

Overcoming Declinism: Style and Philology in Nietzsche

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1. Philology, declinism and the cultural significance of style

Nietzsche was first and foremost a philologist by training, schooled in the meticulous attention to stylistic analyses of the ancient authors as a basis for textual criticism. Stylistic exercises in Latin, Greek, and German were the backbone of his secondary and tertiary education. Nietzsche's views on both the historical and the contemporary discipline of critical scholarship, of which he himself had been an ardent student and subtle practitioner, are of paramount interest if we wish to make sense of the importance of style in his work. The philological study of style was itself a Greek, not a modern, invention: Hellas is not just Athens, Aeschylus, or Socrates. It is also Alexandria, the Museion, and the collation and exegesis of the Homeric poems. Style in the classical-philological tradition had always been understood not just as a technique of (written) composition, but also as a name for the totality of expression of a given genre, period, or position.

Nietzsche was arguably more at home in classical scholarship than in many classical texts from the history of philosophy. It is vital to appreciate the specific nature of the philological methods Nietzsche adhered to as a student in Naumburg, Bonn, and Leipzig, and as a professor in Basel. Since his early days at Schulpforta he had been immersed in what became known as the Bonn school, the most influential protagonist of which was Friedrich Ritschl, his teacher at Bonn and Leipzig and the mentor who secured him his early appointment in Switzerland, justified by his commanding display of pseudoepigraphical, conjectural, and source critical methods.¹

“It is not for nothing that one was a philologist, perhaps one is a philologist still,”² Nietzsche declares in one of his late prefaces. By leaving his university chair, he admitted defeat in the attempt to change the institution. Yet instead of instigating a new era of future philology out of the spirit of philosophy in the academy, he embarked on a project that almost exactly mirrored this plan, namely to devise a future philosophy at the premise of philology. In the course of his writings, philosophical and philological figures of thought converged in a way seldom seen in the history of ideas and perhaps not fully understood to this day.³

One of the cardinal puzzles of traditional classical scholarship had been the question of how and why Greco-Roman civilization had gone into decline and eventually disappeared as a cultural and political force. It was common to mirror the fate of its culture in stylistic developments that led from a Golden to a Silver age and eventually into decay. In his early philological thought, Nietzsche experimented with a variety of scenarios and explanations for the decline of the classical age. I will identify three models of the *Zugrundegehen* (going under) of Greece around the publication of his first book. Questions of style play an important role in these models, not as mere epiphenomena to more basic developments, but as substantive factors in themselves.

The first model I will call the *overstretching model*. “Greek culture [*Griechenthum*],” Nietzsche noted in the winter of 1869, “has to go under [*zu Grunde gehn*] after the Persian Wars.”⁴ Inspired by Jacob Burckhardt, this is an important motif. A one-sided focus on the state and the military compromised the fine balance, which had made the flowering of culture in the Greek city-states possible in the first place. Nietzsche interprets the fruitful competition between the various small city-states as the first victim of the Persian Wars and thus as the first step toward (cultural and ethical) decline.

The second model is his best-known one and can be characterized through Nietzsche’s expression of the *superfetation of the logical*.⁵ It forms the underlying argument of which the death of tragedy is but an instant. According to this model, the cause of the decline is theoretical man, personified by Socrates. His excess of reasoning had a similarly destructive effect as the Persian Wars: “The ancient world is destroyed by the ἄνθρωπος

θεωρητικός [theoretical man]. The Apollonian element once again distinguishes itself from the Dionysian, and now both degenerate. Consciousness and dull desire now oppose each other as enemy powers rioting within the same organism."⁶ It is easy to see that this is a question of style as much as of content. For the young Nietzsche, they are two sides of the same coin: *le style est la culture même*, to rephrase Buffon. Accordingly, the decline of Greece was prefigured in the gradual acceptance of a stylistic overload that led to its cultural mummification.⁷ As a figure of thought, this can be traced throughout Nietzsche's later writing as well: Modern Europe seems to display a number of parallels to the declining phases of antiquity, most notably its mixture of styles. It is a symptom of the loss of an organizing power in the light of an abundance of "means and goals."⁸

The third model is a kind of unintentional by-product of this connection. I will call it *destruction by proxy*. In a long and unpublished version of the preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, dedicated to Wagner, Nietzsche noted: "The classicists [*Philologen*] are destroyed by the Greeks: that much one could cope with. Yet the ancient world breaks into pieces in the hands of the classicists!"⁹ This could be paraphrased in the sense that one could live with the fact that philologists buckle under [once more: *zu Grunde gehen*] the weight of the Greeks, but not with the fact, that they destroy and disintegrate any adequate understanding of antiquity while doing so. At the hand of the contemporary philologists, Greek culture 'goes under' a second time through the fragmenting effects of specialized modern scholarship. Once again, this is not a statement about philology as such, but about a discipline that has become a symptom of a society that can no longer distinguish between what is important and what is unimportant because it has lost its sense both for the authority of the highest values and for the unity of style and the stylistic expression of culture.

All three models of the decline of antiquity are linked by a notion of excess that is derived from the ruinous effect it has had on a fine balance: excess of military power and politics over other domains of culture, excess of rational thought over the forces of life, excess of analysis over synthesis in historical reconstruction. One of the central conclusions resulting from the work of the young philologist was therefore that it was precisely a certain

style—both in a broad cultural, but also in a specific sense—that allowed the Greeks to contain that excess during the period of their greatness. This style was in turn based on some form of inherent, i.e., not necessarily institutionalized, philology. This conclusion distinguishes Nietzsche from the broad tradition of cultural pessimism in the tradition of Rousseau or the critique of civilization. For the fine balance of Greek culture was not a state of nature that had been compromised, but, on the contrary, the fragile product of artifice. Since the Greeks managed to “organize the chaos,” their culture did not itself end up as a chaos devoid of style, as an “aggregate.”¹⁰ More to the point, the Greeks had learned to distinguish. In other words, they practiced criticism (from *krinein*—to distinguish). As a philologist, particularly as a textual critic, Nietzsche recognized both this critical approach and the resulting focus on style as the essence of what had distinguished Greece from all earlier and later cultures.

The distinctive style of the Greeks, then, depended, as style always does, on the critical faculty of distinguishing. The Greeks were philologists even before philology became institutionalized in Alexandria. Put more succinctly: the later institutionalization of philology was a sign of the decline of the vital powers of philological judgment in the depth of culture, which it tried to compensate for with another kind of excess. Alexandria was only a symbol of this excess—namely the excess of the critical faculty itself. Yet seen from this perspective, philology was not only *not* responsible for the downfall of Greek culture, but, on the contrary, what had kept it alive for so long and preserved it for the future. It was therefore no contradiction when Nietzsche, immediately after criticizing the Alexandrians of his own day, rehabilitated critical philology as a method. Philology *in the right doses*, as it were, is the indispensable art of reading and thinking slowly and meticulously.¹¹ Toward the end of his career as a professional philologist, Nietzsche finally realizes “Praise to philology: as a study of integrity [*Redlichkeit*]. Antiquity was destroyed by its decline.”¹² At the very moment after he had given up his chair, Nietzsche affirmed that the decline of Greece was, in the end, caused not by philology, but by its erosion.

2. Origins: the philological style of interpretation

Etymologically, the word "Redlichkeit," which I have translated as "integrity," is derived from "Rede"—speech—in the sense of identity between the things one says, the things one stands for, and the things one does.¹³ By virtue of these qualities, *Redlichkeit* is not least a style of thinking, judging, and meaning. Nietzsche's return to philology's methodological and ethical achievements coincided with his growing distance to the histrionic streaks of the Wagner cult, its stylistic excess. Philology's role is to stay away from its bombastic promises and to act, with the help of *Redlichkeit*, as the keeper of the flame *ad usum delphinorum*. Taking "Redlichkeit" literally is inspired by Nietzsche's own wordplay on the "zu Grunde gehen." Antiquity went under (*ging zu Grunde*) because it *ging auf Gründe*—it specialized in reasoning and reasons (*Gründe*). This purely theoretical position is diametrically opposed to an alternative way of *auf Gründe gehen*, namely in the sense of *einer Sache auf den Grund gehen*. This would be the domain of philology. *Grund* does not only refer to reason, but also to a source. Philology in Nietzsche's time was the theory and practice of finding and dealing with sources. It was also, as we shall see, a style—a critical decision—of interpretation.

Before the experimental sciences took over, philology represented the notion of scientific inquiry par excellence. Its ideal was historical explanation: of grammatical categories or language change, of literary genres and styles, or of state institutions. Among its key metaphors were concepts such as 'origin' or 'source' (which ultimately also points to an origin). Establishing an origin (comparable to etymology in linguistics) was long regarded as the determination of an essence: the origin (*Ursprung*) denotes a retrogressive *telos*. In Nietzsche's early work, this idea is still perceptible. Initially, the title of *The Birth of Tragedy* was supposed to be "Origin and goal of tragedy";¹⁴ the two "artistic drives" of the Apollonian and the Dionysian were expressions for the "origin and essence of Greek tragedy."¹⁵

This was a deliberate provocation. The sharp reaction of the establishment could hardly have come as a surprise. The kind of philology both Nietzsche and Wilamowitz had been raised in, had already bid farewell to the etymological fallacy and the search for (metaphysical) origins and essences. Instead,

philology, especially in the Bonn tradition, had increasingly concentrated on mapping the interdependencies and dynamics of textual histories. In his new beginning from the end of the 1870s onward, Nietzsche continues in the footsteps of this tradition by making sure that his “questions about descent and beginnings”¹⁶ can no longer be confused with a retrogressive essentialism. In the preface to the *Genealogy of Morals*, the “suspicion” relating to the origin of Good and Evil is explicitly associated with the author’s own “historical and philological training,”¹⁷ which replaces the metaphysical search for origins with an analysis of complex conditions and patterns.

Michel Foucault claimed a conceptual differentiation in Nietzsche between “Ursprung” (*origin*) and “Herkunft” (*descent*), where *Herkunft* supposedly denotes a slow and hard genealogy centered on the body and the observation of contingent power struggles in contrast to the traditional metaphysics of *Ursprung*. This thesis is not tenable. The story goes rather like this: After the severe criticism of the *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche became anxious to dissociate both *Ursprung* and *Herkunft* from the misunderstanding of a fallacious essentialism. Both words are now used synonymously on countless occasions¹⁸—aphorisms devoted to the *Ursprung* or *Herkunft* of religion, faith, knowledge, morality, science, free spirits, cults, customs, laws etc. are legion long before the *Genealogy of Morals*. Phenomena “betray their descent”¹⁹ as the process of their emergence. A third term—“Entstehung”—becomes instrumental for distinguishing the developments traceable in a given circumstance from intentions or aims.²⁰ In this sense, Nietzsche’s philological training was the main inspiration for his attack on functionalist explanations of complex phenomena as practiced by the ‘English’ philosophers—represented first and foremost by his former friend Paul Rée, whose book on *The Origin of moral sentiments* (1877) had been deeply influenced by British utilitarianism.²¹ By reverting to philology, Nietzsche radically removed everything that might smell of purpose from his concept of origin.

For the coming era “beyond morality,” Nietzsche foresaw a complete overcoming of origins, a topic explored at length in *Beyond Good and Evil*.²² Zarathustra proclaims: “Not where you come from, should from now on be your

honor, but where you are heading!"²³ This is not an argument against the exploration of origins, descents, and developments altogether, but for incorporating this exploration into a future-oriented formulation of values. A central chapter in Nietzsche's long-planned but never realized *magnum opus* was to be entitled, "The origin of values." Nietzsche had come to the conclusion that the study of origins was nothing less than a precondition for the *amor fati*. Critical philology had become an important discipline not by giving up the search for origins once origin's nature was exposed as deeply problematic, but by changing the interpretation of what an origin was and what it entailed. Nietzsche realized that, from the perspective of the future, origins themselves could and should be changed. Incorporating the search for origins in a future-oriented philosophy was thus the translation of incorporating philology itself into the formulation of new values. In one of his very last works, Nietzsche writes: "The question about the origin of moral values is a question of the *first order* for me because it determines the future of humanity."²⁴

This insight in the importance of re-interpreting origins leads to one of the most contested, but also most misunderstood, issues in Nietzsche studies: Nietzsche's concept of interpretation itself. It is usually associated with the position that there is no such thing as a "fact," but "just interpretations. We cannot determine a fact 'in itself.'"²⁵ Nietzsche therefore has come to play a predominantly negative role in classic hermeneutic theory because he supposedly combined this position with a belief in the violent nature of interpretation irreconcilable with any 'union of horizons.' A famous entry in one of Nietzsche's late notebooks defines interpretation as "a means to become master of something";²⁶ in other writings it is compared to raping or plundering.²⁷

There are two problems with this understanding of Nietzsche's position. First of all, Nietzsche almost never uses the expressions "interpretation" or "to interpret" in connection with written texts, but reserves them for metaphorical descriptions of organic processes or power relations. Second, interpretation is almost always presented as a necessary substitute or compensation for the lack of a reliable text. His most famous definition of the "nature of all interpretation" in the *Genealogy of Morals* as "bending into shape, shortening, leaving out, filling out, grouting cracks, forging"²⁸ consists

of German equivalents for the technical terms from textual criticism's different categories of textual corruptions (in Latin: *lacunae*, *luxaturae*, *omissiones*, etc.). Nietzsche, in other words, uses the standards of critical philology in order to prove the impossibility of strictly scientific methods (in the sense of nineteenth-century positivistic science) in complex domains involving human agency. This methodological standard also serves as an escape from various theoretical paradoxes, for example the accusation that his theory of interpretation might itself only be an interpretation.²⁹

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche even adopts the perspective and voice of "an old philologist" who points out the clumsy art of interpretation on the part of positivistic scientists who do not possess a "text" and therefore have to make do with forgeries and thus "bad 'philology.'" ³⁰ This is no naïve anti-scientific hubris. On the contrary: Nietzsche does make a case for the "sense for facts" and reminds science of the constant need for questioning its own methods and underlying theories. Much of his criticism became scientific standard in the anti-positivist movements of twentieth-century theories of science. From the philologist's point of view, 'texts' are neither simple facts nor simple artefacts, but reconstructed versions in a long line of attempts and appropriations. Friedrich Ritschl's version of the Lachmann method had put less emphasis on the hierarchy of the stemma, and more focus on complex relations between sources, influences, traditions, fragments, commentaries and textual histories. It was, in fact, known as the genealogical method.³¹ As such it arguably became the direct metaphorical background for Nietzsche's own genealogy. Nietzsche's genealogy does not deny the 'fact' of interpretation, but introduces a meta-level of careful, 'philological'—and this means to a large extent: stylistic—examination of always already interpreted material. Subordinating everything to vital needs and power ambitions represents only one extreme in the continuum of producing significance.

At the other extreme, we find the most subtle forms of interpretation, based on reliable texts and practiced by philologists (real or metaphorical ones) who proceed slowly and tactfully. This is the practice Nietzsche calls not interpretation, but "reading."³² We have to be careful not to misconstrue the

implications. There are few domains where reading in this emphatic sense is possible at all—and it is neither a guarantee for 'objective' results nor morally superior. Reading is not even always preferable to interpreting even if it was theoretically possible—and Nietzsche is not always an exemplary reader himself, but sometimes a violent interpreter. And yet, there simply does exist a systematic differentiation between interpretation and reading throughout the whole corpus of Nietzsche's texts, including the letters and posthumous writings. Already at the height of the debate about *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche comments on Wilamowitz like this: "He only achieves what he wants through the most brazen interpretations, yet he read me very badly since he neither understands what I want on the whole or in the particular."³³

The need for a differentiation between reading and interpretation has deep roots in Nietzsche's philosophy of philology because it concerns the very core of the relationship between the two disciplines. Theologians as well as certain philosophers are Nietzsche's prime examples of bad readers. This is why Nietzsche, e.g., in the *Antichrist*, identifies them as interpreters rather than readers.³⁴ Interpretation in this sense is a forgery which only philologists are able to uncover—philology's function in Nietzsche's late work has a pronounced critical function vis-à-vis the fixation of meaning in the service of the enemies of life and their "hatred against the natural."³⁵ What Nietzsche calls a lack of philology is thus not only a sorry state of the text, but also the uncharitable refusal to be tactful and subtle, to listen carefully.³⁶ Reading, on the other hand, is a never-ending "commentary"³⁷ and a skeptical refusal of judgment ("ephexis in interpretation"³⁸). It is quite literally concerned with the bodily integrity of the text.³⁹ In short: while interpretation is mainly concerned with content and thus ends with constructing its own object, reading is mainly concerned with style, or better: reading understands its object through the prism of its style as a means of preventing the interpreter's constructivism. However, and this is a major caveat, this critical function cannot subsist on its own. Pure criticism is nothing else than another form of nihilism. Nietzsche makes this very clear: by virtue of its kinship with skepticism, philology risks falling into the nihilist trap itself. Only *via negationis*, in an agonistic relationship, does it produce life-affirming effects

that have the potential to become new, freer and gayer forms of interpretation (in the sense of *The Gay Science*).⁴⁰

In the end, this also applies to Nietzsche's own texts and the 'readerly,' stylistic, and interpretive strategies inscribed in them. Nietzsche's author-persona, i.e., "Nietzsche," asks for subtle readers who patiently study his writings "like good old philologists read their Horace."⁴¹ He also fantasizes about future university chairs exclusively dedicated to the "interpretation of Zarathustra."⁴² In the opening epigrams of *The Gay Science* Nietzsche had already developed an implicit invitation to his readers to distance themselves from the "all-too-subtle ones" in order to follow "their own trajectory," which ultimately can only be a benefit for the object of their interpretations as well.

3. The purpose of existence

To sum up thus far: If the decline of Hellenic culture was instigated by the loss of critical judgment and philology that had helped to sustain its stylistic integrity, a return to critical philology seemed the only viable way to regain and preserve what was most valuable in it: a sense of distinction. It goes without saying that this is not identical with any institutionalized form of philology. Rather, it is about incorporating its methods into a more ambitious, value-driven philosophical outlook, which has to be strong enough in the light of its deconstructive tendencies. The great revaluation of all values symbolized by Christianity was an act of interpretation in pure disregard of the achievement of ancient philology. Hence, it also represented, as Erich Auerbach so memorably demonstrated, a stylistic revolution.⁴³ The revaluation of this revolution or revaluation as an act of counter-interpretation, in consequence, had to be a stylistic revolution itself, presumably inspired by philology once more—and reading rather than interpretation turned out to be its *via regia*. This is why philology and philological methods of reading and writing would again play such a central and positive role in Nietzsche's mature period.

In this period, Nietzsche even extended the re-interpreting and re-reading of sources or origins, the genealogical as well as stylistic reconstruction of texts, bodies, and cultures, to himself. Commenting on his

own earlier work, not least on its style, became a characteristic trait. I will demonstrate this with the reading of a single but important aphorism: the first aphorism of *The Gay Science*, the work with which Nietzsche wished to inaugurate a new kind of philosophy, based partly on philological premises.⁴⁴ In this aphorism, he returned to the central topic of his early work and thus both to philology, style, and the question of declinism.

Tragedy, the topic of Nietzsche's brilliant debut, is largely absent from his work after the break with Wagner. In *The Gay Science*, it re-enters the stage. Tragedy plays the lead role in both the first and the last aphorism of the first edition. Since the last aphorism is almost identical with the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tragedy even marks the transition between *The Gay Science* and Nietzsche's most ambitious attempt at a new philosophical style. Tragedy has, of course, always been the preferred literary genre of philosophers. Yet in contrast to his predecessors, Nietzsche seems less interested in the philosophical content of tragedy than in the tragic condition of philosophy.

Reading Nietzsche's aphorisms calls for extreme caution. Expressions such as "Nietzsche says," "Nietzsche claims" or "Nietzsche argues" are only defensible as conscious ellipses. Nietzsche's published writings—the posthumous writings have their distinct problems—are polyphone.⁴⁵ The first aphorism of *The Gay Science*, entitled "The teachers of the purpose of existence," is a case in point.⁴⁶ These ethical teachers are identifiable as a number of voices and positions. The tragic poets manifestly belong to them. One of them, Aeschylus, is singled out and quoted explicitly. At the end, the aphorism culminates in a pluralistic "we" and "us" and the address of the plural "you" of the "brothers." In a text that deals with the relationship of the individual and the species, this seems contradictory: A voice, which pokes fun at the "boundless, fly- and frog-like wretchedness" of the individual, declares itself as an "I." If the "I's" initial thesis about the primacy of species and instinct is correct, we would have a glaring example of a performative self-contradiction.⁴⁷

Yet the first sections of the aphorism should also make us suspicious on the grounds of their content alone. Its claims are not particularly original, but

a blend of elements of Darwinism, Schopenhauer's philosophy, and a kind of humanism or idealism inspired by Christianity, which has taken up the cause of abstract "humanity." The reader is even addressed in Christian terminology as "fellow man" and "neighbor" (*Nächster*). We can hardly recognize in this "I" our usual conception of Nietzsche's philosophical position in *The Gay Science* and beyond. On the contrary: Nietzsche's works of this period describe the dangers of an alliance between Darwinism, Christianity, and the negation of (individual) life in the style of Schopenhauer.⁴⁸ The attempt to reconcile modern science with the normativity of handed-down morality appears to be the most disastrous sign of the times. The same is true for the concept of teaching (*Lehre*) itself, which is put under vast pressure in the course of *The Gay Science*. In addition, it hardly rhymes with Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics if a concept like "species" is described in terms of its "essence." For what is this essence supposed to be? The "preservation" of the species. Many explicit and implicit invectives can be found elsewhere in Nietzsche's works that are at odds with precisely this understanding of human existence as mere preservation.⁴⁹ That Man is not to be preserved but to overcome is a central motif from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* onwards. Finally, the "I" of the aphorism even uses one of the most common and recognizable logical fallacies, the so-called *post hoc ergo propter hoc*: the fact that "our race" has been "preserved [...] so far" does *not* prove at all that everything that has happened to Man or that everything he has done has been—regardless of moral judgments—in service of that preservation. The contemporary discourse on decadence, with which Nietzsche was of course very familiar and which he referred to in his later work, would claim exactly the opposite with just as much (or as little) logical legitimation.

I will pass over for a moment the sections on comedy, laughter, and 'gay science' in order to approach them from the aphorism's conclusion. It appears that tragedy is treated as the maximum contrast to this self-contradictory thinking of the species because it puts the individual and individual suffering at its center. The Aeschylus passage places Greek tragedy in a universal, almost anthropological context:

There is no denying that in the long run each of these great

teachers of a purpose was vanquished by laughter, reason and nature: the brief tragedy always changed and returned into the eternal comedy of existence, and the "waves of uncountable laughter"—to cite Aeschylus—must in the end also come crashing down on the greatest of these tragedians.

The quotation from Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*⁵⁰ can be found in the hero's first long monody where, chained to the rock, he laments his fate. One after another, he calls on all of the elements—and thus also on the "ποντίων [τε] κυμάτων ἀνήριθμον γέλασμα"—the "countless twinkling waves of the sea,"⁵¹ i.e., the laughter of the waves, which cannot be quantified. The image refers to the endless glittering movement of the water, which in its infinity underlines the infinite indifference of the elements and of nature as such in contrast to the hero's plight. With a simple inversion of a genitive, Nietzsche's rendition of this expression into "waves of uncountable laughter" highlights the wave character of laughter, which has no equivalent in the original.

This rendition is not a mistranslation. I will argue that it is rather a deliberate re-phrasing.⁵² Nietzsche does not write "to cite Aeschylus," as the standard version in English has it, but "mit Aeschylus zu reden"—literally: "to speak with Aeschylus." "Citing" and "speaking with" are two completely different actions. "Speaking with" is not "speaking exactly like," but "speaking with the help of" or "by way of." Far from simply quoting it, the aphorism is in conversation with Aeschylus' drama.

Prometheus Bound is a key work for the understanding of Nietzsche's early writings, including *The Birth of Tragedy*. The frontispiece of this first book of his even depicted a scene from the play. Nietzsche considered Aeschylus' *Prometheus* as proof of the claim that the Attic tragedy only ever portrayed the masked Dionysus, who lives through individuation's suffering by proxy and who is celebrated through the revival of Dionysian music.⁵³ Prometheus is the individual who has reached Titanic heights and competes with the Gods—as a phantasmagoria of the artist who accepts eternal plight as the price for being a Maker. At this point, individuation turns into its opposite, where it leaves the domain of the Apollonian and transcends its "boundaries" as well as the "demands for self-knowledge and moderation,"

for which Apollo stands. Nietzsche explains this process as follows:

But lest under the influence of this Apollonian tendency form might harden into Egyptian inflexibility and coldness, lest in the course of the effort to prescribe the path and range of the individual wave, the movement of the whole lake might die, from time to time the high tide of the Dionysian destroyed once again all those little eddies in which the spell cast by the one-sided Apollonian ‘will’ sought to confine Hellenic culture. The sudden surge of the Dionysian tide lifts the small individual mountains of waves on its back, as the brother of Prometheus, the Titan Atlas, did the earth. This Titanic impulse, to become as it were the Atlas of all individuals and to carry them even higher and further on a broad back, is the common element shared by the Promethean and the Dionysian principles.⁵⁴

The connection of this passage with the Aeschylean “waves” and the metaphors of ebb and flood from the first aphorism of *Gay Science* are palpable. Yet both passages are polar opposites of each other. Where waves and flow in *The Birth of Tragedy* are expressive of the Dionysian as the origin of the Tragic, it is the “waves of uncountable laughter” in *Gay Science*, which are related to the “comedy of existence” and which wash the tragic poet away instead of being caused by him or to carry him “higher.”

For the conception of *Gay Science* as a whole, the systematic contrast between Prometheus, who is bound to the land, and the departure for new shores or infinity, seems to be constitutive. Waves, water, and the sea are prominent, often-used motifs—culminating in aphorisms like FW 310, entitled “Will and Wave.” We experience ebb and flood passively, being at the receiving end of the powers of nature—but we can learn to master ebb and flood by embarking for unknown lands and by mastering the sea itself. Since this describes the contrast between *Gay Science* and *The Birth of Tragedy*, it was seemingly so important for Nietzsche that he changed the wording of *Prometheus Unbound* to make this even more pertinent. “Speaking with Aeschylus” is similar to a staging of the play that tries to be

true to the original by changing it according to the new circumstances rather than stereotypically repeating words that by themselves have lost their meaning. Speaking with Aeschylus means in a sense speaking *as* Aeschylus—i.e., as Aeschylus would speak today.

This leads us back to the relationship between tragedy and comedy and those skipped passages where they are discussed in the aphorism. My question here is as follows: Does the symbolism of embarking for new shores not leave the drama (both tragedy and comedy) behind altogether in favor of the epos? Not only is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* composed according to epic genre conventions, but already *Gay Science* appeals to the Argonauts several times. Nietzsche's philosophy becomes narrative. I would therefore very much doubt that Nietzsche had in mind a simple *alternation* of tragedy and comedy as the few commentators his aphorism has found seem to take for granted. Rather, I detect a structural equivalence to the distinction between the "good" and the "evil" eye from the aphorism's first sentence. The point is not to decide between the one and the other as the whim takes us, but to attain a position *beyond* good and evil—just as much as the aphorism on the whole strives to go beyond either a purely naturalistic or a purely individual-ethical perspective—i.e., beyond traditional comedy and tragedy. The reader is thus given an account of the reason why tragedy, which belongs to the era of individual morality and religion of the ethical teachers, cannot simply be replaced by comedy once its servant role has been exposed by a kind of comedy that is still dependent on a preceding tragedy. *Gay Science* makes a case not just for a new epistemology, but also for a new art, adequate to this new epistemology. The spectacle of tragedy becoming conscious of its own problematic role, performed in the aphorism, is only its prerequisite.

In Nietzsche's early philological thinking, there are a number of reflections on the dramatization of the epos—especially in the notebooks from 1869-1871, culminating in chapter 12 of the *Birth of Tragedy*. The dramatization of the Apollonian (to which the epic belongs) cannot, according to Nietzsche, reach the same heights and tragic effects as the dramatization of the Dionysian. In theory, this would mean that the Dionysian is forever lost in an age dominated by the spirit of the epic.

Nietzsche later speculates whether the drama is not inferior to the epos because of its crude audience.⁵⁵ However, the real shift seems to be to inverse the tendency of the postclassical world through the epicization of the drama, understood as the Dionysian.

In *The Dionysiac World View*, prior to *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had written: "In Prometheus the Hellenic world is presented with an example of how the exaggerated promotion of human knowledge is as ruinous for the promoter as it is for the promoted."⁵⁶ More than a decade later, in *Gay Science*, the Prometheian urge after knowledge is no longer the problem, but the preparation for its solution. I have in mind aphorisms such as *Gay Science* 300, "Preludes to science," which starts from the premise that modern science was originally forged from witchcraft and alchemy. Without their false pretences and illusions, which in hindsight were patently wrong, knowledge would never have set itself ambitious enough goals. Perhaps religion too has only been a similarly meaningless, yet in the end useful prelude:

Did Prometheus first have to imagine having stolen light
and pay for it before he could finally discover that he had
created light by desiring light, and that not only man but also
god was the work of his own hands and clay in his hands?
All mere images of the sculptor—no less than delusion,
theft, the Caucasus, the vulture, and the whole tragic
Prometheia of all those who know?⁵⁷

In the "Prometheia," the problem of knowledge is confronted with the problem of ethics. Just as tragedy, knowledge too has so far been in the service of religion and morality. Prometheus is a champion of the mortals; he acts in the name of abstract equality. To legitimize his suffering, not only this goal, but his very individuality had to be glorified.

If we have seen through this mechanism and choose to take seriously in any way at all the arguments of Schopenhauer, Darwin, and modern science, sketched at the beginning of the aphorism, we are left with the following possibilities. The acceptance of the nullity of individual existence could speak for a kind of Buddhist self-denial or even self-annihilation as endorsed by Schopenhauer. Nietzsche's works repeatedly criticize this view as

nihilistic. His early alternative, which appeals to life and casts doubt over *Wissenschaft*, is now also rejected in the name of a new and gayer *Wissenschaft*. This 'science,' however, is not at all identical with a pure naturalization of morality and ethics, as superficial readers of Nietzsche often seem to assume. On the contrary: this is why the very first aphorism of *The Gay Science* progresses from a pondering of the "essence" of Man and his instincts to the dramatic analysis of the hero on the stage. The teacher of the purpose of existence quite literally appears on stage ("tritt auf") and thus acts in a complex social and aesthetic context, not in a space of unmediated naturalism. This stage, however, is no longer a literal dramatic stage, but a new style of performative prose as practiced by Nietzsche.

The actual consequence to be drawn by a 'gay' science is described as laughing "at oneself," that is to say as the opposite of drawing either a nihilistic, a naturalistic, or a tragic-vitalistic conclusion from the premise of the basic nullity of individual existence. Laughing at oneself is precisely the alternative beyond good and evil. It creates a space again for knowledge, for a knowledge that is not in service of a particular morality and therefore committed to tragedy as traditionally practiced. This form of knowledge would be the "gay science" itself: Nietzsche has realized that science and knowledge are not themselves problematic or nihilistic. This would only be true for their more or less contingent association with the tragic world view of individual-ethical self-glorification on the one hand, or the nihilistic variety of thinking purely in terms of man as species on the other.

Thus understood, gay science presupposes a concept of the comedy of existence in positive terms, not just as the destruction of old illusions. This is why Nietzsche can celebrate the art of illusion that comes with tragedy in spite of all the critique. If tragedy winks farewell to false legitimizations, to the "resplendent retinue of reasons" and the "Oughts and Because," which are always allocated a purpose afterwards (another *post hoc ergo propter hoc*), it is rehabilitated. The teachers of the purpose of existence are those who bestow meaning and normativity on events that unfold anyway. Their fictive reasons and arguments for life are harmless only because life can afford to ignore them. They are nevertheless not wholly irrelevant or useless

since they prevent us from resignation in the face of the meaninglessness and absurdity of the comedy of existence. The renunciation of ethical teachings is not at all identical with a renunciation of ethos, but its liberation from inadequate restrictions.

So what exactly is the purpose of tragedy according to Nietzsche's reinterpretation and revaluation of his early work on the Greeks? For Aristotle, the answer was clear: the purpose of tragedy is its effect, i.e., catharsis as a consequence of tragic distress. Aristotle's theory of tragedy follows from his metaphysics and illustrates, in a sense, how the essence of a phenomenon can always be derived from its purpose. In order to complete its purpose, tragedy needs artistic means that will lead to the distress of its audience. Yet if tragedy is nothing else than a teaching on the purpose of existence, and if this purpose consists solely in the preservation of the species, which is secured by instinct anyway, then either the aphorism's initial claim about instinct as an essence is false—or tragedy is superfluous, which is to say that its continuous presence could not be explained on naturalistic grounds alone. Not only would it have to have died out a long time ago, it could arguably not have arisen in the first place except for some freakish evolutionary accident.

The aphorism tries to solve this dilemma by naturalizing the invention of purposeless purposes itself. It uses a trick that is as simple as it is ingenious. The constant invention of purposes is declared to be part of the nature of Man as the "fantastic animal." Note, however, that it is not Nietzsche or even "Nietzsche" who makes this claim, but other voices in the aphorism, most notably the "most cautious friend of man." This is nothing less than a demonstration of how the belated legitimization of purposes works: the tautological relationship between essence and purpose discloses once more how deeply entrenched in metaphysics our thinking and acting is. A scientific analysis of instincts is one thing; its insertion into an understanding of the world, which cannot be reduced to instincts, is another. Yet instead of turning this insight into a tragedy, gay science re-interprets it as a basic condition for both life and knowledge. "To laugh from the whole truth" means to interpret the flood of interpretations as a kind of rhythm that

the individual cannot abolish, but which she can partake in creating and influencing. Understanding the "law of ebb and flood" means to accept "sublime unreason" as a law that is unfit as a basis for individual ethics—i.e., as the abstract basis of universal normativity. Every individual and every group contribute to their time and their rhythm: "We, too, have our time!" From the perspective of *The Gay Science*, there was a time appropriate to *The Birth of Tragedy*, but it no longer exists. Therefore, Nietzsche re-assesses the concept at the heart of this work already with the first aphorism of his new one. Under new conditions, tragedy can then at the end of this book be said to begin again. "And therefore! Therefore! Therefore!" also describes the stylistic principle of narrative sequence employed by *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and thus comedy in the epic genre (as e.g., in Dante's *Divina Commedia*). Speaking with Aeschylus is bestowing one's own rhythm onto tragedy. Since the connection of laughter and wisdom (*sophia*) cannot succeed where a traditional concept of art is simply used to negate a traditional concept of science, art has to reinvent itself as much as science.

If the future is indeed to remain open while reconnecting with the past, it has to invent and perfect its own style that is not content with parodying the styles that have gone before in all eternity. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, the nineteenth century still appears, in best declinist fashion, as a time of quickly changing fashions and "style masquerades," as a "carnival in the grand style." Yet it is already hinted at that "we" might only be original as parodists, including our laughing as perhaps the only contemporary feat that might have a future.⁵⁸ *Zarathustra* is, consequently, an enormous experiment with different styles. *Ecce Homo* celebrates it as "the most diverse art of style which has ever been at the disposal of any human being." It also celebrates style as the art of rhythm.⁵⁹ The inevitability of declinism can apparently be sublated or even overcome by individual style choices that freely adapt historical styles that comply with one's own rhythm.⁶⁰ By that token, style is no longer just a symptom of a historical situation, but a means to free oneself from the shackles of historicism.

Following the ancient understanding of parody as *prosopopoeia*, Nietzsche manages to stage the tragic without becoming the 'manservant' of

a particular religion or morality. The simulation of a teaching about the purpose of existence subverts its own dogma and liberates naturalized Man from being reduced to naturalism. Nature is simultaneously unmasked as a metaphysical concept and turned unabashedly into the most artificial work of art. Perhaps this is the philosophical point of Nietzsche's stylistic techniques altogether. He no longer wishes to derive anthropological or other laws from the favorite literary genre of philosophers, but to make it liable for the 'gay' and risky thinking of unheard "waves of uncountable laughter." The condition for all of this is philology, the art of reading for style.

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Notes

¹ For an account of the once immense importance and influence of the Bonn school, largely forgotten today, see Christian Benne, *Nietzsche und die historisch-kritische Philologie* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2005). Nietzsche never attacked anyone associated with the Bonn school; on the contrary: he continued to send his later books to people like Ritschl's student and biographer Otto Ribbeck until the end. For Nietzsche's early philological thought, cf. the work by Carlotta Santini, in particular the commentary edition of Nietzsche's philological writings (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Histoire de la Littérature Grecque*, traduction par Marc de Launay du texte établi d'après les manuscrits par Carlotta Santini, présentation et notes par Carlotta Santini, Les Belles Lettres 2021). See also Carlotta Santini, "Friedrich Nietzsche in Basel: An apology for classical studies," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 50, Nos. 6-7 (2018), 672-81. A note on quotation: Nietzsche is quoted according to the German standard edition of his works (KSA) and letters (KGB) even where the titles are translated into English. Translations are mine unless otherwise stated. Where English translations have been used, they are referred to bibliographically. Some material in this essay is based on my entries in *Dictionnaire Nietzsche*, ed. Dorian Astor (Paris, Laffont, 2017) as well as on Christian Benne, "Was ist der Zweck der Tragödie? Zum ersten Aphorismus der Fröhlichen Wissenschaft," in *Nietzsche zwischen Philosophie und Literatur*, ed. Katharina Grätz & Sebastian Kaufmann (Heidelberg, Winter 2016), 107-17.

² *Daybreak*, Preface 5, KSA, 3, 17.

³ Nietzsche belongs to a tradition that includes Friedrich Schlegel's philosophy of philology. For both, philosophy and philology were bound to each other in a process of reciprocal critique and control.

⁴ 1869 2 [6] KSA 7, 46.

⁵ *Socrates and Tragedy* KSA 1, 546.

⁶ "An dem ἄνθρωπος θεωρητικός geht die antike Welt zu Grunde. Das apollinische Element scheidet sich wieder von dem dionysischen und jetzt entarten beide. Das Bewußtsein und die dumpfe Begierde stehen jetzt als feindliche, im selben Organismus wüthende Mächte sich gegenüber." (1870-71 7 [7] KSA 7, 138; my translation)

⁷ See. e.g., *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* 3, KSA 1, 265-70.

⁸ *Human all too Human* II 117, KSA 2, 427.

⁹ "Die Philologen gehen an den Griechen zu Grunde: das wäre etwa zu verschmerzen. Aber das Alterthum bricht unter den Händen der Philologen in Stücke!" (1871 11[1] KSA 7, 353; my translation)

¹⁰ *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* 10, KSA 1, 333. In the Kantian tradition, which had informed the philological tradition, the concept of the aggregate is the opposite of the system, understood as an internally consistent and necessary unity. A critique of the aggregate can already be found in Friedrich Schlegel's philosophy of philology (Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel-Ausgabe* (KFSA), ed. Ernst Behler et al. München: F. Schöningh, 1958. Vol. 16, p. 40).

¹¹ 1876 19[1] KSA 8, 332.

¹² "Lob der Philologie: als Studium der Redlichkeit. Das Alterthum gieng am Verfall derselben zu Grunde" (1880 6[240] KSA 9, 261; my translation).

¹³ "Redlichkeit," in: *Grimm online* (<http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB>).

¹⁴ *Birth of Tragedy* 1, KSA 1, 25; cf. the letter to Erwin Rohde, 29 March 1871.

¹⁵ *Birth of Tragedy* 12, KSA 1, 82.

¹⁶ *Human all too Human* I 1, KSA 2, 24.

¹⁷ *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface 3, KSA 5, 249f.

¹⁸ z.B. *Human all too Human I* 5, KSA 2, 27.

¹⁹ *Gay Science* 348, KSA 3, 583.

²⁰ See, e.g., *Genealogy of Morals II* 12, KSA 5, 314.

²¹ Cf. *Genealogy of Morals*, Preface 4, KSA 5, 250f.

²² E.g., *Beyond Good and Evil* 32, KSA 5, 50f.

²³ *Zarathustra III*, KSA 4, 254f.

²⁴ *Ecce Homo Daybreak* 2, KSA 6, 330.

²⁵ 1886-87 7[60], KSA 12, 315.

²⁶ 1885-86 2[148], KSA 12, 140.

²⁷ *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* 137, KSA 2, 436.

²⁸ *Genealogy of Morals III* 24, KSA 5, 400.

²⁹ *Beyond Good and Evil* 22, KSA 5, 37. Nietzsche's later writings often demand an art of reading well, which is based on the ability of "Thatsachen ablesen [zu] können, ohne sie durch Interpretation zu fälschen" (AC 52, KSA 6, 233). On Nietzsche's concept of interpretation cf. Hendrik Birus, "'Wir Philologen...': Überlegungen zu Nietzsches Begriff der Interpretation," in: *Revue Internationale de philosophie*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (1984), 373-95.

³⁰ JGB 22, KSA 5, 37.

³¹ Cf. Sebastiano Timpanaro, *La genesi del metodo del Lachmann* (Firenze, Le Monnier, 1963).

³² The most famous passage can be found in the late preface to *Daybreak* Preface 5, KSA 3, 17.

³³ Letter to Erwin Rohde, 8 June 1872.

³⁴ *Antichrist* 52, 6, 233f.

³⁵ *Antichrist* 15, KSA 6, 181.

³⁶ E.g., *Beyond Good and Evil* 47, KSA 5, 69.

³⁷ *Genealogy of Morals* Preface 8, KSA 5.

³⁸ *Antichrist* 52, 6, 233f.

³⁹ Cf. *Daybreak* 86, KSA 3, 80f or AC 47, KSA 5, 226.

⁴⁰ Reading and interpretation have to be in balance; neither one of them must win the upper hand. (Structurally, this is similar to the relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in classical Greece). This is why

Nietzsche in the same context both celebrates the tactful "Kunst der Auslegung" (*Genealogy of Morals* Preface 8, KSA 5, 255) and the warrior, who conquers (*Genealogy of Morals* III Motto, KSA 5, 339).

⁴¹ *Ecce Homo* Book 5, KSA 6, 305.

⁴² *Ecce Homo* Book 1, KSA 6, 298.

⁴³ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (Bern, Stuttgart, Francke, 1988).

⁴⁴ Cf. *Klassiker auslegen. Friedrich Nietzsche: Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, ed. Christian Benne & Jutta Georg (Berlin, 2015).

⁴⁵ The privileged place of the aphorism "The teachers of the purpose of existence"—as the first aphorism of the book with which Nietzsche wishes to begin a wholly new kind of philosophizing—must not conceal the fact that it actually comes in second place even in the first edition of *Gay Science*. It is introduced by a collection of (almost completely neglected) epigrammatic poems. Without going into detail, there can be no doubt about one of their important functions as a kind of reading instruction for the book as a whole. I would go so far as to call them one of Nietzsche's principal demonstrations of how to deal with his writings. This is true for most of the epigrams, not just those with explicit titles such as "Interpretation" or "To my reader." I would like to highlight two aspects. First, epigrams belong to the genres with the highest semantic density. Through the format of the titles, Nietzsche points out the kinship of his aphorisms with the epigrams: those longer prose texts need to be read as if they were epigrammatic in character, too—i.e., as radically concentrated expositions that can be de-compressed by competent readers. Second, the epigrams have telling titles such as "Motto of a Brute," "The Involuntary Seducer," "The Wanderer" "The Solitary One," "The Wise Man Speaks," "The Sceptic Speaks," and so on. There is a parallel to be drawn here: in every reading of an aphorism, we need to ask ourselves who is speaking. Thus sensitized, we should naturally assume that the "I" speaking in the aphorism is not simply an auto-reference of the empirical author. At the very least, we should not think it impossible to interpret it as the continuation of the *prosopopoeia* of the lyrical "I" from the introductory epigrams. A rhetorically acute and literary aware author

such as Nietzsche, who sometimes refers to himself in the third person or in inverted commas, can well be thought capable of such a relatively straightforward technique. Cf. Christian Benne, "The philosophy of prosopopoeia," *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (2016), 275-86.

⁴⁶ *Gay Science* 1, KSA 3, 369-72. The few existing readings hardly go beyond a paraphrase (Kathleen Higgins, *Comic relief: Nietzsche's 'Gay Science'* (Oxford, 2000); Günter Schulte, *Nietzsches 'Morgenröthe' und 'Fröhliche Wissenschaft.'* *Text und Interpretation von 50 ausgewählten Aphorismen* (Würzburg, 2002). Useful hints in Marco Brusotti, *Die Leidenschaft der Erkenntnis. Philosophie und ästhetische Lebensgestaltung bei Nietzsche von 'Morgenröthe' bis 'Also sprach Zarathustra'* (Berlin & New York, 1997), 423, 444. For Brusotti, tragedy and comedy are representative of complementary ways of learning to see oneself aesthetically. The tragedy of Man ends when (s)he acknowledges her- or himself as the creator of her or his own tragedy.

⁴⁷ English quotations from *The Gay Science* are taken from *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian del Caro, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge, 2001); translations from *The Birth of Tragedy* are from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford, 2000). All other translations are mine.

⁴⁸ Explicitly, e.g., 1887, 10[7], KSA 12, 457. On the critique of Darwinism in the context of the *Gay Science* (2nd edition), see *Gay Science* 349, KSA 3, p. 585.

⁴⁹ E.g., *Gay Science* 349.

⁵⁰ Attributed to Aeschylus since antiquity, his authorship has become a topic of debate.

⁵¹ *Loeb Classical Library 145*, 454-55.

⁵² As a translator, Nietzsche is closer to Walter Benjamin's translator rather than any contemporary model (Walter Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," in Charles Baudelaire, *Tableaux Parisiens. Deutsche Übertragung mit einem Vorwort über die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (Heidelberg, 1923), vii-xvii.

Christian Benne, "Overcoming Declinism: Style and Philology in Nietzsche"

⁵³ See, e.g., *Birth of Tragedy* 10, KSA 1, 71-75.

⁵⁴ *Birth of Tragedy* 9, p. 58, KSA 1, 70.

⁵⁵ 1878, 27[19].

⁵⁶ KSA 1, 565.

⁵⁷ *Gay Science* 300, KSA 3, 539.

⁵⁸ *Beyond Good and Evil* 223, KSA 5, 157.

⁵⁹ *Ecce Homo* Book 4, KSA 6, 304.

⁶⁰ *Twilight of the Gods* Ancients 1, KSA 6, 154.

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