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Nietzsche's transcription of the early European counterfeit

On the meaning of Nietzsche's philhellenism in the European context, Glenn W. Most shows well how the erudite philhellenism may serve to build up relationships between countries within the XIXth century Europe, based on three definitions of nationalism. That's the way the author understands the meaning of the ancient political framework for Friedrich Nietzsche¹. I propose to start by Most's comparisons. I shall differentiate a second definition of the root "Hellenismus" in the word "Philhellenismus" that implies a more mitigated panorama on a single possible meaning of the whole. I shall support this argument providing five reasons why, this second definition should not be neglected, in order to understand Nietzsche's idea of Europe. Finally, I propose to read these reasons, which in my opinion justify this second sense of the word "Hellenismus" against the ordinary Nietzsche reception, which admits a sort of religious adulation of the Presocratics, that exposes Nietzsche to a simplifying philhellenic view, easily mirroring the German nationalism. We shall provide an epistemological hypothesis reflecting how Nietzsche's views on nationalism turn limited after the end of the 1870-71 war.

The meaning of "Philhellenismus" in the straight forward sense and three definitions of nationalism

Philhellenism consists (1) in following the spirit of Friedrich August Wolf's science of antiquity which conceived the development of the personality by education and culture and accepts the Greek cultural self-sufficiency. This aesthetic and political perspective, which is already present in Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, is a valuable optic not only because it makes easier an approach to the sources of Greek philosophy and

literature, but also because it has an epistemological value, in relation to the difficulties of the process of unification of Germany by Prussia. The study of the ancient political framework has therefore an instrumental meaning.

At this point, we shall consider three definitions of nationalism: (a) the national supra-individualism, which places the nation over the individual, (b) the national unit, which demands the subordination of subsets of the nation such as regions, religious, ethnic and social categories and finally (c) the national supremacy as autarky, defined as the state of being self-sufficient at the level of the nation.

The first two statements are less important. The national supra-individualism (a) is in agreement with the constitution of the Athenian democracy. It is however difficult to spread this constitution outside Greece. In the case of (b), that states that the national unit demands subordination in a monistic entity, comparing the Greeks and the Germans is even less instructive. While Prussia had to overcome cultural differences to unify Germany, the Greeks remain tied to an organic membership in a political community, promoting divisions into small city-states. This fragmentation is by itself a sign of competition involving a pluralistic balance of power ; moreover cultural development is visualized in terms of conflict.

The third and most important (c) regards autarky. It drives to a form of conglomeration of interests between the ancient model and Germany. Greece constitutes a mirror for the Germans, who precisely aim by accomplishing their political unit to reach the self-sufficient situation of the Greeks, isolated from any external decision-making influence. That is to say the instrumental meaning of “philhellenism” is a cultural self-sufficiency. Nietzsche seems to agree with this perspective, notably by the emphasis with which he refers to the Presocratics as model.

On the contrary, let us consider now, that term the “Hellenismus” directs the attention to the work of the German historian Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-84), referring not to

Hellenism but to the Hellenistic age, therefore we shall review our perspective on philhellenism and the signification of the political framework of the antiquity for Nietzsche. The differentiation between “Hellenismus”, “Hellenism” and “Hellenistic age” is covered in an important study published in 1836 by Droysen: *Geschichte Alexanders des Großen*. “Hellenismus” does not mean only the use of the Greek Attic language, in contrast with those barbarians and the common language (Koine), but in a very specific manner “Hellenismus” means also the cultural period which begins from Alexander’s time. According to Droysen, this period melts the Greek character (Hellenic), with that not Greek from Orient, in the sense of the existence of a unity and of a progressive fusion. Instead of “the millenary conflict between the East and Occident endlessly repeated (...)” established since the times of Herodotus whose perspective excluded any possible unity, Droysen introduced with Alexander the Great, the nostalgia of a golden age that implies the origin of a new cycle in history. From the first edition of his manuscript to the second, Droysen discarded most of the passages suggesting the initial conflict and emphasized a blend between Occident and Orient, between Macedonian Europe and Asia². So we can say that Droysen follows Wolf’s thinking of a science of antiquity, without taking into account Greek cultural self-sufficiency. He also opposes Johann Winckelmann’s assumption that the Greeks cannot borrow foreign shapes without making them altogether Greek. Droysen sees a disadvantage in Winckelmann’s model of evolution that goes through different phases by looking for ‘the origins, birth, mutation, decline and end’ of Greek art. Instead of underlining with Winckelmann the idea of a decline of art in Greece following Alexander, he distinguishes between the rediscovery of classical period art by him and the theme of decline strictly speaking. He is perhaps right to distinguish between these two periods: a) the Archaic which is a moment of sublime perfection that culminates with the works of the sculptor Phidias and the huge constructions that Pericles ordered; b) an imitative period, which follows the fourth centuries BC and

continues up to the passage of Greek into Roman art. This last is marked by artifice, erudite mannerism and forgetfulness. For Winckelmann, the development of Greek art confers, just as intimately, a political dimension, claiming that it is via liberty that art has been elevated and that the art of the Greeks “was great just as long as they were free³”. The period that started with Philip is the start of decline, because the Macedonians are the declared enemies of the freedom of the Athenians. Freedom is understood as the condition that makes the development of human potential possible in the heart of the Greek city, it is a relationship between political freedom and the beauty of Greek art.

Droysen shows however that the term “decline” is redundant in any other context than that of the historical hypothesis that serves to bring out classicism. In contrast, Droysen doesn’t assume it, when he specifies, that at the time of the Alexandrian conquests, the conquerors “didn’t only give, but also received; they were to learn and to relearn⁴”. Once the empire is conquered, the most difficult thing is to get everyone used to a tranquil life lived in moderation. Such a manner of proceeding is difficult, because it isn’t in Alexander’s character and it isn’t well seen from the point of view of the Greek and Macedonian cities. Before even returning to the West, a new world opens up to human thinking in the East. The Asians, that until then, were considered to be barbarians, are “men as well, with their needs, aptitudes, virtues, with their way of being full of healthy elements, amongst which a good number are lacking in those who scorned them for barbarians⁵”. Even if the active and stable element of the blend comes from the West, the most fertile fusion must be carried out after wartime: the incorporation of federative elements into a monarchical principal. Rather than halt before the grandeur of Greek culture, proposed as the model of classicism due to its mastery of the petulance of natural will (the Dionysian element) that originated in the East, via its Apollinian aestheticism, one could ask following Droysen, to what extent Nietzsche was aware of this new supra-European fusion when he wrote: “To enlarge oneself step by step, to become more

supranational, more European, more supra-European, more eastern, let's face it, *more Greek* – for that which is Greek has been the first big fusion and synthesis of all that is oriental and, thereby in fact the very *start* of the European soul, the discovery of *our 'new world'*⁶“.

Inversely, Nietzsche seems to rejoin Winckelmann when he interprets the apparition of the Hellenistic epoch as the decline of the city of Athens enduring Macedonian domination, which means an orientalisation of the world understood in a way contrary to Droysen. Nietzsche sees in Alexander the man that “untied the Gordian knot of Greek culture”, (...) and let “the ends float upon the winds⁷”. Nietzsche seeks a succession of “anti-Alexanders” endowed with the most powerful strength in order to gather and link all things together, “an astringent virtue”, “ein Vereinfacher der Welt”. Nietzsche and Droysen refer to the same metaphor, taken from Plutarch, when the former says that Alexander contemplated interiorly Asia and Europe “drink from the same crater”, being the sovereign of a European empire, but the future of this great geographic entity would belong to those who, strengthened by this same viewpoint, would not conquer countries but rather impose a culture. Inspired by the greatness of Alexander, he raises the problem of the transposition of different cultures within a vaster political entity. The latter quotes: “As in a goblet of love, [...] so were mixed the elements of all nationalities; the peoples drank as one from this goblet and forgot their old enmity and their own powerlessness⁸”. Even if Nietzsche accentuates the separation when he attaches to Alexander the epithet of “parody” and of “gross shortening of Greek history”: Alexander “created only the type of the ordinary Greek and of what has been called the Hellenistic age⁹”, these explanations must at least mitigate the negative criticism that can be found in Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*¹⁰. Instead of being the period of the “decline and fall of Greek genius”, we have an apologetic appreciation that Nietzsche may have followed. This support is not limited to the Dionysian origin of Greek art, but targets the development of the supra-European fusion, as of the Hellenistic period.

Let's look at the global opposition between two conceptions of the Greeks. In the first instance, Nietzsche sees the Greeks above all as superior individualities: a "crowd of great individuals"¹¹. One can sense Nietzsche's fascination for the Presocratics, as an admiration somewhat mitigated by the strong personalities separated of that period, that are rapidly pulled aside and absorbed into mediocre figures, in comparison to the formers. According to a second close examination, some post-Socratic personalities are eulogized and used as pertinent links to the comprehension of latter religious or moral configurations. The reason for the apparent contradiction is that Nietzsche borrows the notion of the agnostic and competitive character of the Greeks from Jacob Burckhardt, who perceives in their rivalry the sources of Hellenic greatness. It follows from the antithetical character of these two forms, that Nietzsche seems to contradict himself on the roles of eastern influences. It is never too clear if there is a Greek dependence on the East or only a considerable distance, perhaps even a danger of falling back to the Asian level. This incertitude reproduces Nietzsche's ambivalence in the face of the very idea of Europe, one moment fortifying its identity by its link with Asia, the next strikingly marked by meaninglessness.

Five reasons in favour of "Philhellenismus" in its larger sense

The three first reasons for which, via "Hellenismus", Nietzsche is able, in certain cases, to understand the Hellenistic epoch and not Hellenism comes from the invention of the notion of counterfeit by the Cynics and the use of it by the first Christians. I shall first of all define 1) the philosophical meaning of the word "Cynicism" via Greek acceptance linked to the usual meaning of the word "Kynismus" (from the Greek *kunismos*, *kuôn*, dog). It signifies the moral transvaluation, a moral reversal of values, culminating in the freedom of autarky, that is the refusal to accept a social role. Nietzsche explains this process, on one hand, through the Cynic asceticism characterized by his "Schimpfmaul" that is to say the freedom of poetic

expression of Diogenes of Sinope and, on the other hand, defacing the currency takes us back to the criticism of Christianity¹². 2) The explanation of the use of counterfeit by the Christians rests on the influence of Cynicism starting in the Hellenic Greece up to the teachings of the first prophets of early Christianity. According to this perspective, Jesus did not represent a continuing pure Judaism but yet the influence of Cynicism. Sentences such as: “Blessed are you poor”, “Blessed are you that hunger now”, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you”, (Matthew, 5 : 3-5 / Luke, 6 : 20-38), “the kingdom of God has come near to you” (Luke, 10 : 3-16) represent a certain degree of intellectual kinship with Cynic orientations¹³. The expression “the kingdom of God” serves us to introduce 3) the third reason, at first introduced by Greek Cynicism and inherited by Christianity : it is the creation of an antique cosmopolitanism essential to the Nietzschean idea of a ‘good European’, defined as itinerant intelligence, neither restricted by the distance separating the big cities nor by any border. The ancient cosmopolitanism constitutes a first critical ethical reflection, that analyzes the difficulties of the passage from a Greek world, in which the polis was the dominant political formation, to large central states. The period of the Hellenistic age is characterized as less creative in political thought than in morals : while good man was good citizen, after Alexander most of the political concepts are set in the context of a ‘cosmic community’. These doctrines are a creation of a pessimism, that is widespread in mid-fourth-century BC, which reached its height with the Cynics. Let us precise Nietzsche’s conception of the Cynic counterfeit and the usefulness of these three heuristic hypotheses in favor of a theoretical interest for the Hellenistic age. Firstly, it’s content orientates the evaluation of all values towards a defensive transvaluation, with two directions: that towards an existential minimum and that of Cynic cosmopolitanism. Secondly, the Cynic freedom takes an aggressive form: “the freedom of speech”, which was a foundation of Attic democracy. The Cynic shares with his citizens, the courage to meet in public spaces. Nietzsche explains that a subtle Cynicism is

a precious help to the philosopher's task because he finds suitable shortcuts and recognizes at the same time the commonplace and "the rule" in himself that he expresses "*in front of witnesses*"¹⁴". The last two reasons to consider the Hellenistic period, from the point of view of the ancient European soul, are to put in relation with the distinction between the ascetic virtue and the European cultural role of the ascetic priest that represents these values. 4) Nietzsche conceives ascetic virtues as fully-fledged virtues. Distinct from the religious form of the Romans, he is interested in the Greek Cynicism through its tragicomic understanding of the asceticism: "(...) a certain asceticism, a severe and cheerful continence with the best will, belongs to the most favorable conditions of supreme spirituality (...)"¹⁵". The Cynic lantern must serve philosophers to highlight a sense of freedom based on asceticism, teaching the simplicity of life. In contrast to superficial erudition, philosophical seriousness consists in assuming the Cynic isolation of asceticism, obeying norms imposed by a cruel nature in two ways: the daily sufferings associated to physical training and the ultimate sufferings, the challenges imposed by destiny which defeats men whatever happens : the illness and death. "A fair life leads to die happy"¹⁶". It is therefore not only a question of freeing oneself from the artifices established by civilization, to get an independence regarding to the acquisition of knowledge. For Cynicism, it is a question of taking the short way: training is better than spending one's entire time reading. A life of frugality and suffering allows a soul that becomes indifferent to the strokes of the Fortune to detach itself of the passions. While getting used to frugality, eating food for nourishment only and wearing a single garment, content with any kind of shelter, man ends up finding his independence vis-à-vis the outside world¹⁷. Nietzsche is well inspired by this simplicity or absence of vanity when he says: "I am thinking of the first night of Diogenes: all ancient philosophy was aimed at simplicity of life and taught a certain absence of needs, the most important remedy for all thoughts of

social rebellion. (...) as long as philosophers do not muster the courage to seek an entirely different lifestyle and demonstrate it by their own example, they will come to nothing¹⁸”.

5) In contrast, Nietzsche radicalizes the criticism that one finds in David Hume’s *An Enquiry concerning the Principle of Morals*, that monkish virtues are rather vices than virtues. His notion of the ascetic priest is responsible for a pathogenic nihilism and therefore for the creation of non-innocent ascetic means.

Conclusion

Nietzsche’s reflections on Cynicism completes his conception of a tragic ecstasy through a practical pessimism, that of the Greeks, which forms a reaction to the Sophists’ Enlightenment, a response still characterized by a strong rationalistic individualism, whose message is perpetuated up to the Hellenistic age. In contrast, the Roman Cynicism can be understood as an existence in community, which recalls the sectarian way of life of the first Christians. Existence has become religious and is oriented towards the mythical tradition and the worship of Heracles. This later transformed the Greek form into a literary phenomenon, known as the imitation of the Cynic satires¹⁹. The former brings into focus the Cynic freedom to refuse a social role. It is the root of an ancient cosmopolitanism, which constitutes an keynote paradigm of the idea of Europe, aiming five ethically pertinent notions for Nietzsche: the transvaluation of all values, the freedom of speech in the Cynic sense, the individual asceticism, the ascetic priest and nihilism. Since such a fixed group of Nietzschean vocabulary may be drawn, specifying a part of the European soul, it seems to me both powerful and plausible an argument to protest against any univocal association of Nietzsche’s philhellenism with a self-sufficient Hellas.

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¹ Glenn W. Most, "Jusqu'à quel point le philhellénisme était-il une expression du nationalisme ?" in *Nietzsche et l'Europe*, dirigé par Paolo D'Iorio et Gilbert Merlio (Paris, Editions de la maison des sciences de l'homme, 2006), 57.

² Johann G. Droysen, *Geschichte des Hellenismus*, (Gotha, F.A. Perthes, 1877-78).

³ Johann Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993), 312 and 332.

⁴ Johann G. Droysen, *Geschichte Alexanders des Großen* (Berlin, Decker's Verlag, 1917), 543.

⁵ Droysen, *Geschichte Alexanders*, 541.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Nachgelassene Fragmente August-September 1885", in *Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, KSA 11, 41[7], ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 681.

⁷ Nietzsche, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth", KSA 1, 1, 446-7.

⁸ Plutarch, *De fort. Alex.*, I, 6, quoted in Droysen, *Geschichte Alexanders*, 550.

⁹ Nietzsche, "Homer's Wettkampf", KSA 1, 792. Nietzsche mentions Droysen in a note of the fragment 12[1] of September 1875. "Kommentar zu Band 8", KSA 14, 579.

¹⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1986), 275-6 and 313-23.

¹¹ Nietzsche, "N. Frühling-Sommer 1875", KSA 8, 5[14], 43.

¹² Nietzsche, "N. Sommer 1883", KSA 10, 14[5] and 14[3], 476-7.

¹³ Hans Dieter Betz, “Jesus and the Cynics: Survey and Analysis of a Hypothesis“, *The Journal of Religion*, 74 (1994), No. 4, 456.

¹⁴ Nietzsche, “Jenseits von Gut und Böse“, KSA 5, 26, 44. Walter Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, (New York, Modern Library Edition, 2000) 228.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, “Zur Genealogie der Moral“, KSA 5, III, 9, 356. Kaufmann, *Basic Writings*, 548.

¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, VI, 5 (London, William Heinemann, 1925), 7.

¹⁷ Laertius, *Lives*, 109.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, “N. Herbst 1873-Winter 1873/74“, KSA 7, 31[10], 752.

¹⁹ Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, *Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus* (Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1996), 24-5.