



Science, Life, and Art in Nietzsche's Notes for 'We Philologists'

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Accepted: 27 July 2024 / Published online: 19 August 2024
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Abstract

The study retraces Nietzsche's 1875 notes for the planned but never published *Unfashionable Observation, We Philologists*, through a specific focus on the topics of science, life and art in their close and seldom discussed interrelation. The questions that the investigation addresses are: what is the significance of Nietzsche's problematisation of science in *We Philologists* for our interpretation of the topic in his later works? How should we interpret these notebooks in relation to his previous writings, on the one hand, and to his later treatment of themes like the deconstruction of Christianity, the critique of eudemonism or the historical genesis of the genius on the other? Framing the notebooks as unwittingly experimental precursors of Nietzsche's aphoristic books, the article interprets the unique nuance of the notes as an opportunity to start shedding a different light on the discussion of these questions in Nietzsche's later works. Science, life and art become thus the focal points of a more specific and circumscribed analysis of his early thought – reconnecting these topics to their tangible origins, and tracking their early development in the context of Nietzsche's acclaimed switch from philology to philosophy and cultural criticism.

Abbreviations of Nietzsche's Works

- BAW *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe: Werke*, Ed. J. Mette et al., 5 vols., Munich, 1943
KGW *Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Werke*, Ed. G. Colli et al., Berlin, 1967-
KGB *Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel*, Ed. G. Colli et al., Berlin, 1975-
KSB *Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe*, Ed. G. Colli et al., 8 vols, Berlin, 1986
KSA *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Ed. G. Colli et al., 15 vols, Berlin, 1988

Although Friedrich Nietzsche engaged with the problem of science in different phases of his career and from the most diverse angles and hermeneutical

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perspectives, classical philology was in effect the only scientific discipline of which he had first-hand professional experience, and the one out of which he did elaborate his earliest reflections on science as model of knowledge, method of thought and way of life. If the publication of a heterodox treatise such as *The Birth of Tragedy* could well be considered as his main critical gesture towards the discipline, this critique assumed nonetheless many other forms, and it is possible to find its traces in lectures notes, letters and notebooks of the same years.

Frequently obscured by other better-known works of the Basel period, Nietzsche's most explicit and accomplished critique of philology appears in a series of short writings, dated between Spring and Summer 1875, that he was planning to collect in a fifth instalment of his *Unfashionable Observations* titled 'Wir Philologen'.¹ The project never did result in an actual publication, and the notebooks – collected today both in the fourth volume of the Colli-Montinari *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*² and in the eighth volume of the *Kritische Studienausgabe*³ – have remained a seldom discussed segment of Nietzsche's production, despite their striking conceptual and stylistic consistency, and although they represent a crucial moment of the philosopher's endless dialogue with his earliest vocation.⁴ As reported by Hubert Cancik, whose commentaries on these notebooks remain the most extensive and perhaps most influential, Nietzsche was initially planning to shape the essay along the lines of the other *Unfashionable Observations*: namely, as a lengthy text divided in extended subsections – an outcome attained in part in what is now notebook seven, and in the transcription of notebook three, partly under Nietzsche's dictation, by Carl von Gersdorff.⁵ The fact that it remained drafted in short aphoristic fragments, however, contributes to the bizarre effect by which the notes appear, retrospectively, as a stylistic experiment – as an unwitting anticipation of Nietzsche's celebrated works of

¹ Fifth or fourth? On the order of the writings comprising the *Unfashionable Observations* and their exact chronological collocation in relation to *We Philologists* see Cancik, 'Philologie als Beruf', pp. 84-87; *Nietzsches Antike*, pp. 94-95; 'The Religion', p. 265. The problem is also briefly addressed in Schaberg, *The Nietzsche Canon*, p. 47 – where Nietzsche is said to have abandoned his previous idea of publishing the *Notizen* in light of their merely personal value (cf. the letter to Rohde dated 7 October 1875, on which we shall return below). Similar remarks in Benne, Santini, 'Nietzsche', p. 191 – on whose reading the fifth (or fourth) *Observation* was never published 'for good reasons', amongst which they only name the fact that it became 'obsolete' in the context of Nietzsche's life after his departure from academia. Notwithstanding these biographical and bibliographical details, however, the notes seem to enact an exercise in untimeliness in their own right: if the position of classical philology in the modern world was (and still is) inherently untimely, its critical discussion could not but embody and exacerbate this condition. Hereafter, all translations of articles and books in German except Nietzsche's will be mine.

² KGW, IV/1, pp. 85-203. Hereafter, the notes will only be referenced using their numeration as it appears in these pages – omitting both the volume name/numeration and the page number – and quoted in English translation from F. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, pp. 1-109.

³ KSA, VIII, pp. 1-127.

⁴ For a detailed survey of the sourced manuscripts see Cancik, 'The Religion', pp. 263-266 – in which material from 1876 is also included; Handwerk, 'Translator's Afterword', pp. 558-559 – including instead notebooks 10 and 16 from the same period.

⁵ See Cancik, 'Philologie als Beruf', p. 90; *Nietzsches Antike*, pp. 95-96.

the following years where, nonetheless, both the topics and their discussion appear to a higher degree of urgency and personal involvement.⁶

In this study, I argue that the notes can be considered an important element in the evaluation of Nietzsche's understanding of science, life and art in their indissoluble interconnection, and I retrace them with a particular focus on the passages where these topics seem to be more closely related. Reconsidering the significance of these notebooks in Nietzsche's philosophical and existential path, the treatment takes advantage of the spontaneity of his private writings to shed light on problems that gained major complexity in later years but that, at this specific stage, showed a more personal nuance, and therefore a more specific and circumscribed character.

I.

In *We Philologists*, Nietzsche drafts a critique of science through a provocative discussion of the deficient standards and criteria adopted by his contemporary and past colleagues. Despite his growing hostility towards the field of study, in the years of the *Unfashionable Observations* he maintained a sincere concern for the future of philology and the definition of its tasks.⁷ Thus his ironic depiction of the classicist should not be read as merely destructive, and even less as a belated defence and justification of the harshly criticized peculiarities of his own philological works, but rather as an attempt to identify the personal attitudes and the methodological choices that alienated the exponents of the *Altertumswissenschaften* from what he considered to be their real aims. In this first section, I will discuss the historicist stances assumed by classical philologists and their rationalistic posture towards life and art – portrayed by Nietzsche as an objectionable form of modern Socratism – as paradigmatic themes of his early critique of science, recurring throughout the notes as focal points of the latter.

Written three years after the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the notes for *We Philologists* revive several aspects and themes of Nietzsche's criticism of that intellectual attitude defined by James Porter as 'logic of disavowal': a self-deception through which the beholders of classical antiquity failed to acknowledge the contingency of the aestheticized, idealized and utterly subjective nature of their depictions, making their claims of objectivity at best self-contradictory.⁸ The historicist

⁶ Cancik deserves mention for the earliest insights on the transitional and anticipatory nature of *We Philologists* and, more specifically, for the detection of a thematic and stylistic continuity between this abandoned project and *Human, All Too Human*. Yet, in the wake of his work, and in implicit opposition to it, Benne and Santini have denied this continuity. In their treatment, *We Philologists* is rather akin to the previous lectures 'On the Future of our Educational Institutions' (1872), and even the stylistic consistency of the notes with Nietzsche's aphorisms of the following decade is framed as delusional, as the product of a 'misunderstanding' fuelled by a 'philological, namely editorial problem' (Benne, Santini, 'Nietzsche', p. 191). This article will frame the problem from a perspective that differs from both the interpretations here mentioned. In both cases, in fact, the urge to situate *We Philologists* in Nietzsche's *Denkweg*, and thus to defend (or demystify) its continuity with his previous and subsequent works, seems to have overshadowed the uniqueness of these notes – which lies precisely in the peculiar glimpse that they offer of Nietzsche's thoughts in the course of this crucial transition, as we shall see.

⁷ This ambiguity is well thematized by Cancik, who locates, within the text, a 'destructive' and a 'constructive' (in his words 'utopian') part of the discourse (see Cancik, 'Philologie als Beruf', p. 89); similar remarks, but in more general terms, in Silk, Stern, *Nietzsche*, p. 95.

⁸ For an exhaustive thematization of the concept see Porter, *Nietzsche*, pp. 186–196.

aspiration to comprehend ancient literature from an objective standpoint, to emancipate from the present in order to grasp the texts in the purity of their original context, appeared to Nietzsche as delusional. He intuited that to dispense with the optics of modernity was the purest of modern dreams and that, on the contrary, the awareness of the sheer subjectivity of our historical judgement was not only the first step towards a critical appreciation of antiquity – and so perhaps, and paradoxically, towards the purest possible form of historicism – but also the only way to perpetuate a field of study that, inevitably, would have said its last word very soon.⁹

Philology as a science concerned with antiquity naturally has no eternal duration, its subject matter can be exhausted. Not to be exhausted is the ever-new accommodation of every age to antiquity, measuring oneself against it. If one sets the philologist the task of understanding *his* age better by means of antiquity, then his task is an eternal one. – This is the antinomy of philology: we have actually always understood *antiquity* only *from out of the present* – and are now supposed to understand the *present* *from out of antiquity*?¹⁰

In Nietzsche's early thought, and probably well beyond, the insight into the temporally situated, subjective impulse behind all historical research needs to be seen, on the one hand, as a consequence of his psychological interest in the conflicting drives underlying every cultural phenomenon and, on the other, as one of the factors shaping his views on the role of classical scholarship. It is worth spelling out this three-fold conceptual framework starting from the last aspect.

Echoing methodological prompts that, sparked initially by August Boeckh and his philology of things (*Sachphilologie*), were gaining new momentum in Basel thanks to the lectures on Greek culture by Jacob Burckhardt¹¹, Nietzsche's conception and practice of philology reflected and advocated the cognitive value of an immediate, aesthetic intuition against an endless 'ant-like' analysis of the texts.¹² Not only were

⁹ On Nietzsche's ambiguity towards historicism see Cancik, *Nietzsches Antike*, pp. 89-91.

¹⁰ 3[62].

¹¹ In May 1875, Nietzsche received from Louis Kelterborn a second, more reliable record of Burckhardt's lectures on Greek Culture – and indeed the inspirational role played by the Swiss historian in the conception and composition of *We Philologists* is a theme that recurs very frequently in the commentaries on the notes (see Cancik, 'Philologie als Beruf', p. 84; 'The Religion', pp. 266-267; D'Iorio, 'L'image', pp. 414-415; Regent, 'Nietzsche', p. 695 [n. 53]; but also Löwith, *Jacob Burckhardt*, p. 12). As proved by a letter to Gersdorff (7 November 1870 – KGB, II/1, pp. 155-156), by the mid-seventies Nietzsche was well acquainted not only with the lectures on the Greeks, but also with those on the study of history, later republished and commonly known as *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*. In *We Philologists*, Burckhardt is explicitly mentioned twice – 4[3], 5[58]. 5[127] is a direct quotation from the *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* ending with a capital 'B', but Handwerk has traced many more cross-references from notebook 5 in Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, pp. 462-470. Apart from these, other remarks that seem to derive, more or less evidently, from an engagement with Burckhardt's material appear in 3[15], 3[52], 5[16], 5[70], 5[114], 5[115], and 5[143] – and they range from the treatment of the Hegelian theme of rationality in history to the proverbial Greek mendacity and 'enmity toward writing'. Not to mention Nietzsche's aspiration to appraise 'the whole Hellenic way of thinking' (see below) – an aspiration that was most probably a tribute, at least in part, to his colleague's *kulturgeschichtlich* method and psychological interest.

¹² The question concerning the role of intuition in Nietzsche's philological method is certainly beyond the specific scope of this investigation, but some clarification on our use of the term seems due. Despite

the two aspects seen as antithetical, but they were also arranged in a hierarchical order of tasks in which the intuitive one had priority and epistemological preponderance.¹³ Anticipating a theme that, in different contexts and to different degrees of assertiveness, was to recur in his writings up until *Twilight of the Idols*, he visualized a historical dialectic in which the efforts of entire generations of researchers were seen as a mere preparatory phase, as a prolegomenon to the appearance of a pivotal figure who, synthesizing and exploiting their work, would have undertaken a comprehensive, final evaluation of the studied phenomena.¹⁴ In the specific context of classical philology, the preparatory phase was represented by the innumerable analytical studies devoted to a microscopic scrutiny of Greek and Roman texts – whilst the ultimate role of the superior representatives of the discipline consisted of an interpretation of the classical period in which the general had priority over the particular, the text had to give way to the context¹⁵ and, in a reversal of Seneca's renowned motto, philology had to be made into philosophy.¹⁶

Footnote 12 (continued)

the ironical and critical approach towards intuitionism that was to characterize the so-called free spirit period (see for instance *Human, All Too Human*, I, aphorisms 131, 162; KGW, IV/2, p. 563 – 23[173]), the Nietzsche of these notebooks could still hold the 'intuitive insight' ('*intuitive Einsicht*') of the Greeks, for instance, to be the hallmark of their genius (see 5[70]). In *We Philologists*, his word for 'intuition' is '*Anschauung*': a term that betrays his remarkable continuity with the long philological tradition preceding him (e.g. Wolf, Boeckh) – but also with Burckhardt, whose understanding of the concept was closely intertwined with the just mentioned focus on 'the whole Hellenic way of thinking' and perfectly compatible with that of Nietzsche himself, in the first section of *The Birth of Tragedy* and elsewhere. In relation to these predecessors, and returning to the focus of this contribution, it may be said that this intuitive approach was precisely the element that Nietzsche deemed pivotal in order to enrich the philological science with a shrewder grasp of the real mechanisms of life, on the one hand, and with major awareness of the subtleties of art on the other – but more on this below. In 5[5] the '*Anschauungen*' of a scientific mindset are the antidote to the 'physical assumptions [*Annahmen*]' of religion, whilst 5[31] hints at some 'higher view' ('*höhere Anschauungen*') of the philologists' pedagogical tasks that they seemed cunningly reluctant to accept. For a discussion of the term see Jensen, *Nietzsche's*, pp. 61–64 (and *ibid.*, nn. 9–10, for further references) – where nonetheless the markedly Schopenhauerian background does not allow the sense here considered to emerge.

¹³ The first remarks on this hierarchy of tasks and faculties date back to 1868, see BAW, III, p. 339; V, p. 128.

¹⁴ See the provocative image of the one 'genuine philologist', contrasted with the 'unsuited majority' of the remaining '99' in 3[21].

¹⁵ The focus on the context seems confirmed by Nietzsche's predilection, in his almost perfectly coeval lectures on the 'Geschichte der griechische Literatur' (1874–1876), for Gottfried Bernhardt's *History of Literature*. As highlighted by Santini, this predilection was 'due to its consideration of Greek literature in its socio-political contexts and [to] its attempt to reconstruct through those contexts the "Weltanschauung" of the Greek world' (see Santini, 'The History', p. 170).

¹⁶ The Senecan original (*Epistle*, 108.23) reads: *quae philosophia fuit, facta philologia est* – provocatively reversed by Nietzsche himself at the end of his inaugural lecture in Basel, 'Über die Persönlichkeit Homers' (1869). The reversal is extensively discussed, with several references to *We Philologists*, in Berry, 'Nietzsche', pp. 85–89. Yet Nietzsche's urge to desert philology and textual analysis should be taken with a pinch of salt. Throughout his career, and especially in the years of his alleged conversion (or perhaps *return* – cf. BAW, V, p. 251) to philosophy, he maintained a deep interest and a markedly speculative understanding of philology (see Gerratana, 'Jetzt zieht mich', p. 327; similarly Latacz, 'On Nietzsche's', p. 8).

A great advantage for a philologist is that his science has prepared so much in order to place it in the possession of heirs, if he *is capable* of this – especially to take up the *appraisal* of the whole Hellenic way of thinking. As long as one fiddled with details, it led to a *misunderstanding* of the Greeks; [...].¹⁷

All the emphases are in the original, and indeed the idea of an evaluation of historical phenomena beyond the concern for details, but also beyond the specificity of Greek culture, seems to have been visualized by Nietzsche as a markedly *psychological* undertaking: as the result of a complex investigation that, overcoming the boundaries of a canonical textual analysis, had rather to shift its focus onto the enigmatic realm of ancient and modern ‘ways of thinking’. *Pace* Cancik, this methodological choice, as well as the belief in its irreconcilability with the restraining standards of philology, had been dismaying yet enticing the young Nietzsche well before the drafting of *We Philologists*, and the traces of his reflections on these hermeneutical issues can be found, in his private writings, as early as 1868.¹⁸ In the February of that year, to be sure, whilst describing to Erwin Rohde the outline of a ‘history of literary studies in antiquity and in the modern period’, he wrote: ‘I am initially uninterested in the details; what attracts me is the generally human [*das Allgemein-Menschliche*], how the need of a literary-historical investigation intensifies’.¹⁹ Not a mere romantic interest in the ‘generally Greek’ then, but rather a fairly unorthodox concern with the ‘generally human’ in all its political, social and psychological implications grounded his approach to the history of literature, as much as his suspicious reception of every research methodology that could dispense with or, indeed, disavow the role of the subjective element too briskly.²⁰ The latter was therefore of the utmost importance in Nietzsche’s reflections not only, and not merely, for its contribution in shaping the cultural phenomena of the past and their transmission through the centuries, but also, and consequently, for the role it played – and should have increasingly played – in defining the tasks and the strategies of a classical scholar.

Thus one should not be surprised if his characterization of Socrates – and of the archetype the latter had embodied at the latest since the lecture on *Socrates and Tragedy* in February 1870 – displayed and analysed elements that, in *We Philologists*, ranged freely from the uncertain physical and psychological features of the

¹⁷ 3[15].

¹⁸ See BAW, III, pp. 329–338. On Cancik’s reading *The Birth of Tragedy* is a first example of Nietzsche’s psychological enquiries, but the full evolution ‘*vom Philologen zum Psychologen*’ took place not earlier than 1874–1876 (see Cancik, *Nietzsches Antike*, pp. 54–57, 94).

¹⁹ KGB, I/2, p. 248 - trans. is mine. Gerratana highlights the continuity between this earlier project and *We Philologists*. Furthermore, in his treatment of the meaning of ‘*Allgemein-Menschliche*’ – after providing evidence of a note (BAW, IV, p. 127) where Nietzsche lists the possible origins of the ‘need of a literary-historical investigation’ – he tends to underline the importance of the psychological insight in Nietzsche’s analysis of ‘ancient and contemporary scholars’, and in this phase of his thought in general (see Gerratana, ‘Jetzt zieht mich’, p. 340). For a stronger emphasis on his ‘negative (polarised) psychology’ see also Cancik, *Nietzsches Antike*, pp. 101–102, 105–106.

²⁰ In 5[19] Nietzsche confirms that the ‘critical observation’ of antiquity – an observation that is neither ‘conjectural’ nor literary-historical, and that therefore cannot but be focussed on ‘cultural and psychological habits’ (see and cf. Porter, ‘Nietzsche’s’, p. 68) – is the only approach that ‘still remains’.

ancient philosopher to the impact of his alleged teachings on the subsequent centuries of scientific and philosophical thought.²¹ Keeping his role of archetype of the theoretical man, the Socrates emerging from these notes epitomized every aspect of a scientific rationality that, both on a historical and on an individual level, exercised its harmful authority over human life in contrast to art and its narratives. Unlike the Presocratics who, since the first lectures on their philosophy planned by Nietzsche in 1869, had been depicted as the embodiment of an attempt to overcome myth through an equally artistic representation of nature, Socrates was portrayed as a totally inartistic thinker – dispensing with the mythical outlook to prepare an individualistic, abstract and moralistic season of Greek culture.²² Framing this archetype as such, Nietzsche intended to reveal that a scientific approach to human creativity and life bore limits that, being already visible at the earliest stages of its development, remained essentially unchanged in its modern representatives. The urge to find logical consistency in mythical tales, for instance, gradually distancing the Greeks of the classical period from their archaic religion, had its precise counterpart in the philological obsession with the analysis of textual evidence and the result, in both cases, was a complete misunderstanding of the observed phenomenon. Conversely, the antidote prescribed by Nietzsche to the scholarly pedantry of scientific rationality was a 'sense for the symbolic': an almost physical proximity to the concealed significance of bygone things.

'Someone who has no sense for the *symbolic* has none for antiquity: this sentence to be applied to sober philologists [*nüchternen Philologen*].'²³ In commenting on this passage, thereby defined as a 'key phrase' of *We Philologists*, Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting writes:

As for the "sober philologist": to examine the historical correctness and formal philological quality of what has been handed down is 'bloodless memory of the past', and one would think that Homer had such a philological existence in mind when he described the shadows of Hades.²⁴

The *nüchterner Philolog* is not just sober, his deficit of sense has something deadly and, on the other hand, in a note of the early 1868 we can already read that 'there is something dead about science' (*Wissenschaft hat etwas Todtes*)²⁵: a lack

²¹ See, for instance, his depiction as 'the ugly man of the people' in 6[13].

²² In *We Philologists* – particularly in notebook 6, isolated sometimes from the others with the title 'Science and Wisdom in Battle', and predominantly dedicated to a discussion of the Presocratics (or rather 'Preplatonics' as he preferred to call them) – Nietzsche's characterization of these philosophers is in substantial continuity with the remarks he had previously made in the lectures on the 'Encyclopaedia of Classical Philology' (1871-1874[?]) and in the so-called *Philosophenbuch*. Nonetheless, the contrast with Socrates is more stressed here than it is elsewhere – cf. KGW, II/3, pp. 407-409; KSA, I, pp. 807-812; and particularly KGW, II/4, p. 214, where the very definition of 'Preplatonic' required a neat inclusion of Socrates within the group of his predecessors.

²³ 3[54] – emphasis in the original.

²⁴ Niehues-Pröbsting, 'Anekdote', p. 279. To be sure, Niehues-Pröbsting takes the provocative image from 3[51].

²⁵ BAW, III, p. 321.

of sensitivity for life in general, and for the real, concrete life of individuals in particular.²⁶

II.

The paradigmatic role played by philology in Nietzsche's evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of science for human life was a consequence of the fact that, through his engagement with the discipline, he could appreciate the effects of the scholarly way of life not only on himself, but also on some figures for which, in his early years, he felt a very strong attachment.²⁷ Hence, his remarks on the inherent conflict between science and life should not be conceived of as an abstract discussion of two opposite metaphysical entities, but rather as the result of a heartfelt clash between two elements that, especially in the case of life, need to be understood in all their concreteness. Science was indeed philology, but it was also and essentially a drive – a passion for knowledge²⁸ that, systematized in a specific method, had achieved its results through centuries of ever more specialized research. Life was – unpretentiously, and consistently with the psychological approach we are outlining – that of actual individuals. A philosophical synecdoche for a simple phenomenon.²⁹

The *advancement of a science at the expense of human beings* is the most damaging thing in the world. The spoiled human is a step backward for humanity; he casts his *shadow* forward across all time. It debases the disposition, the natural purpose of the individual science: it is itself finally ruined by this; it stands there, advanced, but does not affect life, or does so immorally.³⁰

This section of the article aims, on the one hand, to determine whether this process of annihilation, and the idealistic denial on which it was grounded, could be interpreted as consequences of an adulteration of the goals of science by means of an inherited pattern of religious values. On the other hand, it will briefly evaluate the

²⁶ On 2 June 1868, Nietzsche wrote to Paul Deussen that most philologists lived 'against nature' (see KGB, I/2, p. 283). On a different if compatible reading, these remarks on sobriety could also be interpreted as a counterpart of Nietzsche's thematization of 'intoxication', in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and particularly in the last paragraphs of section 15 of the book – where the '*tragic knowledge*' of the Greeks seems to preempt the pretensions of the 'theoretical man', outdoing his cognitive potency.

²⁷ See the unmistakably personal tone of 5[142], but also the letter to Rohde dated 7 October 1875 where, commenting on his drafts for *We Philologists*, he writes: 'I have experienced everything personally, and therefore it is difficult to keep this all at a distance' (KSB, V, p. 119 – trans. is mine).

²⁸ Although the first occurrence of the phrase 'passion for knowledge' was to occur in aphorism 429 of *Dawn* only.

²⁹ On the question concerning the meaning of the word '*Leben*' our reading could not be further removed from Cancik's. In *Nietzsches Antike*, he concludes the lecture on *We Philologists* with a quotation on life from 3[60] but, to be sure, in relation to the notebooks the question is barely addressed. Conversely, in the previous lectures he frames Nietzsche's concept of *Leben* as directly derived from Heraclitus' cosmogony – a claim that would certainly deserve further discussion, but that seems to force him to an unambiguous and perhaps precipitous association of life with the will to power (see Cancik, *Nietzsches Antike*, p. 78). Along similar lines, his treatment of the second *Unfashionable Observation* postulates an immediate identification of life with the unhistorical, with oblivion, and thus with an uncanny stance that excludes every rational function up to the '*Koordinierung der Wahrnehmungen*', resulting therefore utterly incompatible with the meaning here considered (see *ibid.*, p. 92).

³⁰ 5[175].

alternative approach proposed by Nietzsche, trying to understand the extent to which his portrayal and defence of individuality could lead to a justification of individualism, of an ethics advocating prosperity and wellbeing.

The whole scholarly endeavour appeared to the thirty-one-year-old Nietzsche as an orchestrated denial of 'the unreason in human things'³¹, as a hopeless attempt to escape the irrational aspects of reality by means of an ascetic immersion in a perfectly rational world of beauty.³² Yet, the asceticism practiced and idealized by modern scholarship, twelve years before its final exposition in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, was significantly different from that of artists and priests for a specific reason: it could not dispense with, and indeed was tightly bound to its powerful drive to knowledge – a feature that nurtured its dream, failing nonetheless to conceal its inadequacy before the real challenges of life.³³

Science investigates the processes of nature, but can never *command* human beings. Inclination love pleasure displeasure pain elation exhaustion – with all of that, science is not acquainted. What human beings live and experience, they must *interpret* from out of somewhere; thereby appraise it.³⁴

This interpretation and the related evaluation were once made possible by the adherence to a genuinely religious outlook, but they seemed to have become completely irrelevant to the diligent philologists, committed to a nihilistic sacrifice of their individualities to the concealed religiousness of a secularized belief: the belief in the advancement of science. Although the relation between drive to knowledge and modern ascetic ideals was to wait until the third treatise of the *Genealogy* to be thoroughly articulated, an analogous and perhaps more problematic coexistence of science and Christianity recurs quite often in *We Philologists* as well.³⁵ Persuaded that 'a serious inclination towards antiquity makes one unchristian'³⁶, the Nietzsche of these notes believed nonetheless that the Church succeeded in giving a harmless direction to classical studies by binding them with theology – a bond that had been formally untied by Friedrich August Wolf, but that kept manifesting itself in the psychology and the praxis of his successors. Several passages hint at the role played by Christian ethics and metaphysics in the definition of the tasks and ambitions of the classicist, adducing arguments that, despite an element of self-contradiction, present nonetheless a substantial consistency with Nietzsche's philosophy of

³¹ See 5[20].

³² 'Escape from reality to the classics: hasn't the understanding of antiquity already been falsified in this way?' (3[16]). On this topic see also 5[63]. For a later thematization of the escape or 'flight from reality' in a similar context, see Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, II, 24.

³³ On modern asceticism and the drive to knowledge see 5[26].

³⁴ 6[41].

³⁵ In Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, III, 24-25 (p. 339) – to be more precise – the 'unconditional will to truth' characterizing science is depicted as ultimately grounded on 'the belief in the ascetic ideal in itself [...] the belief in a metaphysical value, a value in itself of truth as it is guaranteed and chartered by that ideal alone'.

³⁶ See 5[107].

the time and later.³⁷ The contradiction lies in the fact that the Christian concern with the salvation of the individual soul, despite its all-too-metaphysical implications, is nevertheless occasionally depicted as a possible antidote to the nihilistic depersonalization of science – and many passages seem to portray it as an overall healthier model, if compared to the ‘most comical comedy’ of ‘existing for one another’.³⁸ Yet, the Christian concern for individuals was exclusively focussed on their soul, a soul that had been similarly deprived of its irrational aspects. If classical scholarship was culpable of a blind denial of ‘the unreason in human things’, this disavowal had found important support in the concept of individuality propounded by Christianity. Disregarding every earthly aspiration, and neglecting likewise the value of every sensible, bodily need, Christian ethics ended up endorsing the very idea of an ‘escape from reality to the classics’, contributing therefore to producing the same nihilistic outcome. In one way or another, a healthy connection between science and life was inevitably compromised, and philologists could only find miserable relief in an ever less plausible metaphysical belief. On the other hand, they had been and were still being educated to do so: their asceticism consisted also and mainly of a contempt for mundane inclinations and desires in pursuance of a superior cause, and indeed another important aspect of the surreptitious persistence of Christian ideals concerned, in *We Philologists*, the problem of *vocation*. An echo, perhaps, of the important changes that Nietzsche was mustering in those years.

Stricter religions demand that humans understand their activity only as a means to a metaphysical plan: a miscarried choice of vocation, then, lets itself be accounted for as a test of the individual. Religions keep their eye only upon the salvation of the individual: whether he be slave or free man [...], his life’s goal does not lie in his vocation and therefore a false choice is no great misfortune.³⁹

Although an exhaustive analysis of the meaning of education in these notebooks would require a study of a different scope, it is important to highlight that the critique of the German pedagogical system was, in these notes, amongst Nietzsche’s most compelling questions, and that it did encompass and synthesize several issues spelled out and discussed in this study.⁴⁰ The paradoxical practice by which young

³⁷ This role is also thematized in one of Babich’s acute discussions of ‘Nietzsche’s critical philosophy of scientific reason’: ‘what is at issue is more a matter of Nietzsche’s contention that religion, particularly in its monotheist modality, turns out to be no enemy to science but much rather its indispensable prelude, even its ally, as Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science* [...] and as he argues to conclude the third essay of his *On the Genealogy of Morals*’ (Babich, ‘Nietzsche’s’, p. 241; see also *ibid.*, pp. 244–245 and nn. for further references). The notes for *We Philologists* are not explicitly mentioned but, for the reasons we are discussing, they certainly stand out as a further, extremely relevant case study in relation to this specific question.

³⁸ See 3[64]. For the contrast between concern with individual salvation and depersonalization, see also 3[63], 3[69].

³⁹ 3[21]. Similar remarks, but with a stronger emphasis on the waste of youthful physical strength, in 3[19].

⁴⁰ Santini has rightly noted that many of the pedagogical insights of *We Philologists* could well be read as ‘counterarguments’ that Nietzsche elaborated ‘in response to some major points of the *Enzyklopädie*’

minds were forced to commit to classical studies at a very early and immature stage of their lives, for example, could only be explained, according to Nietzsche, through the disregard of the students, and of human beings in general, as individuals. The most urgent problem was a misrepresentation of human life that – whilst neglecting the cornerstones of the humanistic ideals which, paradoxically, the same pedagogical system was supposed to disseminate – was undoubtedly justified by the modern worship of progress, but that was once again grounded, in the last analysis, on an all-too-Christian understanding of existence.⁴¹

Throughout his life and career, Nietzsche remained resolutely hostile to an ethics propounding happiness as the ultimate goal of the individual. Aware and fond of the teachings of Schopenhauer, he probably suspected that a 'negative' happiness was all that humans could possibly hope for⁴² – and indeed in his bitter depiction of the professional environment he was about to leave one can only find countermeasures, antidotes to the poisonous conception of science we are describing.⁴³ The attention to individuality emerging from these notes, but also the defence of a genuinely individual perspective in the definition of the priorities of science itself,⁴⁴ should therefore not be interpreted as a positive validation of individualism, and the difference between the two stances lies precisely in Nietzsche's understanding of the feasible purposes of human life. If the possibility to understand and to pursue their vocation was seen as an inalienable priority of human beings, and if it was preferable for the latter to emancipate their minds from more or less concealed metaphysical dreams – the quest for prosperity and wellbeing, be they individual or collective, was by no means implied and justified by this shift of perspective. On the contrary, in *We Philologists*, and in particular in the sixth notebook of the collection, Nietzsche identified the 'indecent pretension to happiness'⁴⁵ as the real core of ancient and modern Socratism – disclosing another crucial feature of the belief in the advancement of science heralded by his colleagues, and anticipating the radical critique of eudemonism that was to reappear in several of his writings of the 1880s. 'The greatest loss that can befall humanity is when the highest life-forms do not come into

Footnote 40 (continued)

and of other pedagogical writings of his youth – e.g. 'On the Future of Our Educational Institutions' (see Santini, 'Friedrich Nietzsche', pp. 674–675).

⁴¹ In 5[39] Nietzsche observes philology's 'amalgamation with Christianity', whilst in 5[59] he characterizes his colleagues as 'confused Christians'.

⁴² For Schopenhauer's 'negative happiness' see for instance *The World as Will and Representation*, §§ 58–59.

⁴³ Although they were conceived in the first instance for his intoxicated colleagues, and perhaps just for himself, these remedies could easily be applied to scholarly life as we know it today: 'healthier, more agile bodies, a purer and deeper sense in observation of the very nearest things, free masculinity, belief in good race and good education, martial proficiency, jealousy in ἀριστεύειν, pleasure in the arts, respect for free idleness, a sense for free individuals, for the symbolic' (5[40]).

⁴⁴ For a discussion of these priorities in relation to the individual see 3[69], 6[4].

⁴⁵ See 6[14]. The phrase, in the original 'die garstige Pretension auf Glück', appears also in 6[15]. In the first occurrence it is in double inverted commas, and indeed Nietzsche was quoting it from the first book of *Parerga und Paralipomena* where, in turn, Schopenhauer had lifted it from the *Letters to and from Johann Heinrich Merck* (see Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, p. 471 [n.13]).

existence⁴⁶, and it is probably with precise reference to these superior life forms – namely those of the great artists, the geniuses – that one should read most of his early and mature tirades on individuality.

III.

The genesis of political, philosophical or artistic greatness was amongst Nietzsche's most compelling interests, and the previously mentioned theory regarding the pivotal figures inheriting centuries of research is only one of the contributions he tried to give to the comprehension of the historical processes producing the genius.⁴⁷ In this final section, a brief discussion of this topic will introduce an overview of his thoughts on the importance of an aesthetic sensitivity in committing to classical philology and, consequently, on the value of artistic ambition in contributing to a virtuous development of the latter. An overview, in other words, of his provocative idea to reframe the philologists as artists – more specifically, as poets in obstinate opposition to the inexorable mechanization of their tasks.

In *We Philologists*, the topic of the production⁴⁸ of the genius – certainly irreducible to the industrialized process that the word may nowadays suggest – recurs in many notes through a reflection on the social and political conditions that Nietzsche deemed more fruitful to such a genesis: conditions that, in a chaotic combination of hostility and ruthless conflict, had to reproduce the harshest traits of the most savage nature.⁴⁹ The social alleviation of conflict, and the *even more* indecent pretension to social, widespread happiness – characterized as utterly extraneous to the original Greek worldview in the discussion of ancient eudemonism⁵⁰ – are portrayed as the greatest hindrances to the production of the genius. Conversely – with arguments, tones and sometimes exact formulations that seem to anticipate with striking precision those of his later works⁵¹ – Nietzsche associated the emergence of the greatest creativity and the finest intelligence with historical periods characterized by the deepest suffering and by the strictest intellectual discipline, in a dialectical

⁴⁶ 6[31].

⁴⁷ Perhaps more than a compelling interest: 'my religion, if I am still permitted to call anything by that name, lies in working for the begetting of the genius' (see 5[22]). See also 5[11].

⁴⁸ In the original Nietzsche tends to use the word *Erzeugung* or, less frequently, *Erziehung* and *Züchtung*.

⁴⁹ See for example the 'tremendous energy of the will' and the 'wildness' appearing in 5[185]. 5[191] claims that the 'production of the genius' could only be pursued by being 'as malicious and ruthless (*rücksichtslos*) as nature itself', whilst 5[194] tells us of a genius that 'springs forth' through 'the flying spark of the terrible [*furchtbar*] energy'.

⁵⁰ On Greek eudemonism see 3[65], 5[120], 6[48].

⁵¹ See for instance the striking similarities between 5[188], 6[14], 6[15], 6[31] and aphorisms 44, 202, 225, 260, 263, 270 of *Beyond Good and Evil* – where the critique of eudemonism is nonetheless more explicitly transferred from antiquity to modern times, and the tone is significantly more hieratic.

manoeuvre⁵² that turned his critique of a scholarly discipline into the sharpest critique of modern culture.⁵³

The strong political value assigned by some interpreters of *We Philologists* to these insights seems nonetheless questionable. In his discussion of the problem, for example, Cancik writes that 'the breeding of geniuses is thus more than a pedagogical pastime; it is necessary to preserve the rule of the aristocratic minority'.⁵⁴ If it is unquestionable that the social and political aspect of the question played a significant role in Nietzsche's account of it, it seems nonetheless hard to maintain that the aim of this breeding, and of the related political project, could be summarized in the preservation of the rule of a privileged class. In several notes, the function of the genius is instead explicitly connected to a creative agency that overcomes the spatial and temporal boundaries of a specific political situation, propagating its effects on remote lands and seemingly unrelated periods of human history.⁵⁵

Classical scholarship, in any case, did not seem to perceive art in general, and the artistic genius in particular, as urgent or relevant subjects. Yet, the problem of the evaluation of literary works from an aesthetic point of view, but also and above all of the literary talent required for this task were, in *We Philologists*, amongst the most pressing.⁵⁶ If even a purely historical and analytical knowledge of antiquity was somehow 'mediated through reproduction, imitation'⁵⁷ of the ancient models, it was necessary to understand this imitation as an artistic act, and contemporary and past philologists as representatives of this atypical artistry. Nevertheless, it was also necessary to recognize its limits. Significant limits.

Opposite to this stands: there can be no imitation. All imitation is only an aesthetic phenomenon, directed therefore at appearance; something living can take on manners, thoughts, etc. through imitation, but it can *engender* [*erzeu-*

⁵² Borrowing a phrase from Porter, through this manoeuvre Nietzsche was 'positing continuities between a darker view of antiquity [...] and a historical present that willfully blinds itself to these same features in its own cultural makeup' (see Porter, 'Nietzsche's', p. 50; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 53-55 – where Nietzsche is made into a dialectical thinker with specific reference to Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). The 'uncomfortable junction' between modernity and antiquity was made dialectical precisely by Nietzsche's avowal of a mechanism of interdependence and mutual agency between the two – a mechanism in which, consequently, the alleged 'disinterest' and purity of the beholders of classical antiquity were unmasked as inevitable dialectical reflexes, rather than as conflicting drives, of the present in all its concreteness and 'barbarism'.

⁵³ This turn is well thematized in Cancik, *Nietzsches Antike*, pp. 94, 96, 100. After his treatment, both Berry and Santini have recalled Nietzsche's contrariety to the assimilation of 'human' and 'menschlich' (see Berry, 'Nietzsche', p. 88; Santini, 'Friedrich Nietzsche', p. 675).

⁵⁴ Cancik, 'Philologie als Beruf', p. 95. Similar if milder remarks in Cancik, *Nietzsches Antike*, pp. 103-104.

⁵⁵ See for instance the explicit artistic connotation of the genius in 5[22], but also the consideration for 'regular human qualities' in the foundation of the Greek state thematized in 5[146]. The treatment of the topic seems even more precipitous in Regent, on whose reading the existence of a subjugated class of slaves is the crucial prerequisite for the appearance of the genius, and any diverging interpretation of the problem is accused of a 'sanitized' interpretation of Nietzsche's political thought (see Regent, 'Nietzsche', pp. 700, 716-717, 720-725).

⁵⁶ For an earlier thematization of the problem, see BAW, III, p. 330.

⁵⁷ 6[1].

gen] nothing. A culture that runs after the Greek one can engender nothing. Admittedly, the creator can borrow from and nourish himself everywhere. And so, too, only as creators will we be able to have something of the Greeks.⁵⁸

Once again, the emphasis is in the original, and indeed a crucial insight of these notes seems to reside in a reconciliation of science, life and art through creativity: through an approach to the wonders of antiquity that could seduce to life, prompting their beholders to the production of more beauty. Not by chance, Nietzsche found the brightest examples of this sort of artistic ethic of science in the legendary philologist-poets: creators who, like the often-mentioned Goethe and Giacomo Leopardi, interpreted antiquity as an endless source of images and ideas, and its study as a joyous and emancipating moment of inspiration.⁵⁹ An aggressive, active drive, as one can read in several notes, that was very difficult to find in the modern version of the discipline and its representatives – starting from the very first of them, Wolf, who had nonetheless an unexpectedly shrewd perception of the limits of modern scholarship.⁶⁰ To be sure, a significant part of the third notebook contains literal or slightly modified excerpts from Wolf's *Kleine Schriften in lateinischer und deutscher Sprache*: a collection of writings where the author of the *Prolegomena ad Homerum* expressed several perplexities on the scholarly approach to the theory and praxis of philology.⁶¹ Even an amateurish reading of a classic was sometimes to be preferred over a dreary examination of its particles and, conversely, the access to the cherished wonders of antiquity should have been restricted to those visibly equipped with artistic talent, and with a 'sense for the symbolic'.⁶² Notwithstanding the critical stance towards the scholarly tradition that Wolf initiated and embodied, Nietzsche found in him an eminent predecessor, as well as an important source of legitimacy for his controversial ideas on the real purpose of classical studies.⁶³ The grave shadow of the founder of modern philology on such an ample segment of the *Notizen*, in effect, seems to betray an intimate need to defend this legitimacy before the trial of a dignified past – a need that could not but be expressed in a private dialogue with the titans of the discipline itself⁶⁴, and that drove Nietzsche to the conviction that

⁵⁸ 7[1].

⁵⁹ On the philologist-poets see 5[17]. For the 'competitive soul' characterizing Goethe's approach to antiquity see 5[172].

⁶⁰ See for instance 5[167], where Goethe's 'study of rivalry' is set against the 'study of despair' characterizing modern scholarship. The active element, in its contradiction with an all-too-contemplative paradigm of scholarly work, is well thematized in Regent, 'Nietzsche', pp. 715-719.

⁶¹ For the creative element of philology in Nietzsche's reception of Wolf see in particular 3[45], 3[46], 3[47].

⁶² On the amateurs and their unexpected hermeneutical potential see 3[59].

⁶³ This twofold role is effectively summarized by Santini, who writes that Nietzsche used Wolf 'as an ally in his critique of contemporary philology' (see Santini, 'Friedrich Nietzsche', p. 675).

⁶⁴ Apart from Wolf, the other authority confronted in *We Philologists* is Richard Bentley, for whom, in the very same notebook, Nietzsche had much harsher words (see 3[30], 3[31], 3[32], 3[33], 3[57]). Gottfried Hermann, Theodor Bergk and Otto Jahn are also mentioned as examples of a biased and defective philology – in Bergk's case, a philology devoid of any trace of 'Greek fire and Greek sense' (see 3[29], 5[33], 5[87]).

having written a single line that deserves to be commented upon by the scholars of a later time outweighs the merit of the greatest critic. There is a deep modesty that lies in the philologist. Improving texts is an entertaining task for scholars, it is rebus-solving; but we should regard it as not a very important matter. A bad thing, if antiquity were to speak less clearly to us because a million words stood in the way!⁶⁵

IV.

In conclusion, in the preparatory notes written for his untimely discussion of classical scholarship, undoubtedly a significant passage of the existential and theoretical path leading him from philology to philosophy and cultural history, Nietzsche kept setting up a close dialogue between antiquity and modernity: a dialogue that helped him in exposing his great variety of atypical analyses in all the complexity of their psychological implications and subtleties. From this perspective, the fact that he decided to leave the notes unpublished is significant in its own right: a circumstance that makes them even more relevant to the analysis of Nietzsche's relationship with his prospective and actual readers, on the one hand, and of the topics that he chose to address in this form on the other. Recapturing the problematization of science inaugurated by *The Birth of Tragedy* in a sort of intimate aphoristic monologue, *We Philologists* discloses the limits of scholarly praxis not only through an analysis of its methodological shortcomings, but also by means of an assessment of the tangible effects on the lives of the individuals it engages. The readers of Nietzsche's later works can find in these notebooks a problematization of science and life characterized by a rare degree of personal entanglement with these topics – an outlook that was soon to be replaced by the more comprehensive, but also more detached and abstract treatments of the subsequent years. As to art, if the stylistic tension of the unwilling aphorisms of *We Philologists* provides a practical example of a science nearing art and vice versa, the exemplary value of the philologist-poets reveals that Nietzsche deemed this reconciliation possible *within* the philological activity – and that it was not necessary to reframe them as philosophers or artists in order to appreciate their significance. Nietzsche knew his favourite philologists – he was 'one of them'.⁶⁶

Funding No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The author certifies that he has no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript. The author has no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

⁶⁵ 3[31].

⁶⁶ Cf. 5[142].

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