

1

After Nietzsche? When Un-modern Turned Anti-modern

Yes, hateful slander existed
even in ancient days:
partner of flattery, sly evil-doer.
It casts brilliant things in shadows
and brings to light
a rotten glory
better left in the dark.

—Pindar, *Nemean 8*

In creating a compelling story of modernity—which is to say, the nostalgic passion-play of a decline and fall *into* modernity—it is essential to determine how to begin. The most cursory survey of the dramatic literature of modernism displays an astonishing array of possible beginnings. So it is that Luther or Calvin, Montaigne or Descartes, Newton or Napoleon, Kant or Hegel is posited as “the first modern thinker.” I am *not* making this claim about Nietzsche. Indeed, this book is designed to call precisely such narrative periodizations into question.

I wish to begin with Nietzsche, not because I take him to be the first modern thinker, whatever that would mean, but rather because I think that we can trace out an important trajectory in his career which will illumine much of my subsequent thesis. We see Nietzsche erupt onto the scene in the early 1870s with an eloquent attempt to think against the contemporary grain, to think outside of his own times in a manner he calls “unmodern.” Later, in the wake of his growing disaffection with his reception (or nonreception) in Europe, Nietzsche begins to think *against* his times, to envision what he begins to call a philosophy of the future, and a world yet to come. Nietzsche transformed himself from an unmodern thinker to an antimodern one in the space of a single decade. And his perspective on the Greeks lies at the heart of this dramatic change. These facts bear closer scrutiny than they normally receive. From unmodern to antimod-

ern, via the Greeks—this is the pattern which we will see again and again in the course of this book.

I

Much has been made recently of Nietzsche's later "perspectivism"—the conviction, that is, really quite logical for a thinker who has called the value and intellectual utility of truth into question, that where we stand in fact largely determines what we can see.¹ "The concepts 'true' and 'untrue' have, it seems to me, no meaning in optics"²—this Nietzsche tells us explicitly, rather late in his career. One is tempted to say "*in the realm of optics.*" But this is not what Nietzsche says. The omission is, in fact, a large part of his point. There *is* no other realm. All the world's an optics, a perspective, an (optical) *illusion*. Now this was surely pretty radical stuff in Nietzsche's day, and seems to have been an insight to which he came at a remarkably early date.³ It is already implicit in the notes and complete essays for his enormous cultural project normally translated as "untimely meditations."

Yet Nietzsche's views can be radicalized still further. It was, in point of fact, his chief intention to do so. It is not merely the case that where we stand determines what we see, what we are *capable* of seeing. Many thinkers have said that much. Rather, we ourselves are able *to choose* what we see, as well as what we do not see, that which we have opted to ignore. And this fundamental choice may often prove to be the most important choice of all. Less a selective blindness, this is really a call to genuine insight, to spiritual selectivity—the mature doctrine of necessary fictions,⁴ and the general "aestheticism" which is so deeply characteristic of his later thought.⁵

This matter needs to be concretized; it was in fact an extremely concrete matter for Nietzsche when he first confronted it. The issue centers around a crisis which came fairly early in Nietzsche's career, a crisis which focused less on Nietzsche's vision of the university system and its failure to live up to his own soaring educational vision,⁶ than on his view of the "modern" cultural crisis, particularly in Germany, and its implicit, vital link to the ancient Greeks.

The matter is a broad one, and will take some time to sort out properly. It is further complicated by what we know of Nietzsche's personal history and intellectual development in this same period. The years of his appointment to a chair in classical philology at Basel from 1869 to 1879 were explosive, formative ones for the young professor.⁷ He was the *only* young scholar ever to be nominated to such a position without having first completed his own writing program. He was only twenty-four at the time. The singularity of his career was matched by the singularity of his educational vision. He was an accomplished scholar already, trained in the minutiae of the philological discipline; but more

than this, he was a scholar of profound *vision*, and an even more stunning intuition into the real nature of the past. (This reference to "reality," like his allusions to "truth" in this same period, bear a complex relation to Nietzsche's later writings. They seem to be bound up in intuitive value-judgments which are thought to promote an abundance of life. He clearly believed that the Greeks were masters at this.)⁸ Nietzsche seems to have realized, as most of his philological contemporaries had not, that in order to unmask the past, in order to appropriate it to the cultural demands of the present, in order to make Greece a *living* commodity in the German-speaking countries to the north, then certain things (like the moral writings) needed to be ignored which had been occupying scholars' whole attention. And other crucial realities needed to be called up from the depths, things of which most scholars remained blissfully unaware. That is the central insight in *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. At a relatively early date then, this perspectivist offered the philological community a whole new perspective on the Greeks they all claimed to be studying. It is a perspective which, for all of its own attendant problems and developments, is still sadly lacking in most contemporary Anglo-American narratives.

Matters are complicated by two related issues. On the one hand, as the scholar *cum* free spirit, Nietzsche playfully insists upon his right to change his perspective, to make rhetorical and poetic—rather than scholarly—sense. He is intent upon uncovering new truths, on casting his glance into every dark corner which has been occluded in the shadows cast by the harsh lights of staid academics and bad philology. But more importantly, *Nietzsche's mind was changed on a number of central issues in precisely this same ten-year period*. Thus there remains some real question of continuity, and of potential inconsistency, within his chief philosophical writings, early and late.

That seminal decade in Basel saw Nietzsche through many of the defining crises of his intellectual life: the troubling break with Wagner, the only real genius Nietzsche ever knew at first hand, after several appalling spectacles in Bayreuth;⁹ the philosophical break with Schopenhauer,¹⁰ whose deep pessimism came gradually to seem more a symptom of the times than their antidote; the disappointing failure of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in 1872 and 1873;¹¹ and perhaps most profoundly, his gradual disaffection with and rejection of, not merely the scholarly community of which he had tried so long to be a part,¹² but also—most painful of all to him—"German culture" itself.

The programme of essays which Nietzsche began to collect under the rubric of *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* ("Unmodern Observations")¹³ span this crucial period of crisis and, while variously outlined in his notes to himself,¹⁴ were conceived on a massive scale. Intended to number thirteen in all, they would have explored topics as diverse as religion and culture, sociology, psychology, musicology, and, consistently, education . . . all in the name of re-

vitalizing Germanic culture, prompting a new renaissance under the aegis, once again, of the ancient Greeks. Given this intention, given as well where Nietzsche himself first chose to cast *his* scholarly glance, the massive notes which he collected for an essay entitled *Wir Philologen*¹⁵ take on a singular importance—as his most sustained early conversation with the preClassical Greeks, and at the same time, with the Classical philologists of his own day. It was Nietzsche's dawning convictions about what was right and what was wrong in the philological perspective which animated some of his best insights in this period. By 'philology' Nietzsche refused to be confined to the hyperlexicity of classical scholars, pouring over their endless emendations and desiccated manuscripts. "It would be a shame," he quips, "if antiquity should speak less clearly to us because a million words stood in the way!"¹⁶ Philology, Nietzsche insists, ought to be a spiritual and educational exercise, aimed at self-overcoming and the creation of genuine culture in oneself and in one's times. He consistently defines this virtue in this period as "a unity of style"¹⁷—all of one's spiritual powers integrated in the singularity of an aesthetic quest. And the Greeks remained Nietzsche's lodestar throughout his creative life—as a source both of spiritual inspiration *and* an impetus to surpassing cultural achievement in his own age.

If Greek culture is really understood, we also see that it is gone for good. Thus is the philologist *the great skeptic* in our cultural and educational circumstances. That is his mission.¹⁸

The philologist as *skeptic*, not *Übermensch*. Here, if anywhere, are insights—again, formulated very early—which Nietzsche never gave over.

II

What, then, was the main point of *Wir Philologen*? What was Nietzsche's perspective on the classical tradition? Difficult questions to answer. Nietzsche characteristically fights on many fronts at once, and the notes for this essay are characteristic in their breadth and intensity. But the question *can* be answered, and it seems to me that the answer is crucial for a more-than-superficial understanding of Nietzsche's development in this period. The essay is, for me, one of the most important things he ever wrote, and would have been among his loveliest books, had he ever seen it to completion.

What I want to argue is that *Wir Philologen* is far more than a parting shot fired across the ship of academic state—an academy which Nietzsche was, even then, determined to leave behind. Still less is it merely a pictorial, imagistic presentation of the philologist-as-*Übermensch*, the pedagogic soul of a re-

juvenated Germany, over against the petty, technical expertise and bourgeois cultural philistinism of his academic contemporaries.¹⁹ That is where Nietzsche's individualism turns crassest, becoming what Alasdair MacIntyre will, in the next chapter and using pseudo-Aristotelian terms, call "bestly." Rather, I see *Wir Philologen* as a sustained and sophisticated reflection on the ways in which perspectives on the past and present are intimately related. "Philologists are such people as would use the stunted feeling of modern men concerning their own vast inferiority, all to earn a living," Nietzsche warns. "I know them. I am one myself."²⁰

I have already identified this collection of scholarly *prejudices*, past and present, as "the tragic posture."²¹ I would now like to read *Wir Philologen* as Nietzsche's single most sustained engagement with this distinctively "modern" posture, and thus as the most unmodern of his many observations—all of it undertaken in the name of a vision which seemed more authentically "tragic" to him, a vision which was, moreover, *Greek* to the core. Reading Nietzsche this way, and reading this essay in particular, we may be better able to see what in Nietzsche's perspective did not change, what did change, decisively—and often for the worse—as well as where and in what manner Nietzsche's vision is singularly relevant to a variety of contemporary perplexities and problems. He is still "unmodern," even to so late and so postured a "modernity" as our own.

What perspective does Nietzsche invite us to take on the tragic posture? A dramatic analogy best makes the point which wants making here. There is something deeply compelling, but also deeply artificial, about all great art, dramatic art first and foremost. A single *perspective* is given to us, and we are not really permitted to look at the theatrical world in any other way. The play begins in a manner which will help the poet, and us as well, get to the very ending he or she has in mind. "That which is taken for a beginning is always a deception," Nietzsche reminds us.²² The play is a closed circle whose beginning *destines* us to a certain kind of end. I have made this point before, and will surely do so again. That is the secret, and the subtle artifice, of all good storytelling. It is this essential deception which is part of the artist's mission—*aesthetic fictions*, again.

The Greeks were terribly plagued by a love of fables. . . . Every poetic people has such a passion for lying, along with a commensurate innocence. The neighboring peoples must have found this unbearable.²³

Nietzsche's main point is elegant and simple: in a narrative, every beginning and ending are of a piece.²⁴

What, then, is wrong with the stories the modern philosopher and philologist are telling? They are so deeply pessimistic about the "modern" situation—

a prejudice which is part and parcel of the tragic posture—that they have constructed a romantic image of the past *against which* to measure their own decline and fall. The past had in tremendous abundance the very things we no longer have. Their cultural richness is an indictment of the spiritual sterility of modern times—as though Schopenhauer and Wagner did not exist, as most classical philologists were content to pretend that they did not. Wagner's promise, in Nietzsche's early judgment, lay in his *cultural* power, his potential to give a tradition of authentically national theater—as a total, unified dramatic experience—back to contemporary German-speaking culture. Hence the depth of Nietzsche's disappointment at Bayreuth: a whole cultural, and modernist, dream was dying in a decadence more profound than Nietzsche had yet understood it to be.

Another dimension to the pessimistic modernism which Nietzsche was combatting was its *fatalism*. We will return to this notion in some detail in the third chapter. Pessimism tends to exploit this same concept—"modernity"—as somehow the inevitable *fate* of the contemporary world. Things have not changed so very much in the past century; we are still fatalistic modernists by and large, at least within the iron cage of the academy. There is simply nothing to be done about modernity. It defines who we are, more often than not, for the worse. "Is tragedy possible," Nietzsche asks us rhetorically, "for him who no longer believes in a metaphysical world?"²⁵ The modernist answer seems to be, No. The gods have all died, and tragedy died when they did. The only theater left to us—apart from Wagner's megalomaniacal self-indulgence—will be a theater of the absurd or else, as Hegel feared, satire and farce which, however well-intentioned, mark out the vast terrain of cultural decay.

Such a portrait of the modern situation as a Fall from the pristine purity of the past invokes tragic language explicitly. We are all reeling in the midst of a tragic cultural crisis, so the argument runs. It does so because it believes, rather disingenuously, that tragedy is about "unhappy endings" pure and simple—as we are allegedly "ending," unhappily, now. This view Nietzsche rejects out of hand.²⁶ He does so both factually and philosophically. Factually, Greek theater gives the lie to any such teleology. "Fragility, not Teleology," was the battlecry of the tragic stage, as we will see more clearly in chapter 3. Aeschylus, so far as we know, wrote only trilogies. That is to say, a deep crisis in the moral order is presented in the first play, but it is resolved in the third. Sophocles, too, began by writing trilogies, none of which survive intact, but then he later took to writing single plays. All the more telling, then, that three of Sophocles' seven surviving plays also *end well*. Nietzsche himself made much of this fact in *The Birth of Tragedy*.²⁷ It is only with Euripides that disaster begins to play a larger role in tragic drama. I suspect that this is precisely what Nietzsche considered so Socratic, and therefore decadent, about him (much as Aristophanes did in

The Frogs). That had become pretty much a canonical orthodoxy in the preceding generation, blaming the “end” of the Greek theater on Euripides.²⁸ What is surprising, and really very unusual, is to see Nietzsche accept an academic orthodoxy so uncritically.²⁹ It is precisely Euripides who troubles scholars so because he has left us a number of tragedies (or rather “tragicomedies” in our modernist double-speak) which defy scholarly classification *precisely because of the way they end*. The *Helen*, the *Iphigenia at Tauris*,³⁰ and the *Alkestis*—all raise the same issue because all end well. To say it again: Greek tragedy is not, and never was, about unhappy endings or simple disasters. Aristotle observes quite clearly that, given the choice, anyone properly put together would prefer a happy ending where it is possible.³¹ Tragedy is, in fact, not particularly interested in endings at all. It is modern people who are interested in that.

This leads us to the related philosophical issue. In fact, tragedies do not *end* badly. They *begin* badly. They begin at a point of outrageous human suffering, of a crisis in expectation and in the moral order. And regardless of how they end, the tragic genre is an inherently *affirmative* genre. We are all elevated somehow by the strangely pleasurable suffering we have witnessed.

The passion in Mimnermus, the hatred of age.

The deep melancholy in Pindar: only when a ray of light comes down from above does human life shine.

The world is to be understood out of *suffering*—that is the tragic in tragedy.³²

Tragedy presents us with a deep paradox: we are witnesses to pain and suffering on the stage, and yet we derive pleasure in the process. It constituted a life-long philosophical endeavor for Nietzsche to come to terms with this fact, to appreciate the essential dramatic miracle we have all experienced. Greek tragedy stands at an infinite remove from simplistic categories like “optimism” and “pessimism,” since it is not finally interested in the way plays “end.” Resolved or unresolved, tragedies are about *a certain kind* of spiritual crisis—what Hegel called a *Kollision*³³—something from which, however agonizing, meaning can be found (found, not made, as the more simplistic narratives of our day would have it).

Now the inconsistency between these penetrating insights and Nietzsche’s untrammelled hostility vis-à-vis the Christian tradition should be clear. For the dominant assumption, in Nietzsche’s day as well as in our own, is that Christianity is an “antitragic” faith by definition—that it cannot allow tragedy the last word in human affairs because it is too invested in a narrative order which must “end well.” If there is any truth to Fitzgerald’s dictum that Americans “all believe in the green light,” then Nietzsche views the claims of Christians as even

more superficial (in the case of Stanley Hauerwas, as I will argue in chapter 4, he may well be right). They believe in lights they cannot see. Christianity is grounded in a hopelessly optimistic (an interesting oxymoron, that) view of the world, too deeply committed to the principles of resolution even to appreciate the tremendous challenge which tragedy presents to its view of the world. To open oneself fully to the pessimism which tragedy preaches would be to move "beyond" Christianity, or rather beneath it, just as surely as Christianity attempts to move "beyond tragedy." Now such a view, while oddly compelling at first glance, is more deeply indebted to the posture than it is to careful argument. It is surely a bit too simple when dealing with a faith which preaches at its heart a crucified god.³⁴ And in any case, this postured refusal of Christian theology relies on the very sloppy categories of optimism and pessimism, as well as this fixation upon (unhappy) endings, which are the chief trademarks of the tragic posture. They are all things which Nietzsche, at his best, rejected out of hand.

III

So much, then, for the chief intellectual assumptions which constitute the tragic posture as I have defined it. If I have gone into greater detail rehearsing those four points here, it is only because I think that Nietzsche was so deliberately engaged in thinking about all four. How does the Nietzsche we meet in *Wir Philologen* line up over against this posture?

Extremely well, it seems to me. In fact, the notes for this essay represent the most systematic engagement with this constellation of ideas known to me in Nietzsche's *Nachlasse*. The two starting points—beginnings and endings, past and present—are most easily dealt with. They are, after all, the *leitmotif* of the entire essay. Winckelmann and Goethe had essentially rediscovered Greece for Germany³⁵—and in rediscovering her, they had also reevaluated her, recasting her in a vaguely German image, while animating her at the same time with new spiritual life.

But the legacy of this rediscovery, at least within the German academy, had not been a particularly happy one. The philological community was willing to see only a fantasy world of their own devising,³⁶ a world less true to the past than it was a utopian sublimation of classicist desire—classicists who were themselves entirely unsatisfied with the "modern" world in which they lived. This is the "Quixotism" of classical thinking to which Nietzsche objected so strongly. "There are things about which antiquity instructs us," Nietzsche says, "which I am hardly able even to say openly."³⁷ Greece was, in the final analysis, an *aesthetic* and not a political or moral ideal.³⁸ Nietzsche notes this pith-

ily, in a passage from the Seventh Notebook which had such importance to him that he italicized all of it:

*The philologist needs to understand three things, if he wants to prove his innocence: antiquity, the present, and himself. His guilt lies in the fact that he understands neither antiquity, nor the present, nor himself.*³⁹

As I have said many times now, interpretations—or less kindly, *prejudices*—about antiquity and modernity are always of a piece. Beginnings and endings hang or fall together.

The reasons for this are not far to find; we have alluded to them already. Philology has created a mythical haven for itself, an Ithaca to which it longs for return. It is a perspective which refuses to look at what it does not want to see. A romanticized classical antiquity and a pessimistic rejection of the present as somehow “modern” are flip sides of a common coin—an academic escapism of the worst sort. “The *flight from reality* to antiquity: isn’t the interpretation of the past falsified in precisely this way?”⁴⁰ He continues: “Greek antiquity is a collection of classical examples for the clarification of our whole culture and its development. It is a means to understand ourselves, to correct our times and thus to overcome them.”

What, then, stands in the way of completing this essential cultural task of overcoming? “The pessimistic foundation of our whole culture,” Nietzsche replies.⁴¹

What I find most intriguing about Nietzsche’s engagement with the tragic posture is how nicely it traces out the areas of real development, and occasional degeneration, in his mature thought. His primary insight—that the Greeks are surpassingly important, but for reasons which are as unmodern as they are foreign to the philological community—stands. He had been dissatisfied from the very start with Winckelmann’s self-satisfied talk of the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur”⁴² of the Greeks. His attempt to recover the *Dionysian* elements of theatrical experience is a product of this dissatisfaction.

Nietzsche himself, however, bows to the postured disdain for “modern” times later in his career. What began as a rather narrow disenchantment with cultural philistinism and the politicization of post-Hegelian Germany grew into a far broader rejection of German culture and the Teutonic style—a style which he characterizes as corrupted by a strict diet of local newspapers, Wagnerian music, and warm beer. Still later, Nietzsche’s rejection becomes nearly universal: he calls all of Europe, and finally the entire modern world, into question. His mature doctrine of *décadence*,⁴³ what he calls his “nose for decay,” is itself postured and overdrawn, according to his own earlier standards. He is no longer

unmodern; he has turned *antimodern*. And that is where his classicist polemics give way to the tragic posture.

By contrast, Nietzsche's reflections on tragedy and the nature of tragic suffering represent the most consistent dimension to his thought which, if anything, achieve ever-greater prominence, eloquence, and conviction. Nietzsche calls himself the first tragic philosopher. The tragedy he envisions embodies suffering, to be sure, but suffering of a very definite kind. Tragedy is an *enobling* estate. "Tragedy is the form that promises us a happy ending," Walter Kerr observes. "It is also the form that is realistic about the matter."⁴⁴ The Greeks do not deceive themselves; suffering is itself an eminently Hellenic motif.⁴⁵ But in their best moments, the Greeks took suffering and turned it into some of the finest poetry the world had yet known.

By Homer's time, the Greek spirit was largely complete. . . .

With them, we understand how bitter and cruel life appears! They do not deceive themselves. But they play around life with the drama of lies. Simonides says to take life as a game. Seriousness was all too familiar to them—as pain. Human suffering is a pleasure to the gods, since they will get a song out of it.

This the Greeks knew: that only through art can pain become pleasure: *vide tragoediam*.⁴⁶

Whatever else this means—and it meant *many* things to Nietzsche, at a variety of moments in his own life—it indicates decisively that tragedy is not about optimism or pessimism, pure and simple.⁴⁷ These categories are inadequate. And that is one of the most enduring and consistent themes in Nietzsche's thought.⁴⁸

This takes us to the final issue of Nietzsche's problematic and exceedingly complex relationship to the Christian tradition. He is, in these early years, still a far cry from the cheap anti-Christian polemics of his later works.⁴⁹ It is quite odd, then, that the same man who speaks so eloquently of tragedy as a way beyond the optimism/pessimism dichotomy should himself fall back on these same categories when it comes to discussing the Christian tradition. The spirit of Christianity—a ressentimental spirit of *décadence*—overcame the tragic integrity of the heroic and classical world, he says.⁵⁰ This same tragedy—and here the word *does* connote unhappy endings—played itself out again when the spirit of a rejuvenated antiquity we call the Renaissance, was done to death by Christianity, this time in the guise of the *German* Reformation.⁵¹ "Rome against Judea; Judea against Rome"⁵²—*that*, Nietzsche insists, is a timeless antagonism.

All the more remarkable, then, is this note, which flies in the face of so much which Nietzsche had already said, and would go on to say with ever-increasing vehemence.

Christianity has overcome classical antiquity—that is too easily said. First of all, Christianity is itself a part of antiquity; secondly, it preserved antiquity for us; and thirdly, it was never really at war with the pure spirit of antiquity.⁵³

Christianity as a part of antiquity, as the preserver of antiquity . . . one idea which consistently occupies Nietzsche's attention in this period is how one gains access to the Greeks. And in this period he wrestled frankly with his clear knowledge that our only access to the Greeks comes by way of Christianity, as well as what he calls "Alexandrian culture." That is to say, the only books we still possess are those that Alexandrian scribes and medieval monks thought fit to copy over. So it is that a decadent culture is in the same sense, inescapable. It has mediated all that we know of the Greeks to us.

"Enlightenment" and Alexandrian culture is the matter—in the best of cases!—that philologists want. Not Hellenism.⁵⁴

Over against this scholarly prejudice and narrowness of vision, Nietzsche notes another way of gaining access to antiquity. He sees something of this in Goethe: "This is the way Goethe grasped antiquity: always with a competitive spirit. But who else?"⁵⁵ That is to say, apart from scholarly decadence, there is another (Goethean, agonistic) incorporation of preClassical ideals, a virtual leapfrogging of the Christian-Alexandrian moment, in order to get from modernity *back to* Classical antiquity. We use the very best of the Alexandrian and Christian syntheses . . . in order to overcome them. Now, Nietzsche's reasons for admitting here what he himself elsewhere denies are also illuminating:

Better to say that Christianity continued to be braced up by antiquity, needed to let itself be overcome by the spirit of antiquity—that is, by the spirit of the Imperium, of the community, and so forth. We suffer from the extraordinary impurity and confusion of *human affairs* . . .⁵⁶

The problem is also the impurity and confusion of the *humanities*, the sloppy philology which insists on speaking of Greek and Latin antiquity in a single breath, of Athens and Rome as if they were of a piece. That academicians, theologists particularly, continue to do so will become clearer, I hope, in chapters 4 and 5.

Our relationship to classical antiquity is the real reason, the essential reason, for the sterility of modern culture: this whole modern concept of culture is something we get from the Hellenized Romans. We must distinguish within the phenomenon of antiquity itself: when we get to know its really productive period, we also condemn the whole epoch of Alexandrian-Roman culture. And

*yet we condemn our whole attitude toward antiquity and our entire Philology at the same time!*⁵⁷

IV

"We must distinguish within the phenomenon of antiquity itself." That is the methodological heart of Nietzsche's perspectivism, *his* perspective on the phenomenon of antique culture. 'Greece' was never synonymous with 'Athens'—not even culturally—until a very late date. That is an Alexandrian prejudice. "Greece" is a scattered collection of islands and local cultures with no center, a menagerie of artistic styles and perspectives which are not easily harmonized: from Asia Minor, through the eastern islands of the Dodecanese and the central Cyclades, and finally westward to the mainland, with Crete beckoning to the south. We will be moving away from Athens, southward toward the Aegean islands, in a moment.

But first, to say it again: Greece embraces not a single antiquity, but several—Nietzsche's Greece chief among them. This Greece is not many things which we might expect it to be. First and foremost, it has nothing to do with Rome. Rome did not preserve the best parts of classical antiquity, for Rome was already *décadent*.⁵⁸ "How much power does man have over things?—that is the central educational question," Nietzsche insists. "Now, to demonstrate how completely different it all can be, point to the Greeks. We need the Romans to show how things got to be as they are."⁵⁹

The Greeks are the only people of genius in world history. Even as learners, for they understand learning best, knowing enough not strictly to decorate and to glitter with borrowed adornments—as the Romans do.⁶⁰

Not only are Greece and Rome *not* synonymous, but Rome actually *contributed* to Greece's undoing. There are fascinating moments in which Nietzsche seems to suggest that the *pax Romana*, far from being the triumph of the late Hellenistic age, merely made the Greek world fat and lazy. Where struggle has become a thing of the past, there a form of cultural vitality has grown old. Moreover, Rome tilled the soil and made it ready for Christianity—which, as we saw, in Nietzsche's later view perpetuated the worst of it all. Taken together, Rome and Christianity did the very *memory* of an older, healthier Greek antiquity to death. Gaining access to this past anew is the essential educational and philosophical task.

Another thing which Greece quite clearly is not—and again the legacy of Rome misleads us—is a political or military high-water mark. According to Nietzsche, after the seemingly miraculous victories against the Persians—first at Marathon, and then later at Salamis and Plataea—Athens had started down

the path, not to world-historical importance, but rather toward inevitable military defeat and cultural irrelevance. Her best days were already behind her, though her empire had hardly begun. Taking the aesthetic turn so characteristic of his later thought, Nietzsche insists that Greece was an *aesthetic* ideal, never a moral or political model for our own, or any, times.

The political defeat of Greece is the greatest failure of culture, for it brought in its wake the hateful theory that one may only nurture culture if one is at the same time armed to the teeth, that it is all done with boxing-gloves. . . .

In this manner, Sparta [we should add Rome also] was the ruin of Hellas. It forced Athens to establish a centralized confederacy and to cast her lot completely upon politics.⁶¹

These are comments clearly directed against Nietzsche's contemporaries. Prussian troops held to define a nation which was quick to interpret military victory (against France in 1871) as a validation of its own cultural superiority.⁶² Culture, Nietzsche insists over and over again, is not concerned with *that* kind of power.

Nor is it about racial integrity, which was another alarming aspect of the contemporary German cultural scene, what Nietzsche censured most explicitly as "philistinism." Using the offensive notions of racial "purity" and "blood" to his own rhetorical purposes (and against those anti-Semites like Wagner and his own brother-in-law⁶³ who liked them), Nietzsche explodes the philological, Aryan myth of ancient Greece in the most deliberately jarring terms.

First habitation of Greek soil: Mongolian origin, with tree- and snake-cults. The coast bordered by Semitic raiders. Thracians here and there. The Greeks took all of these ingredients into their blood, and all the gods and the myths with them (much of the Odysseus-myth is Mongolian). The Doric incursion was a later military thrust, after which all the antecedent elements gradually coalesced.

What are "the Greek races?" Is it not enough to say that Italians, coupled with Thracian and Semitic elements, became *Greeks*?⁶⁴

Here, in a single brilliant sketch, Nietzsche manages to antagonize the racist theoreticians of his own era, underscores his own respect for Renaissance-culture and *Italian* (rather than German) philology, and de-emphasizes the importance of military power in the cultural course of things. These were, then as now, "unmodern" observations in the best sense.

Even racially, Nietzsche is saying, the Greeks were never one thing. It is ridiculous to look for that kind of unity. Any unity we find is one we impose ourselves—the first law of perspectivism. "We must distinguish within the phenomenon of antiquity itself. Philologists, it must be, shot through with

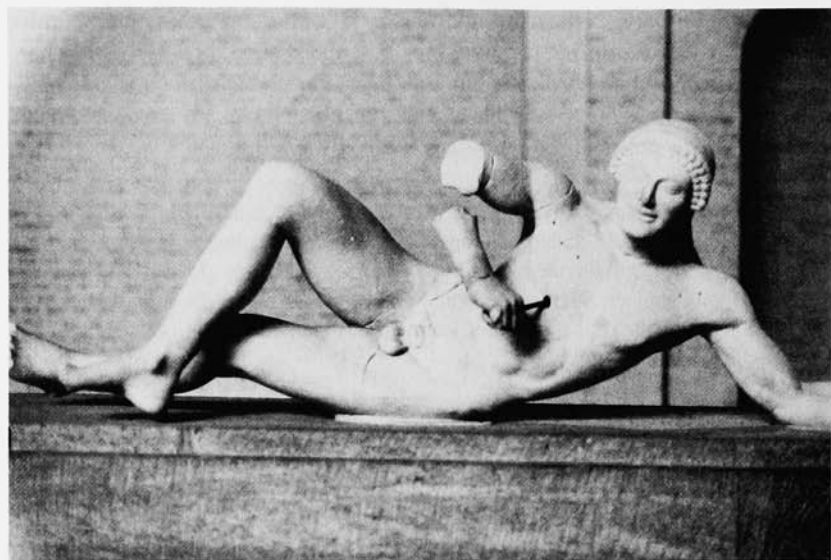


Figure 1. Front view of Fallen Warrior, Temple of Aphaia, West Pediment.

perspectivism: there are many different Greece's, and the philologist needs first to decide *which* Greece he wants—and *why*. One of the chief convictions which animates Nietzsche's whole essay is the intuition—which flew in the face of academic orthodoxy then, but has since been completely vindicated—that "Greece," or at least the first in a long line of Greece's, was far older than anyone had yet realized. In an early letter (1872) to Erwin Rohde, Nietzsche is quite clear about this:

Oh, that I would never again hear that effeminate image of the Homeric world as a youthful place, the Springtime of the world, etc.! In the sense that is argued, it is simply wrong. That an uncanny, wild struggle—emerging out of a darker, gloomier, more savage time—preceded him, and that Homer stands as a conqueror at the end of this desolate period—that is among my surest convictions. *The Greeks are much older than we think*. You can talk about Spring only if you put the Winter first. This world of purity and pristine beauty did not simply drop down from heaven.⁶⁵

And again, three years later, in the notes for *Wir Philologen*:

Men today marvel at the gospel of the tortoise and the hare—ah, those Greeks simply ran too fast. I do not look for happy times in history, but rather for times

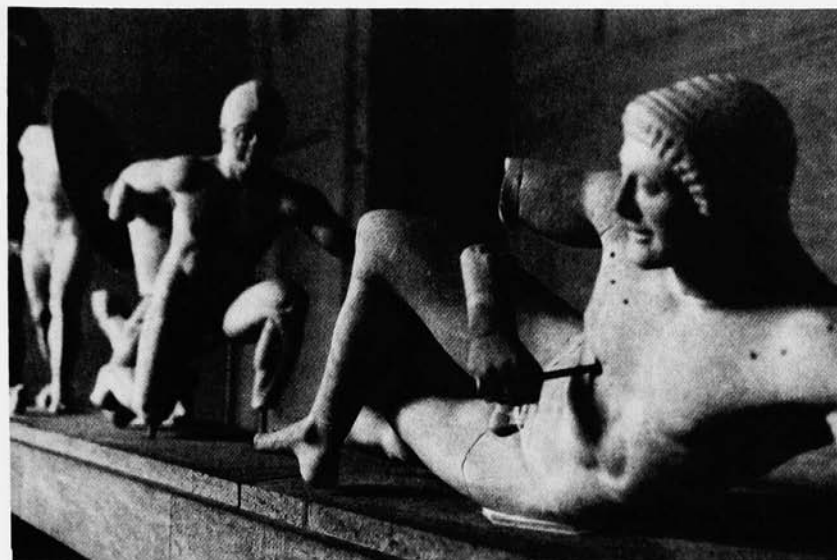


Figure 2. Temple of Aphaia, West Pediment, Glyptothek München.

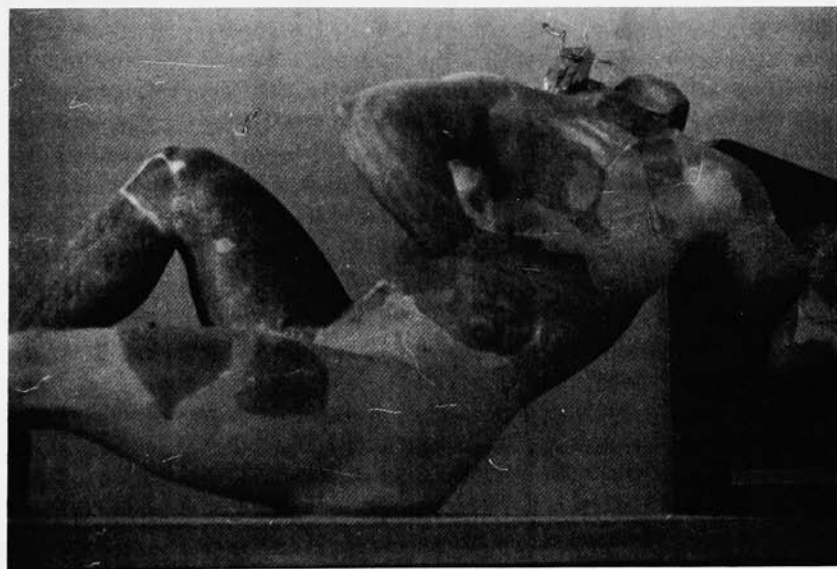


Figure 3. Front view of Fallen Warrior, Archaic Parthenon, Akropolis Museum, Athens.

which provide soil suitable for the cultivation of genius. This I find in the times prior to the Persian Wars. One cannot learn enough about them.⁶⁶

The implications of this perception are profound. Some of them we meet consistently in Nietzsche's later thought: the way he privileges the pre-Socratic philosophers and calls Socrates decadent by comparison; his preference for Aeschylus and his insensitivity to Euripides' manifold dramatic gifts; his polemical and nearly universal Roman/Christian scorn. But there is something else at stake for Nietzsche here, something which lies at the heart of the tragic posture, something which is both unmodern *and* antimodern, by turns. It is the single most important aspect of the essay, tossing the gauntlet down at the feet of the philological establishment, and at the same time charting out a vast territory for a lifetime of creative thinking.

You believe that Philology is at an end—and I believe that it has not yet even begun.

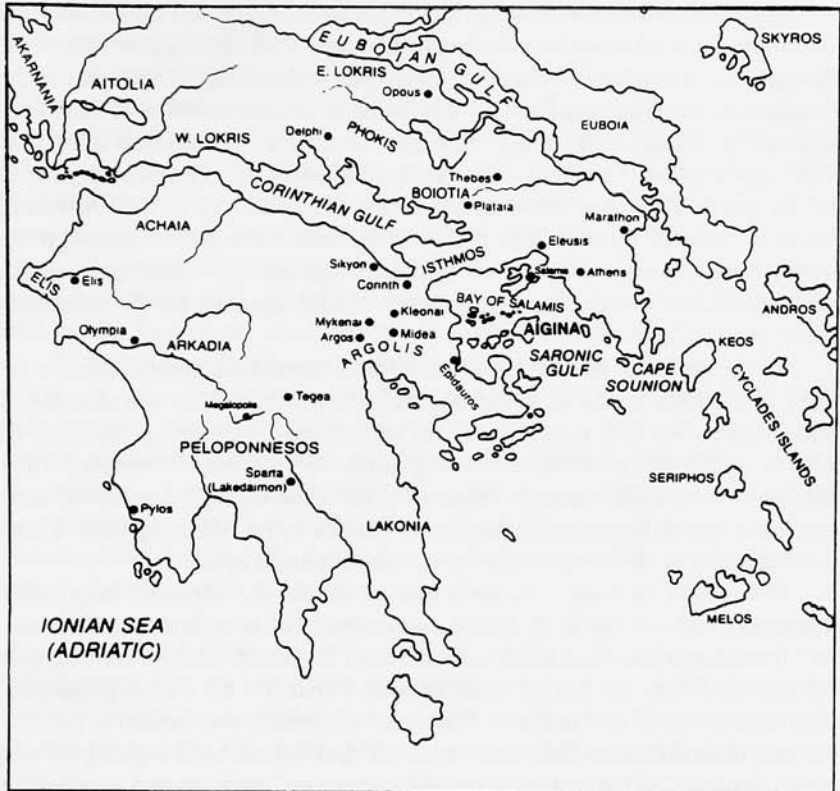
The greatest events which Philology has yet experienced are the successive appearances of Goethe, and Schopenhauer, and Wagner. One can manage a glance backward which penetrates much further now.

The 5th and 6th Centuries are now ready to be uncovered.⁶⁷

V

There is an island in the Saronic Gulf, directly south of the Piraeus harbor in Athens. It is a relatively large island which dominates the horizon from that perspective. Even today the rather shallow soil, which is nonetheless ideal for certain fruits and pistachios, and the soft rolling hills which make a picturesque setting for the poets and painters who have settled there, all combine to provide a stunning contrast with the rocky mountains of Attica, and the overbuilt chaos of Athens herself. The island served briefly as the capital of a soon-to-be liberated Greece in 1826, before once again yielding pride of place to Athens. The history of the island has, in fact, *always* been deeply intertwined with Athens, from prehistoric times.

That island is Aegina (Map #1). The archaeological record tells us that when Aegina was prospering economically, then Athens had fallen on hard times—and vice versa. This appears to have been the case from the Early Bronze Age. The Aegean, in a sense, was not big enough for them both. In the Archaic and Classical periods, when Athens was asserting her cultural and economic hegemony over the entire Aegean basin, it was Aegina which stood in her way, literally and figuratively. Pericles, exasperated, called Aegina "the eyesore of the Piraeus." Why?



Map 1. Locating the Island of Aegina. Reprinted with permission of *Soundings, An Interdisciplinary Journal*. (Knoxville, TN).

The question can be answered variously. And in answering it, it seems to me that we are drawing on knowledge only barely available to Nietzsche, if he knew of it at all. Yet remarkably, Nietzsche *sensed* it in the Greek history he wanted to tell, a history which he *intuited*, like Goethe, so sensitively and so well. The economic competitiveness of the area—that agonism which promotes the spiritual health of a culture, and which Nietzsche refers to as “life’s school of war”⁶⁸—exploded into periodic military conflict throughout the seventh and sixth centuries. Just as Sparta had its Messene, and Rome its Carthage, Athens had Aegina. And like them, only *after* this great conflict had been resolved, in victory, could Athens undertake any broader political program in the region. Such a program, as Nietzsche tells us, was both a sign of her own tremendous cultural endowment, and at the same time the beginning of her political end.

The conflict was a very long time in the deciding. It was punctuated and interrupted several times by influences (primarily Persian) from abroad. What happened then constitutes a fascinating chapter in the history of this part of the Mediterranean. When the Persians first came to Greece in 490 BCE, they were repulsed at Marathon by a vastly inferior Greek force comprised mainly of Athenian hoplites as well as a contingent of Plataeans. It was, of course, a land battle, and thus Aegina—the only sea-power strong enough to rival Athens at the time—played no part in it. Nor for that matter did Sparta, although we should have expected her to do so. Spartan troops arrived shortly *after* the decisive battle had already been fought—a real sticking-point for the Athenians some decades later.

Ten years later, when the Persians returned, things looked very different indeed. On the one hand, the threat was far more grave: Athens was abandoned and given up for lost; its Acropolis (as well as the neighboring sanctuary of Eleusis to the south) was burned to the ground. Defeat seemed imminent. Then the Persians were unexpectedly repulsed at sea in the bay of Salamis (480 BCE) and decisively defeated on land, again, at Plataea in the following year. A substantial majority of Xerxes' forces never made it home again.

One reason for these victories is that the Greeks did what they only rarely managed to do—to put aside their local quarrels and to present a united military front. Even here they did not do so across the board. Thebes, for one, cast her lot with Persia and lost her freedom when Persia lost the war. Aegina straddled the fence until the final hour.⁶⁹ She was not certain she wanted to fight on the side of an Athenian fleet with which she had herself been warring off and on for decades. At the last moment, she rose to the occasion and cast her lot with the united Greek fleet. And rise to the occasion she surely did. After Salamis, when the Greeks awarded a prize to the naval contingent which had best distinguished itself (a characteristic Greek competitive custom, which Nietzsche surely loved), Aegina took the first prize—much to the chagrin of Athens, which had to content itself with second place.

With the spoils and monies they won in this battle, the Aeginetans conceived an enormous temple complex to Aphaia, patron goddess of the island, whose mythical "relationship" to this particular spot seems to have been very old, yet whose history was rather obscure.⁷⁰ Suffice it to say that the temple celebrates an important *local deity*, who is at least arguably more important for being local than she is for being divine. In fact, another sea-nymph—Aegina herself—had become the bride of Zeus, bearing him a semidivine son by the name of Aiakos. His sons, the Aiakidai, were known throughout Greece—as symbols of a lost and heroic golden age—but always had a special favor for this island. First there was Peleus, who fathered Achilles, a son of even greater

renown. Then there was Telamon, who is also best-known as the father of a son who surpassed him: of Ajax.

Now the Aiakidai had allegedly been seen at Salamis, coming to the aid of the Aeginetan fleet—another reason, if any were still needed, for dedicating the spoils of war in a temple to a *local* deity. But there is far more to this temple than pious thanksgiving. The temple is situated on one of the highest points of the island, boasting a stunning panoramic view of the bay and the mainland beyond. It would have been visible from almost anywhere in Athens on a clear day—the eyesore of the Piraeus, said Pericles. It surely was designed to antagonize the Athenians,⁷¹ whose own temples lay in ashes and were not to be rebuilt (as the Parthenon we now know) for some forty years.

That later age was the age of Pericles, the great age of Athenian imperial expansion and self-congratulatory “democracy.”⁷² When this same Athens finally took off the boxing gloves in the Peloponnesian War, she forcibly removed all the male inhabitants of Aegina and sold them into slavery. These people were not resettled until after the thirty-year conflict had been resolved in the Spartans’ favor, and the Spartans offered free-passage to any Aeginetan desiring a homecoming. We do not hear much of this awful event,⁷³ but we have a poet who speaks of it at length.

That poet is Pindar.⁷⁴ An aristocratic native of Thebes—Theba being the sister-nymph of Aegina—he knew what it was to be on the losing side in a war of this magnitude. He knew the embarrassment of backing the wrong tyranny. And he seems to have wandered very widely, relying upon his growing notoriety as a poet to win him homes abroad, before he finally settled down, after a fashion, on Aegina. Nearly a fourth of his extant Victory Odes (eleven out of forty-five) are composed for Aeginetans who were victorious in the panhellenic games, and this seems to have been no mean coincidence. His epinikians were presumably performed—when the performance took place on Aegina—at the Aiakeion, the shrine of Aiakos in the center of town, and the island’s many local myths served as grist for his poetical mill in many an ode. In every sense, Aegina had become his spiritual and adoptive second home.

Now the curious imagery of his *Eighth Nemean Ode*⁷⁵ makes a sudden, fresher kind of sense. Pindar sings the suicide of Ajax, ancient kin of Aiakos—and of Aegina herself, since person and place are ever of a piece in Pindar. Ajax killed himself, we are told, for shame after losing the honor of Achilles’ armor to Odysseus—that slippery spokesman for a newer political savvy and Realpolitik. While there is always a danger in simplifying complex poetic and mythic images, there is still a truth—an *artistic* truth, Nietzsche would be quick to remind us—in the claim that “Ajax is Aegina, and Odysseus is Athens.” Or, if that seems too simplistic, then Ajax is a symbol for an older, aristocratic world

which had been made to look ridiculously hollow at Sparta, and which was challenged now by the ideology of Athenian democracy.⁷⁶ That is why Pindar makes so much of the fact that a whole ethos died when Ajax (who is also Aegina) did. The Greek world was no longer a place hospitable to this older brand of heroic virtue, a world where deeds, not words alone, were the measure of the man.

A man who was short on words
but great of heart, now lies crushed
in darkness, buried by bitter words.
For the world gives first prize
to the glittering lie . . .⁷⁷

Ajax was the only genuinely aristocratic hero left when Achilles died—an aristocrat of the spirit, not a moneyed gentleman such as the next generation would produce in such nauseating, philistine abundance. When Odysseus, Agamemnon, and others jealously schemed to steal a prize rightfully his, they sought to cut Ajax down to a more human size—and decapitated themselves in the process.

The Danaans favored Odysseus
with secret votes. And Ajax
stripped of the golden armor
rolled thrashing
in his own hot blood.⁷⁸

The world has been a smaller place ever since, Pindar tells us, tied to the Procrustean sensibility of democratic ideals which Nietzsche, too, laughed to scorn.

The history of these two places—Athens and Aegina—is even more intertwined than that. When Lord Elgin and his assistants had finished carting most of the best Parthenon marbles off to England in 1811,⁷⁹ four younger men—but especially Elgin's architect, Charles R. Cockerell, who later published a copious journal of their travels⁸⁰—opted for further archaeological work in Greece and Asia Minor, rather than an immediate return to England and Bavaria. They went first to Aegina.⁸¹ They came immediately to the precinct of Aphaia. And no sooner had they sunk a shovel in the soil, then they began pulling whole statues out of the ground. It was a cache of complete statues, beautifully preserved, which put even the Elgin marbles to shame. In a comedy of errors even more extreme than the one Elgin himself was forced to play (he lost his shirt when the British government offered him only £35,000 for the entire collection, roughly one-half of the incredible cost of dismantling the marbles and trans-