, fears of eroding tradition, or doubts about practical applicability—reveal the very anxieties that have long haunted philology. By confronting these objections, TNK shows its value as a reflective framework: it does not eliminate difficulty but provides a conceptual lens through which difficulty becomes manageable rather than paralyzing.

The originality of TNK lies in this shift of perspective. Unlike skepticism, which denies the possibility of knowledge, or relativism, which levels all interpretations, TNK constructs a positive space of non-knowledge: an epistemic stance where rigor and flexibility coexist, where methods are employed without being absolutized, and where philology can move forward without the burden of impossible demands.

Thus, TNK does not replace philology's traditions, nor does it dissolve them into postmodern uncertainty. It reorients the discipline, showing that its strength lies not in the pursuit of unattainable certainty, but in the creative and responsible use of

provisional knowledge. In this way, TNK secures a future for philology that is both faithful to its past and open to new horizons—particularly in the context of digital and globalized scholarship.

By engaging both the classical tradition of Curtius and the modern perspectives of Shklovsky, Iser, Laudan, and Even-Zohar, TNK positions itself at a level that transcends the opposition between essentialist and functionalist approaches. From this higher epistemic standpoint, their conflict appears as a localized manifestation of a broader cognitive arbitrariness. In this sense, TNK offers a philosophical reconciliation—not by merging the two paradigms, but by revealing their shared dependence on the same illusion of stability. What essentialism posits as fixed and what functionalism treats as mutable are, within TNK's view, equally provisional expressions of the same non-totalizable order of thought.

Philology, then, emerges not as a discipline threatened by its philosophical challenges, but as one enriched by them. With TNK, it gains a conceptual ally that transforms impasse into possibility, anxiety into reflection, and limitation into strength.

In conclusion, the logical structure of TNK offers a renewed foundation for philological and literary inquiry. By transforming the regress of justification into a formal system of nullification, TNK converts interpretive uncertainty into a coherent mode of reasoning. It does not reject logic but redefines it: from a tool of verification into a method of provisional coherence. Within this framework, literary analysis gains a new precision — one that operates not by affirming or denying meaning, but by regulating the movement between them through the operator of the nullification core. In this way, TNK establishes a rigorous logic of non-knowledge: a system in which the absence of final truth becomes the very condition for interpretive depth, critical autonomy, and philosophical clarity.

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