

WHAT I OWE TO THE ANCIENTS

1

In conclusion, a word about that world to which I sought approaches, to which I have perhaps found a new approach—the ancient world. My taste, which may be the opposite of a tolerant taste, is in this case too far from saying Yes indiscriminately; it does not like to say Yes; rather even No; but best of all, nothing. That applies to whole cultures, it applies to books—also to places and landscapes. At bottom it is a very small number of ancient books that counts in my life; the most famous are not among them. My sense of style, for the epigram as a style, was awakened almost instantly when I came into contact with Sallust. I have not forgotten the surprise of my honored teacher, Corssen, when he had to give his worst Latin pupil the best grade: I had finished with one stroke. Compact, severe, with as much substance as possible, a cold sarcasm against “beautiful words” and “beautiful sentiments”—here I found myself. And even in my Zarathustra one will recognize a very serious ambition for a Roman style, for the aere perennius [more enduring than bronze] in style.

Nor was my experience any different in my first contact with Horace. To this day, no other poet has given me the same artistic delight that a Horatian ode gave me from the first. In certain languages that which has been achieved here could not even be attempted. This mosaic of words, in which every word—as sound, as place, as concept—pours out its strength right and left and over the whole, this minimum in the extent and number of the signs, and the maximum thereby attained in the energy of the signs—all that is Roman and, if one will believe me, noble par excellence. All the rest of poetry becomes, in contrast, something too popular—a mere garrulity of feelings.

2

To the Greeks I do not by any means owe similarly strong impressions; and—to come right out with it—they cannot mean as much to us as the Romans. One does not learn from the Greeks—their manner is too foreign, and too fluid, to have an imperative, a “classical” effect. Who could ever have learned to write from a Greek? Who could ever have learned it without the Romans?

For heaven’s sake, do not throw Plato at me. I am a complete skeptic about Plato, and I have never been able to join in the admiration for the artist Plato which is customary among scholars. In the end, the subtlest judges of taste among the ancients themselves are here on my side. Plato, it seems to me, throws all stylistic forms together and is thus a first-rate decadent in style: his responsibility is thus comparable to that of the Cynics, who invented the satira Menippea. To be attracted by the Platonic dialogue, this horribly self-satisfied and childish kind of dialectic, one must never have read good French writers—Fontenelle, for example. Plato is boring. In the end, my mistrust of Plato goes deep: he represents such an aberration from all the basic instincts of the Hellene, is so moralistic, so pre-existent Christian—he already takes the concept “good” for the highest concept—that for the whole phenomenon of Plato I would sooner use the harsh phrase “higher swindle,” or, if it sounds better, “idealism,” than any other. We have paid dearly for the fact that this Athenian got his schooling from the Egyptians (or from the Jews in Egypt?). In that great calamity, Christianity, Plato represents that ambiguity and fascination, called an “ideal,” which made it possible for the nobler spirits of antiquity to misunderstand themselves and to set foot on the bridge leading to the cross. And how much Plato there still is in the concept “church,” in the construction, system, and practice of the church!

My recreation, my preference, my cure from all Platonism has always been Thucydides. Thucydides and, perhaps, Machiavelli’s Principe are most closely related to myself by the unconditional will not to gull oneself and to see reason in reality—not in “reason,” still less in “morality.” For the wretched

embellishment of the Greeks into an ideal, which the “classically educated” youth carries into life as a prize for his classroom drill, there is no more complete cure than Thucydides. One must follow him line by line and read no less clearly between the lines: there are few thinkers who say so much between the lines. With him the culture of the Sophists, by which I mean the culture of the realists, reaches its perfect expression—this inestimable movement amid the moralistic and idealistic swindle set loose on all sides by the Socratic schools. Greek philosophy: the decadence of the Greek instinct. Thucydides: the great sum, the last revelation of that strong, severe, hard factuality which was instinctive with the older Hellenes. In the end, it is courage in the face of reality that distinguishes a man like Thucydides from Plato: Plato is a coward before reality, consequently he flees into the ideal; Thucydides has control of himself, consequently he also maintains control of things.

3

To smell out “beautiful souls,” “golden means,” and other perfections in the Greeks, or to admire their calm in greatness, their ideal cast of mind, their noble simplicity—the psychologist in me protected me against such “noble simplicity,” a *niaiserie allemande* anyway. I saw their strongest instinct, the will to power: I saw them tremble before the indomitable force of this drive—I saw how all their institutions grew out of preventive measures taken to protect each other against their inner explosives. This tremendous inward tension then discharged itself in terrible and ruthless hostility to the outside world: the city-states tore each other to pieces so that the citizens of each might find peace from themselves. One needed to be strong: danger was near, it lurked everywhere. The magnificent physical suppleness, the audacious realism and immoralism which distinguished the Hellene constituted a need, not “nature.” It only resulted, it was not there from the start. And with festivals and the arts they also aimed at nothing other than to feel on top, to show themselves on top. These are means of glorifying oneself, and in certain cases, of inspiring fear of oneself.

How could one possibly judge the Greeks by their philosophers, as the Germans have done, and use the Philistine moralism of the Socratic schools as a clue to what was basically Hellenic! After all, the philosophers are the decadents of Greek culture, the counter-movement to the ancient, noble taste (to the agonistic instinct, to the polis, to the value of race, to the authority of descent). The Socratic virtues were preached because the Greeks had lost them: excitable, timid, fickle comedians, every one of them, they had a few reasons too many for having morals preached to them. Not that it did any good—but big words and attitudes suit decadents so well.

4

I was the first to take seriously, for the understanding of the older, the still rich and even overflowing Hellenic instinct, that wonderful phenomenon which bears the name of Dionysus: it is explicable only in terms of an excess of force. Whoever followed the Greeks, like that most profound student of their culture in our time, Jacob Burckhardt in Basel, knew immediately that something had been accomplished thereby; and Burckhardt added a special section on this phenomenon to his *Civilization of the Greeks*. To see the opposite, one should look at the almost amusing poverty of instinct among the German philologists when they approach the Dionysian. The famous Lobeck, above all, crawled into this world of mysterious states with all the venerable sureness of a worm dried up between books, and persuaded himself that it was scientific of him to be glib and childish to the point of nausea—and with the utmost erudition, Lobeck gave us to understand that all these curiosities really did not amount to anything. In fact, the priests could have told the participants in such orgies some not altogether worthless things; for example, that wine excites lust, that man can under certain circumstances live on fruit, that plants bloom in the spring and wilt in the fall. As regards the astonishing wealth of rites, symbols, and myths of an orgiastic origin, with which the ancient world is literally overrun, this gave Lobeck an opportunity to

become still more ingenious. "The Greeks," he said (Aglaophamus I, 672), "when they had nothing else to do, laughed, jumped, and ran around; or, since man sometimes feels that urge too, they sat down, cried, and lamented. Others came later on and sought some reason for this spectacular behavior; and thus there originated, as explanations for these customs, countless traditions concerning feasts and myths. On the other hand, it was believed that this droll ado, which took place on the feast days after all, must also form a necessary part of the festival and therefore it was maintained as an indispensable feature of the religious service." This is contemptible prattle; a Lobeck simply cannot be taken seriously for a moment.

We have quite a different feeling when we examine the concept "Greek" which was developed by Winckelmann and Goethe, and find it incompatible with that element out of which Dionysian art grows—the orgiastic. Indeed I do not doubt that as a matter of principle Goethe excluded a thing of the sort from the possibilities of the Greek soul. Consequently Goethe did not understand the Greeks. For it is only in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian state, that the basic fact of the Hellenic instinct finds expression—its "will to life." What was it that the Hellene guaranteed himself by means of these mysteries? Eternal life, the eternal return of life, the future promised and hallowed in the past; the triumphant Yes to life beyond all death and change; true life as the overall continuation of life through procreation, through the mysteries of sexuality. For the Greeks the sexual symbol was therefore the venerable symbol par excellence, the real profundity in the whole of ancient piety. Every single element in the act of procreation, of pregnancy, and of birth aroused the highest and most solemn feelings. In the doctrine of the mysteries, pain is pronounced holy: the pangs of the woman giving birth hallow all pain; all becoming and growing—all that guarantees a future—involves pain. That there may be the eternal joy of creating, that the will to life may eternally affirm itself, the agony of the woman giving birth must also be there eternally.

All this is meant by the word Dionysus: I know no higher symbolism than this Greek symbolism of the Dionysian festivals. Here the most profound instinct of life, that directed toward the future of life, the eternity of life, is experienced religiously—and the way to life, procreation, as the holy way. It was Christianity, with its resentment against life at the bottom of its heart, which first made something unclean of sexuality: it threw filth on the origin, on the presupposition of our life.

5

The psychology of the orgiastic as an overflowing feeling of life and strength, where even pain still has the effect of a stimulus, gave me the key to the concept of tragic feeling, which had been misunderstood both by Aristotle and, quite especially, by our modern pessimists. Tragedy is so far from proving anything about the pessimism of the Hellenes, in Schopenhauer's sense, that it may, on the contrary, be considered its decisive repudiation and counter-instance. Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems, the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types—that is what I called Dionysian, that is what I guessed to be the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. Not in order to be liberated from terror and pity, not in order to purge oneself of a dangerous affect by its vehement discharge—Aristotle understood it that way—but in order to be oneself the eternal joy of becoming, beyond all terror and pity—that joy which included even joy in destroying.

And herewith I again touch that point from which I once went forth: The Birth of Tragedy was my first revaluation of all values. Herewith I again stand on the soil out of which my intention, my ability grows—I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysus-I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence.