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On the Reception of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* in German-Language Philology and Literature

Abstract: One hundred and fifty years ago, Friedrich Nietzsche's libellus "The Birth of Tragedy" was published, provoking philology and inspiring literature. The paper discusses the reception of Nietzsche's study with some significant examples from philology and literature.

Keywords: classical languages, educational institution, Friedrich Nietzsche, philology, Wilamowitz-Moellendorff

The young philologist from Basel gave his 1872 work the programmatic title *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, with the intention of answering a controversial question that has been discussed *in extenso* since Aristotle's *Poetics*: the origin of tragedy.¹ Full of self-confidence, Nietzsche describes his book in a letter to Friedrich Ritschl (1806–1876) on January 30, 1872 as "hopeful for our science of antiquity, hopeful for German nature, even if a number of individuals perish from it".² As this letter makes clear, Nietzsche's agenda was much greater than an advance in philological or historical knowledge. His intention, rather, was to leave behind the closed world of philology, and he used public lectures to address this larger audience "on the future of our educational institutions", hoping to attract and appeal to a younger generation of philologists. Nietzsche was well aware of the provocative character of the *Birth of Tragedy*: it is "after all, something more like a manifesto that demands a loud response".³

And indeed, this *libellus*, with its adoption of aesthetic categories along the lines of Schopenhauer and Wagner, was a provocation to the philological world. With its — in modern terms — interdisciplinary approach, involving anthropological and

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1 Cf. Lanfester 1994 and Schmidt 2012.

2 "Hoffnungsvoll für unsere Alterthumswissenschaft, hoffnungsvoll für das deutsche Wesen, wenn auch eine Anzahl Individuen daran zu Grunde gehen"; in: Colli/Montanari 2003, 281–282.

3 "Doch etwas von der Art eines Manifestes und fordert doch am wenigsten zum Schweigen auf".

religious considerations, it represented an enormous challenge. Its departure from convention was heightened by the absence of any scholarly apparatus and by the fact that it dispenses with traditional methods of philological analysis, alongside secondary literature. In a letter to his friend Erwin Rohde (1845–1898) of March 15, 1872,⁴ as in the letter to Ritschl, Nietzsche emphasizes his pedagogical intent, the “idea of an educational institution” (“Bildungsanstaltsgedanken”), which he pursues with his writing. In language with religious implications, he states that an exclusive community has already formed throughout Europe, from Moscow to Florence — “only from the brave philologists I hear nothing – dull – dull – Silent! Silent! as they say in translations of Shakespeare”.⁵

But the reaction of the philological guild was not long in coming. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, also an alumnus of Schulpforta, tore apart Nietzsche’s writing mid-1872 in his pamphlet *Zukunftsphilologie! eine erwidern auf Friedrich Nietzsches „geburt der tragödie“*. Wilamowitz was less concerned with producing a scholarly review than with objecting to the didactic intent of the work. Contesting Nietzsche’s theses, he emphasizes that the genuine Greek being (“Wesen”) is not characterized by an “eccentric, barrier-breaking orgiastic mysticism”, but by a “striving for measure in all things”. Wilamowitz concludes his remarks with a sneering attack on the community Nietzsche wants to create with *The Birth of Tragedy*: “let him gather tigers and panthers to his knees, but not Germany’s philological youth, who, in the asceticism of self-denying labor, should learn to always seek truth alone, to free their judgement by willing surrender, so that classical antiquity may grant only to them that imperishable favor that the muses promise, and in this fullness and purity, classical antiquity alone can grant the content in her breast and the form in her spirit”.⁶

The formulation that the Greek spirit is characterized by a “striving for the measure in all things” gestures toward the source of Wilamowitz’ polemic: the aesthetics and understanding of Greece of Winckelmann and of Weimar Classicism, which found its theoretical expression in Winckelmann’s thoughts on the imitation of Greek works in painting and pictorial art. Similar ideas about poetic

⁴ In: Colli/Montanari 2003, 296–297.

⁵ “Nur von den wackeren Philologen höre ich nichts – stumpf – dumpf – Mum! Mum! wie es in den Shakespeareübersetzungen heißt”.

⁶ In: Gründer 1969, 55: “sammler er tiger und panther zu seinen knien, aber nicht Deutschlands philologische jugend, die in der askese selbstverläugnender arbeit lernen soll, überall allein die wahrheit zu suchen, durch williges ergeben ihr urteil zu befreien, auf dass ihr das classische altertum jenes einzig unvergängliche gewähre, welches die gunst der Musen verheisst, und in dieser fülle und reinheit allein das classische altertum gewähren kann den gehalt in ihrem busen und die form in ihrem geist”.

expression are evident in Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Such theories derive from Thucydides' Periclean *Epitaphios* (II 40, 1): "We love the beautiful with moderation and simplicity, and wisdom without softness" (φιλοκαλοῦμέν τε γὰρ μετ' εὐτελείας καὶ φιλοσοφοῦμεν ἄνευ μαλακίας), says Thucydides. Winckelmann responds in an unmistakably Stoic style: "The general distinguishing mark of the Greek masterpieces is, ultimately, a noble simplicity, and a quiet grandeur, both in their position and in their expression. Just as the depth of the sea always remains calm, no matter how furious the surface, so the expression in the figures of the Greeks, despite all passions, shows a great and composed soul".⁷

Thirty years later, Wilamowitz took another swipe at Nietzsche. The school reform of the Prussian Gymnasium in 1900 pushed back against the previously untrammelled dominance of the classical languages Greek and Latin in the curriculum of the Gymnasium, and ended the monopoly of sole admission to studies from the humanistic Gymnasium. Traditional humanistic education came under pressure. In 1901, Wilamowitz reacted to the reform with an educational policy paper, *Der griechische Unterricht auf dem Gymnasium (The Greek Lessons at the Grammar School)*, which contains a great deal of remarkable information on the reformation of the study of Greek. Classroom hours dedicated to the language were reduced, and the relationship between language lessons and reading and on the canon of school authors changed, but, above all, the curriculum took on a decidedly anti-modernist tenor. With regard to the reading of philosophical texts in Greek, he writes: "Now, however, we see many young people going astray and some perishing because they are enraptured by a dangerous philosophy or semi-philosophy, and now also by Nietzsche. The situation is better abroad". And a little later, while elucidating the grammar school reading canon, he writes: "Plato in Greek, Goethe in German, Paul in religious education: these three heartfelt heralds, working together, will strengthen our sons' souls with a spirit that will make them immune to the contagions of the worst poisons of the present".⁸

7 Winckelmann 1995, 20: "Das allgemeine vorzügliche Kennzeichen der griechischen Meisterstücke ist endlich eine edle Einfalt, und eine stille Größe, sowohl in ihrer Stellung als im Ausdrucke. So wie die Tiefe des Meeres allezeit ruhig bleibt, die Oberfläche mag noch so wüten, ebenso zeigt der Ausdruck in den Figuren der Griechen bei allen Leidenschaften eine große und gesetzte Seele".

8 Wilamowitz 1995, 83: "Nun sehen wir aber zahlreiche Jünglinge in Verirrungen geraten und manchen zu Grunde gehen, weil sie von einer gefährlichen Philosophie oder Halbphilosophie, jetzt von Nietzsche, berückt werden. Das ist im Auslande besser. ... Platon im griechischen, Goethe im deutschen, Paulus im Religionsunterrichte, diese drei Herzenskündiger zusammen wirkend werden unseren Söhnen die Seele mit einem Geiste stärken, der sie gegen die Ansteckungen durch die schlimmsten Gifte der Gegenwart immun macht".

In his *Introduction to Attic Tragedy* (*Einleitung in die griechische Tragödie*) which precedes the commentary to Euripides' *Herakles*, revised several times in the years after 1889, Wilamowitz poses the question "What is Attic tragedy?". A concise definition of the genre can be regarded as another, albeit late, answer to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*: "An Attic tragedy is a self-contained heroic saga, poetically arranged in a sublime style for performance by an Attic civic chorus and two or three actors, and intended to be performed as part of the public worship in the sanctuary of Dionysus".⁹ And in the next sentence he adds: "This is without a doubt a definition with which aesthetic theory can do nothing". Philology, as a part of the study of antiquity, should only be concerned with clarifying the facts, what is provable, reality.

Wilamowitz clearly saw that the educational value that had been attached to Greek lessons throughout the 19th century could no longer be saved. With his educational reform after 1809, Wilhelm von Humboldt had created an institutional anchor for the teaching of the classical languages at the humanistic Gymnasium and at universities on the basis of the image of Greece that had been developed in Wieland's, Goethe's and Schiller's Weimar. The study of antiquity, especially works of Greek literature, was considered to serve not only the acquisition of knowledge, but also to a great extent the development of the personality. Education in the broadest sense was thought to take place through study; philology thus becomes in a quasi-religious exaltation a service to humanity. Friedrich August Wolf summarizes the program succinctly when he writes: "Studia humanitatis ... encompass everything by which purely human education and the elevation of all mental and emotional powers to a beautiful harmony of the inner and outer man is promoted".¹⁰

As a consequence of this view, philology becomes pedagogy. Whoever masters philological methods, especially those of textual criticism, is also thus regarded as broadly intellectually engaged. The narrowing of Humboldt's broad educational ideal is already evident in a practical curricular implementation a few years later, which Johann Wilhelm Süvern (1775–1829) undertook for the Prussian grammar schools between 1816 and 1819. Language drill came to the fore, as the pupils had

⁹ Wilamowitz 1959, 108: "Eine attische Tragödie ist ein in sich abgeschlossenes Stück der Helden-sage, poetisch bearbeitet in erhabenem Stile für die Darstellung durch einen attischen Bürgerchor und zwei bis drei Schauspieler, und bestimmt als Teil des öffentlichen Gottesdienstes im Heiligtum des Dionysos aufgeführt zu werden. Das ist ohne Zweifel eine Definition, mit welcher die ästhetische Theorie so nichts anfangen kann".

¹⁰ Wolf 1807, 45: "Studia humanitatis ... umfassen alles, wodurch rein menschliche Bildung und Erhöhung aller Geistes- und Gemütskräfte zu einer schönen Harmonie des inneren und äußeren Menschen befördert wird".

to translate Greek authors into Latin. The lion's share of grammar school instruction was in Latin and Greek, and only the "Abitur" at the Gymnasium, which was thus always a humanistic one, offered access to university studies and served as a means of social selection.

Examination of Wilamowitz' reaction to Nietzsche's writing against this background makes clear the discourse on educational policy in which they both took part. Both Nietzsche and Wilamowitz aim to reach the youth more generally, not simply the academic world. Wilamowitz sees classical languages and texts as a bulwark against the seductions of modernity. Those who occupy themselves thoroughly and sacrificially, almost ascetically, with the classics are immune to all the temptations of the present, he believes, because they have acquired a clear mind and, in accordance with the ideal of the Greek aristocratic *σωφροσύνη* (*sophrosýne*), the conduct of life based on rational insight, are at rest within themselves. Nietzsche contrasts this conception of the bright, beautiful and immaculate Greece with an image of Greece that is characterized by the desire for the ugly, by the will "to pessimism, to the tragic myth, to the image of everything terrible, evil, mysterious, destructive, fatal, at the bottom of existence".¹¹ Nietzsche replaces philology with psychology and anthropology. Both, however, are not only concerned with education, but with an attitude toward life that grows out of philology. Nietzsche wants to gather around himself a community of initiates, of Dionysus mystics. When Wilamowitz employs Christian ideology in his pamphlet against Nietzsche, speaking of the need for the youth to strive for truth "in the asceticism of self-denying labor", philology becomes a monkish existence of a community of truth-seekers. Both men's claims are absolutist. Both view philology as demanding the whole person. Nietzsche and Wilamowitz' view of Greek literature cannot deny its roots in antiquity. Wilamowitz is, of course, in the tradition of Weimar Classicism: von Humboldt's educational reform and 19th century philology, as a leading science, was in constant dialogue with popular literature of the time, especially at the beginning of the century. Goethe and Schiller engaged in lively intellectual exchange with the philologists of the era such as Friedrich August Wolf and Gottfried Hermann. The stance that the study of Greek literature leads to measure and proportion is shaped by the Aristotelian concept of *μεσότης* (*mesótes*), with balance as the only thing worth striving for, and by the popular philosophical concept of *σωφροσύνη* (*sophrosýne*). Nietzsche, on the other hand, transfers the rhetorical concept of the dithyramb, a genre with precursors in Attic comedy and Plato, and which Horace goes on to develop further in his Pindar Ode (IV 2) to

11 Colli/Montanari 1988, 16: "zum Pessimismus, zum tragischen Mythos, zum Bilde alles Furchtbaren, Bösen, Räthselhaften, Vernichtenden, Verhängnisvollen, auf dem Grunde des Daseins".

describe an unbridled poetic creative power, into a comprehensive anthropological pattern of explanation that contrasts the bright Greece with a dark Greece determined by irrationality.¹²

The consequences of Wilamowitz' assault on Nietzsche's *Libellus* are well known.¹³ Nietzsche's ideas exerted extraordinary influence both inside and outside academia. German-speaking classical studies, however, remained long under the spell of Wilamowitz' criticism. The world of philology, influenced by Wilamowitz' assault, pointedly ignored Nietzsche's *Libellus* (or read it but feigned otherwise). The impact of *The Birth of Tragedy* on scholarship, by contrast, is too great to be discussed in this context. Although Nietzsche's ideas were adopted and developed further by subsequent scholars, this was usually done without mentioning his name. In the 20th century, however, and especially in the period after the Second World War, there was a revival of interest in Nietzsche's writing in classical philology — an interest fed above all by problems and questions that are either central to Nietzsche's writing or are addressed in passing. Of particular note are the preoccupation with the religious dimensions of Greek culture and literature and with its non-Greek, Eastern origins. Drama as a multimedia event, with music and dance as essential components, has also come to the fore in recent years.

Critical examination of the *Birth of Tragedy* made its core ideas accessible to philological research. This began with Nietzsche's friend Erwin Rohde, who in his book *Psyche, Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen* (Freiburg 1898) cannot deny his dependence on Nietzsche, although he does not mention him. In poetic diction reminiscent of Nietzsche, Rohde describes the nocturnal celebration of the Thracian cult of Dionysus, in which he sees a kind of collective ecstasy ("a kind of mania, a tremendous overexcitement of its essence"), which ends in "an overexcitement of sensation up to visionary states".¹⁴ This line of reception leads to the work of Jane Ellen Harrison, for whom destruction, rooted in the unconscious, is a central element of Dionysian religion. Subsequent scholarship has included that of Walter F. Otto, as well as Eric R. Dodds. In his groundbreaking work *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Dodds is clearly indebted to Nietzsche, although he does not quote him, either. In his autobiography, however, he reports that in his youth he devoured Nietzsche with enthusiasm.

Philology, especially German-language philology, remains fascinated by the search for origins and studiously conceals the footsteps in which it stands. Even a

¹² Cf. Zimmermann 2010.

¹³ Cf. von Reibnitz 1992, 2; Silk/Sterne 1981, 157–225.

¹⁴ Rohde 1898, 27–28.

philologist and scholar of religion of the stature of Walter Burkert changes registers when he talks about the origins of tragedy (*Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual*, 1966), and — much like Rohde — is not afraid to let a scene of sacrifice in ancient times arise before our inner eye:¹⁵

“The τραγωδοί were originally a troupe of masked men who had to perform with lamentation, song, and costume, and at the end they were allowed feast on goat. It is possible that the custom was at home in Icaria, where seriousness and “satyr-like” fun may have mingled in a curious way. Rudiments of an agon, competition between several groups, could arise at an early date. The shift to a high level of literature, and the adaption of the elements of heroic myth remains, of course, a unique achievement. Nevertheless, it is based on pre-existing elements: the use of masks, song and dance at the θυμέλη, lamentation, the music of the flute, and the name τραγωδία. All of these combined in the basic situation of sacrifice: a man face to face with death”.

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¹⁵ Burkert 2007, 26.

