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HOMER AND CLASSICAL
PHILOLOGY

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Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

Homer and Classical Philology

HOMER AND CLASSICAL PHILOLOGY

(Inaugural Address delivered at Bâle University, 28th of May 1869.)

At the present day no clear and consistent opinion seems to be held regarding Classical Philology. We are conscious of this in the circles of the learned just as much as among the followers of that science itself. The cause of this lies in its many-sided character, in the lack of an abstract unity, and in the inorganic aggregation of heterogeneous scientific activities which are connected with one another only by the name "Philology." It must be freely admitted that philology is to some extent borrowed from several other sciences, and is mixed together like a magic potion from the most outlandish liquors, ores, and bones. It may even be added that it likewise conceals within itself an artistic element, one which, on æsthetic and ethical grounds, may be called imperatival – an element that acts in opposition to its purely scientific behaviour. Philology is composed of history just as much as of natural science or æsthetics: history, in so far as it endeavours to comprehend the manifestations of the individualities of peoples in ever new images, and the prevailing law in the disappearance of phenomena; natural science, in so far as it strives to fathom the deepest instinct of man, that of speech; æsthetics, finally, because from various antiquities at our disposal it endeavours to pick out the so-called "classical" antiquity, with the view and pretension of excavating the ideal world buried under it, and to hold up to the present the mirror of the classical and everlasting standards. That these wholly different scientific and æsthetico-ethical impulses have been associated under a common name, a kind of sham monarchy, is shown especially by the fact that philology at every period from its origin onwards was at the same time pedagogical. From the standpoint of the pedagogue, a choice was offered of those elements which were of the greatest educational value; and thus that science, or at least that scientific aim, which we call philology, gradually developed out of the practical calling originated by the exigencies of that science itself.

These philological aims were pursued sometimes with greater ardour and sometimes with less, in accordance with the degree of culture and the development of the taste of a particular period; but, on the other hand, the followers of this science are in the habit of regarding the aims which correspond to their several abilities as *the* aims of philology; whence it comes about that the estimation of philology in public opinion depends upon the weight of the personalities of the philologists!

At the present time – that is to say, in a period which has seen men distinguished in almost every department of philology – a general uncertainty of judgment has increased more and more, and likewise a general relaxation of interest and participation in philological problems. Such an undecided and imperfect state of public opinion is damaging to a science in that its hidden and open enemies can work with much better prospects of success. And philology has a great many such enemies. Where do we not meet with them, these mockers, always ready to aim a blow at the philological "moles," the animals that practise dust-eating *ex professo*, and that grub up and eat for the eleventh time what they have already eaten ten times before. For opponents of this sort, however, philology is merely a useless, harmless, and inoffensive pastime, an object of laughter and not of hate. But, on the other hand, there is a boundless and infuriated hatred of philology wherever an ideal, as such, is feared, where the modern man falls down to worship himself, and where Hellenism is looked upon as a superseded and hence very insignificant point of view. Against these enemies, we philologists must always count upon the assistance of artists and men of artistic minds; for they alone can judge how the sword of

barbarism sweeps over the head of every one who loses sight of the unutterable simplicity and noble dignity of the Hellene; and how no progress in commerce or technical industries, however brilliant, no school regulations, no political education of the masses, however widespread and complete, can protect us from the curse of ridiculous and barbaric offences against good taste, or from annihilation by the Gorgon head of the classicist.

Whilst philology as a whole is looked on with jealous eyes by these two classes of opponents, there are numerous and varied hostilities in other directions of philology; philologists themselves are quarrelling with one another; internal dissensions are caused by useless disputes about precedence and mutual jealousies, but especially by the differences – even enmities – comprised in the name of philology, which are not, however, by any means naturally harmonised instincts.

Science has this in common with art, that the most ordinary, everyday thing appears to it as something entirely new and attractive, as if metamorphosed by witchcraft and now seen for the first time. Life is worth living, says art, the beautiful temptress; life is worth knowing, says science. With this contrast the so heartrending and dogmatic tradition follows in a *theory*, and consequently in the practice of classical philology derived from this theory. We may consider antiquity from a scientific point of view; we may try to look at what has happened with the eye of a historian, or to arrange and compare the linguistic forms of ancient masterpieces, to bring them at all events under a morphological law; but we always lose the wonderful creative force, the real fragrance, of the atmosphere of antiquity; we forget that passionate emotion which instinctively drove our meditation and enjoyment back to the Greeks. From this point onwards we must take notice of a clearly determined and very surprising antagonism which philology has great cause to regret. From the circles upon whose help we must place the most implicit reliance – the artistic friends of antiquity, the warm supporters of Hellenic beauty and noble simplicity – we hear harsh voices crying out that it is precisely the philologists themselves who are the real opponents and destroyers of the ideals of antiquity. Schiller upbraided the philologists with having scattered Homer's laurel crown to the winds. It was none other than Goethe who, in early life a supporter of Wolf's theories regarding Homer, recanted in the verses —

With subtle wit you took away
Our former adoration:
The Iliad, you may us say,
Was mere conglomeration.
Think it not crime in any way:
Youth's fervent adoration
Leads us to know the verity,
And feel the poet's unity.

The reason of this want of piety and reverence must lie deeper; and many are in doubt as to whether philologists are lacking in artistic capacity and impressions, so that they are unable to do justice to the ideal, or whether the spirit of negation has become a destructive and iconoclastic principle of theirs. When, however, even the friends of antiquity, possessed of such doubts and hesitations, point to our present classical philology as something questionable, what influence may we not ascribe to the outbursts of the "realists" and the claptrap of the heroes of the passing hour? To answer the latter on this occasion, especially when we consider the nature of the present assembly, would be highly injudicious; at any rate, if I do not wish to meet with the fate of that sophist who, when in Sparta, publicly undertook to praise and defend Herakles, when he was interrupted with the query: "But who then has found fault with him?" I cannot help thinking, however, that some of these scruples are still sounding in the ears of not a few in this gathering; for they may still be frequently heard from the lips of noble and artistically gifted men – as even an upright philologist must feel them,

and feel them most painfully, at moments when his spirits are downcast. For the single individual there is no deliverance from the dissensions referred to; but what we contend and inscribe on our banner is the fact that classical philology, as a whole, has nothing whatsoever to do with the quarrels and bickerings of its individual disciples. The entire scientific and artistic movement of this peculiar centaur is bent, though with cyclopic slowness, upon bridging over the gulf between the ideal antiquity – which is perhaps only the magnificent blossoming of the Teutonic longing for the south – and the real antiquity; and thus classical philology pursues only the final end of its own being, which is the fusing together of primarily hostile impulses that have only forcibly been brought together. Let us talk as we will about the unattainability of this goal, and even designate the goal itself as an illogical pretension – the aspiration for it is very real; and I should like to try to make it clear by an example that the most significant steps of classical philology never lead away from the ideal antiquity, but to it; and that, just when people are speaking unwarrantably of the overthrow of sacred shrines, new and more worthy altars are being erected. Let us then examine the so-called *Homeric question* from this standpoint, a question the most important problem of which Schiller called a scholastic barbarism.

The important problem referred to is *the question of the personality of Homer*.

We now meet everywhere with the firm opinion that the question of Homer's personality is no longer timely, and that it is quite a different thing from the real "Homeric question." It may be added that, for a given period – such as our present philological period, for example – the centre of discussion may be removed from the problem of the poet's personality; for even now a painstaking experiment is being made to reconstruct the Homeric poems without the aid of personality, treating them as the work of several different persons. But if the centre of a scientific question is rightly seen to be where the swelling tide of new views has risen up, *i. e.*

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