

# The Earth as Home: World Literature and the Task of Philology in the Anthropocene

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## Abstract

“In any event, our philological home is the Earth,” Erich Auerbach wrote in “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” – an essay published in 1952, in the aftermath of a world war that had devastated the cultural heartlands of the Old World and displaced tens of millions of people, including Auerbach himself. The aim of this talk is to explore what relevance his plea for a cosmopolitan philology might have today, at a time when the same globalizing forces which Auerbach saw as corroding the “inner bases of national existence” and imposing a uniform way of life across the globe are still fully operative, but have also engendered a new kind of danger Auerbach did not foresee. Increasingly, scholarship in the humanities has begun to take note of the idea that the Earth has entered a new geological epoch shaped by anthropogenic changes which are beginning to make the planet itself *unheimlich* or “uncanny” – not only in the sense Amitav Ghosh has recently suggested, i.e. that we are compelled to reckon with the liveness of material forces the modern mindset had taught us to view as fundamentally passive and docile, but also in the more basic sense that it is becoming less able to serve as a home for human and nonhuman beings alike. What role can the study of literature play in our coming to terms with this new dispensation? Which aspects of Auerbach’s vision of an enlightened humanism can remain relevant in the Anthropocene?