Nietzsche and Greek Studies

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THE CAREER OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE is of special interest and importance in the history of classical learning; in it we may see, magnified to great proportions, the process which is at the heart of every successful classical education. For in Nietzsche an eager and penetrating sensibility was awakened to a re-evaluation of his own beliefs, and of those of his society, under the impetus of the philosophic spirit of the ancient world. The bulk of Nietzschean scholarship has been devoted,[1] and rightly so, to an examination of the mature works of the last decade of Nietzsche's active life; nevertheless, in view of the momentous consequences which Nietzsche's classical studies had for the spirit and intention of his philosophy, it will be valuable briefly to survey his career as student and teacher and to point out the appearance and development of those interests which were the product of his sympathetic insight and powerful enthusiasm.

[1]An essay, couched in a somewhat dithyrambic style, which discusses the development of the young Nietzsche is "Der Weg des fruehen Nietzsche" by Heinz Heimsoeth in *Die Neue Rundschau* 50 (1940) 592-602. The author uses, as the basis of his biographical sketch, the eight volumes of essays, notes, and letters published between 1933 and 1940 by the C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung of Munich from material reposing in the Nietzsche Archives; the official title of this collection is *Friedrich Nietzche, Werke und Briefe: Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe.* The fault of this essay, perhaps attributable to the influence of the National Socialist regime, is that it is a one-sided examination of Nietzsche's development in the context of his German cultural inheritance; this kind of special approach of intellectual influences is, of course, entirely valid, but only provided that the limitation is clearly stated. Heimsoeth does not do this, and anyone who has examined the collection which he used, and observed the overwhelmingly philological character of this *Nachlass,* will be amazed at the sparse treatment of this element in what purports to be a "geistige Jugend-Biographie." Another fault, certainly, is an exaggeration of Nietzsche's intellectual isolation during this period.

Another work, more specifically on the subject at hand, is Ernst Howald's study *Friedrich Nietzsche und die Klassische Philologie* (Gotha 1920). This examines the "struggle" between Nietzsche and the philologists, but has been largley outmoded since the publication of the Munich collection. This collection will be used in the present essay, and will be referred to as the *Gesamtausgabe.*

Nietzsche was trained for the profession of classical philologist in an age when scholars were securing the foundations of a great new science, and we may speculate that the intellectual boldness and integrity of his philological masters were for the young Nietzsche the first intimations of qualities which were to become indispensable to his notion of the superior man. At the celebrated Schulpforta his early training was conducted with a strenuousness which seems scarcely credible today by masters who were, in addition, accomplished and serious scholars; among their number were two men, Wilhelm Corssen and Hermann Peter, whose researches still entitle them to a small but secure position of honor in the history of Latin studies. As was usual, the authors occupying a preponderant position in this curriculum were the Romans, of whose intentions a more than casual understanding was developed by the use of the Latin essay; these essays explored, for the most part, notions of ancient historiography and analyzed the ethical intentions of various character portraits found in the ancient historians. The bias of this curriculum was, then, preponderantly Latin. But even so, Nietzsche's enduring sympathy with the ancient Hellenes was clearly manifesting itself in this early work. If one were to single out from this body of juvenilia anything which was outstanding with respect to precocious insight and accomplished literary and scholarly technique, it would be his essays devoted to Greek subjects. Of these there are two which are especially striking, both having been written in the latter part of his last year at the Schulpforta. The earlier was a kind of senior thesis whose completion entitled the young Nietzsche to a certificate equivalent to our diploma. This essay,[2] ambitious in scope, was a detailed and multifaceted examination of the first choral ode of the *Oedipus Rex*. Of special interest in it are his speculations on the use of choral music in Greek tragedy, an investigation which also considered such subjects as musical effects and manner of performance. Here, certainly, is an early effort to solve an aesthetic problem whose first major formulation was to disturb the scholarly world when the *Birth of Tragedy* was published eight years later. In a manner which would remain characteristic of Nietzsche, this essay express-

[2]"Primum Oedipodis regis carmen choricum," *Gesamtausgabe*, 2. 364-399.

es, next to the germ of a future insight, a belief which the more mature Nietzsche will soon have rejected with all the vehemence of his tragic honesty. For in his analysis of Oedipus' guilt, he advances the notion that Oedipus, himself guiltless, is the tool of a divine justice eager to avenge the cruelty of Laius' and Iocasta's exposure of their young child. Such "justifications" of human suffering would surely have awakened in the older Nietzsche sentiments of disgust, since he came, in time, completely to reject the mechanisms of a divine teleology. As a final item of this period, we should mention a short but very percipient analysis[3] of the relation of Alcibiades' praise of Socrates to the other speeches of the *Symposium*.

In the autumn of 1864 young Nietzsche, just turned twenty, matriculated at the University of Bonn with the intention of studying theology, a project which was soon discarded in favor of a career in classical philology. This decision, which was inevitable on grounds of temperament, was hastened all the more by the imposing figures of Friedrich Ritschl and Otto Jahn, who were at this time professors of classical philology at the Rhineland university. He at once immersed himself in the study of an age which was to remain for him a convincing counter-ideal to those values of Christianity by which he considered the modern world to have been corrupted. This period he called the Tragic Age of Greece; its presiding spirit was Dionysus, symbol of the everlasting fertility and vitality of human life. Accordingly, the whole of his philological work with almost no exceptions is concerned with the period of Greek thought and art which ended with the death of tragedy at the end of the fifth cenury.

His investigations of this period were wide-ranging and conducted with the greatest scholarly care. In his studies of the early Greek epic he saw the establishment of an accurate chronology[4] as a necessary prerequisite to a critical account of this genre. The Greek lyric poets he also found congenial, no doubt because of the aristocratic refinement and restraint of their art; he was especially

[3]"Ueber das Verältnis der Rede des Alcibiades zu den übrigen Reden des platonischen Symposions," *ibid.*, 2.420-424.

[4]"Chronologie der Epiker," etc., *ibid.*, 4.12-31.

sympathetic with Theognis[5] by virtue of the strongly anti-popular sentiments of this lonely and self-conscious exile. A still valuable introduction to the history of the Greek lyric poets is a series of lectures[6] put in its final shape the year before his retirement in 1879 from the chair of classical philology at Basel.

These investigations were, of course, subsidiary, and the bulk of his creative effort was diverted into a study of the pre-Socratics whom he valued as the great representatives in the history of Greek thought of the tragic outlook. This outlook he defined as a will to understanding the totality of existence, even in its most cruelly paradoxical manifestations; a position which he considered the Socratic ethic, with its dogmatic levelling of all contradictions, to have completely undermined. Although Nietzsche was eventually to publish his insights into the thought of this period in a series of essays[7] written in a most abstract and figurative style, he was nevertheless quite willing to pursue his preliminary studies, with a good scholar's conscience, by means of a detailed examination of ancient *testimonia.* He saw that it was not possible to construct a valid history of ancient philosophy without a thorough understanding of the doxographical tradition; this conviction resulted in his first extensive publication,[8] a study of the sources of Diogenes Laertius. Nietzsche's student years at Leipzig, where he had followed Ritschl after the latter's rupture with the University of Bonn in 1865, and his first years at Basel were fruitful ones, witnessing the publication, in the distinguished *Rheinisches Museum*, of a series of articles on early Greek literature and thought. This sense of enthusiastic identification with his profession could not, however, last very long,[9] and the growing unorthodoxy of his procedure

[5]His first publication discussed the history of the text of this author in an article entitled "Zur Geschichte der Theognideischen Spruchsammlung," *RM* 22 (1867) 161-200.

[6]"Griechische Lyriker, Vorlesungen von Prof. Nietzsche," *Gesamtausgabe*, 5.369-426.

[7]This was *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen,* which received its final shape in 1875.

[8]"De Laertii Diogenis Fontibus," part I, *RM* 23 (1868) 632-653; part II, *RM* 24 (1869) 181-228.

[9]T. M. Campbell has discussed Nietzsche's relations with his academic colleagues in two excellent articles. The first, "Nietzsche and the Academic Mind," printed in the *PMLA* 62 (1947) 1183-1196, treats the vicissitudes of Nietzsche's relations with two of his Basel colleagues, Franz Overbeck and Jakob Burckhardt; he further traces the development of Erwin Rohde's increasing alienation from the atheism of Nietzsche's mature philosophy.

culminated in the publication of the *Birth of Tragedy* in 1872, an event which incited the young Wilamowitz to publish his angry review, *Zukunftsphilologie!*[10]

This was in 1872, but we may see in a moving self-portrait[11] written in 1868 an early indication that Nietzsche was bitterly aware of a destiny which would not let him rest content with the plaudits of the scholarly world:

> At this time the founding of the Philological Society took place. One evening, several students formerly at Bonn (of whom I was one) had been invited to Ritschl's home. After dinner our host, in animated conversation, planted the idea which was to prove the basis for the Philological Society. The women were just then in the next room, so that nothing disturbed the excited discourse of the man, who knew from experience what effectiveness and influence such groups could have. The thought took root with the four of us, i.e., Wisser, Roscher, Arnold and myself. Looking about in the circle of our acquaintances, we invited those whom we had chosen to the "deutsche Bierstube" for the purpose of setting up this society. Eight days later we had our first regular meeting. Being without a president for the first half year, we always chose a chairman from our midst at the beginning of the evening. And what animated and unrestrained debates they were! . . . It was on the 18th of January, 1866, that I delivered my first paper and thereby made, in a certain sense, my debut in the Classical Society. I had announced that I would talk on the final rescension of the *Theognidea.* Here, in the vaulted room, I was able, after overcoming my first shyness, to speak with force and emphasis, and I experienced the success of seeing my words treated with the greatest respect by my friends. Late that night, I came home, extraordinarily excited, and sat down at my desk, in order to write bitter words in my book of meditations and to eradicate from my consciousness, as much as I could, the vanity which I had so enjoyed.

After the publication of the *Birth of Tragedy,* Nietzsche entered the larger arena of European thought and ceased, strictly speaking, to be a classical philologist, a fact which ultimately justifies Wilamowitz's bitter attack. But although Nietzsche discarded the methods of classical philology in favor of a broad attack on the

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The other is more specific, and treats the growing dichotomy of Nietzsche's philological and philosophical intentions in the early years of his professorship at Basel ("Aspects of Nietzsche's Struggle with Philology," *Ger. Rev.* 12 [1937] 251-266).

[10]See J. H. Groth, "Wilamowitz-Möllendorf [sic] on Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*," J Hist Ideas 11 (1950) 179-190. Groth seeks to justify Wilamowitz's position on perhaps too lofty a level. In so doing, he places Nietzsche in the same class of thinkers as Spengler and Friedell — a conclusion few would accept.

[11]From "Rückblick auf meine zwei Leipziger Jahre," *Gesamtausgabe,* 3.299.

ideals of contemporary European society, the ancient Hellenes, as they were before the god Dionysus was mocked out of existence, remained for him the great exemplars of a powerful and honest life of thought and feeling.

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