

Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Greek Music Drama”

Translator’s Introduction

In 1870 Friedrich Nietzsche, fresh from his appointment in April 1869 as Extraordinary Professor of classical philology at the University of Basel, gave two public lectures in the Basel Museum. The first, delivered on 18 January 1870, was entitled “The Greek Music Drama”; the second, a fortnight later, was entitled “Socrates and Tragedy.”¹ Nietzsche’s ambition in these lectures was twofold: he was sketching out ideas that were to find definitive expression in *The Birth of Tragedy*, published two years later, and seeking to intervene in the cultural politics of the age by implicitly lending support to Wagner, an unspoken but unmistakable presence in the lectures. In a letter from this period, Nietzsche indicated his awareness that his approach to tragedy was a pluridisciplinary one: “Scholarship, art, and philosophy are growing together in me to such an extent,” he told his friend, Erwin Rohde, “that if nothing else I shall give birth to centaurs.”² An earlier part of this letter reflects Nietzsche’s passionate commitment to ancient Greece and his almost existential sense of loyalty to Greek culture — as well as his elevated notion of academic life:

Every day I get to like the Hellenic world more and more. There is no better way of approaching close to it than that of indefatigably cultivating one’s own little self. The degree of culture I have attained consists in a most mortifying admission of my own ignorance. The life of a philologist striving in every direction of criticism and yet a thousand miles away from Greek antiquity becomes every day more impossible to me. I even doubt if I shall ever succeed in becoming a proper philologist. If I cannot succeed incidentally, as it were, I shall never succeed.³

¹ For the original text of these two lectures, see *KSA* 1, 513-549 and *KGW* III.2, 3-22. This translation is based on “Das griechische Musikdrama”, in *Gesammelte Werke* [Musarion-Ausgabe], ed. Richard Oehler, Max Oehler, and Friedrich Chr. Wurzbach, 33 vols (Munich: Musarion, 1920-1929), vol. 3, *Die Geburt der Tragödie; Aus dem Gedankenkreis der Geburt der Tragödie, 1869-1871*, pp. 169-87 (for ease of reference pagination has been retained in square brackets); also in *Werke* [Großoktavausgabe], ed. F. Koegel, 19 vols (Leipzig: Neumann, 1895-1897; 2 edn, 1899-1913), vol. 9, pp. 33-52.

² Nietzsche to Erwin Rohde of late January and 15 February 1870 (*KSB* 3, 95).

³ *KSB* 3, 94; *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (London and Garden City, NY: Heinemann, 1921), pp. 62-63.

Arguably the most important aspect of his first lecture on the Greek music drama is Nietzsche's insistence on the relevance for modernity of the ancient conception of tragedy; or rather on the possibility of its relevance being rediscovered. For his lecture is, as Silk and Stern noted, "a public lament over the inability of citizens of the modern world to respond to life as 'whole beings,' above all in the sphere of art,"⁴ and behind the argument about the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or "total work of art" lies a plea for a richer, fuller mode of life, one in which, in contrast to the Cartesian tradition and to the denigration of the body in Western philosophy in general, we undertake to recuperate the total economy of the body and become more holistic beings.

During a visit to Tribschen with Rohde, Nietzsche — in a room, it has been suggested, in which a water-colour version of Genelli's painting of "Bacchus Among the Muses" was hanging —⁵ read out part of his lecture on the music drama. Subsequently, on 19 June 1870 he sent a copy of his two lectures to Cosima Wagner who, on 24 June 1870, responded with the following comments about "The Greek Music Drama":

How touched I am by the dedication of the two lectures you were kind enough to send me. Accept my warmest thanks for having vouchsafed me this great pleasure. I have now re-read the lecture on the music drama and can only repeat that I regard it as an invaluable vestibule to your Socrates lecture. I could have spared myself the most unnecessary agitation at the time of the first reading had I known by what a warm pulsing description of the Greek art works it had been preceded. Your broad-boughed tree is now rooted in the most glorious past, in the home-land of beauty, and proudly rears its head into the most beautiful dreams of the future. Many details which captivated and stimulated me even during your reading are now indelibly stamped upon my mind. For instance, your comprehension of creation and evolution, of the "*Fanget an!*" ["Just begin!"] in art⁶ as well as in nature, and particularly, your views on the high consecration of the drama. Your thoroughly trenchant characterization of the chorus as a separate organism — an idea quite new to me — seems to me to furnish the only correct interpretation of the Greek drama. Moreover, the bold and striking analogy you draw between the religious dance of the chorus and the *andante*, and between the English tragedy (you mean, of course, the Shakespearian) and the *allegros* of Beethoven, has again demonstrated to me your deeply musical nature, and I think it is not improbable that this striking musical instinct, has given you the key to the innermost secrets of the Greek tragedy, to suffering instead of action — just as if a person had been led through the Indian religion to the philosophy of Schopenhauer.⁷

⁴ M.S. Silk and J.P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 191.

⁵ See Silk and Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, p. 214. For further discussion, see Siegfried Mandel, "Genelli and Wagner: Midwives to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*," *Nietzsche-Studien*, 19 (1990): 212-229.

⁶ See *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, Act 1, scene 3.

Two years later, when he published *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had added a preface in which he dedicated that work to Wagner, and his *Birth* reprises a number of themes from “The Greek Music Drama.”⁸

Looking back in a note written in spring 1884, Nietzsche claimed “*I have been the first to discover the tragic,*” and that the Greeks, “thanks to their moralistic superficiality,” had “misunderstood” it.⁹ Yet “The Music Drama” anticipates precisely the later Nietzsche’s definition of tragedy when, in *Twilight of the Idols*, he wrote: “The psychology of the orgy as an overflowing feeling of life and energy, within which even pain acts as a stimulus, gave me the key to the concept of the *tragic* feeling.”¹⁰ Because it is “affirmation of life even in its strangest and most difficult problems; the will-to-life becoming joyful through the *sacrifice* of its highest types to its own inexhaustibility” that Nietzsche at once qualifies as “Dionysian” and uses as “the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet.”¹¹ In an age when, as Rüdiger Safranski has put it, we live simultaneously in two worlds, one Apollonian, the other Dionysian — exemplified by travelling in the tube or jogging through the park (Apollo) whilst listening to music on an i-pod (Dionysos) —¹² Nietzsche’s text, presented as an exercise in philological aesthetics, already speaks to our condition in the way that his great work of cultural history, *The Birth of Tragedy*, expanded and developed.

What follows is a translation of Nietzsche’s first lecture, accompanied with interpretative notes aimed at explaining references in his text and providing relevant explanatory material. Inasmuch as this text is, for the first time, being presented in English, it is a ‘historic’ translation, and as such it seeks to make good the comparative neglect of this essay in Nietzsche studies, at

⁷ See Cosima Wagner’s letter to Nietzsche of 24 June 1870, in Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (ed.), *The Nietzsche-Wagner Correspondence*, trans. Caroline V. Kerr (London: Duckworth, 1922), pp. 55-56 [translation modified].

⁸ For further discussion, see Dennis Sweet, “The Birth of *The Birth of Tragedy*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 60, no. 2 (April 1999): 345-359.

⁹ See KSA 11, 25[95], 33 (cf. *The Will to Power*, §1029).

¹⁰ *Twilight of the Idols*, “What I Owe to the Ancients” (§5); KSA 5, 160.

¹¹ *Twilight of the Idols*, “What I Owe to the Ancients” (§5); KSA 5, 160.

¹² Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: Biographie seines Denkens* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 2000), 97.

least in the English-speaking world, where it seems to have been largely neglected. Yet the essay leads the reader to the heart of Nietzsche's move from philology to philosophy, anticipating the central themes of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*.¹³

A note from the editor: The Agonist will only be publishing an excerpt of this translation as a prelude to the forthcoming book version of the essay, which will be the first text published by Contra Mundum Press, the offshoot of Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics. Further news regarding the publication will be posted on the Nietzsche Circle web site.



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¹³ For their comments on an earlier draft of this translation, I should like to thank Rainer J. Hanshe and Yunus Tuncel, while for advice on musicological aspects of Nietzsche's argument, I am grateful to Martin Dixon and Graham Whitaker.

The Greek Music Drama

Friedrich Nietzsche

In our contemporary drama we do not find only memories and echoes of the *dramatic arts of Greece*: rather, its *basic forms* are rooted in *Hellenic* soil, from which they grow *naturally* or to which they are more *artificially* related. Only their *names* have become subject to numerous shifts and changes: just as medieval musicology retained the Greek diatonic scales, along with their names, but what the Greeks, for instance, called *Locrian* was known among the Church modes as “Dorian.”¹⁴ We encounter similar confusions in the field of dramatic terminology: what

¹⁴ Nietzsche’s identification of the Locrian mode with the Dorian mode glosses over the distinction between mode and scale, and the differences between the medieval and modern terminology. The main source for ancient Greek music theory is Aristoxenus of Tarentum, of whose writings (from the third century BCE) on harmonics and on rhythm various incomplete books survive, while later sources include (from the sixth century CE) Boethius’s *De institutione musica* and (from the ninth century CE) Hucbald’s *De harmonica institutione* and the anonymous treatise *Alia musica*. For further discussion of the Dorian mode, see one of Nietzsche’s sources (see below), August Wilhelm Ambros’s *Geschichte der Musik*, vol. 1, pp. 380-404; as well as Phillips Barry, “Greek Music,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 5 (1919): 578-613, and the entries on “Mode” and “Scale” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*. Strictly speaking, the Locrian mode corresponds to the Hyperdorian mode, but Nietzsche’s reference to the Dorian mode is strategic, in that Greeks believed in a link between music and character (Plato, *Republic*, 401 and 402; *Laws*, 659 c – 659 e; Aristotle, *Politics*, 1340b). In the *Laches*, Socrates’s eponymous interlocutor remarks that “the true musician” is “attuned to a fairer harmony than that of the lyre, or any pleasant instrument of music, for truly he has in his own life a harmony of words and deeds arranged—not in the Ionian, or in the Phrygian mode, nor yet in the Lydian, but in the true Hellenic mode, which is the Dorian, and no other” (188 d), and Socrates concurs that “the Dorian mode [...] is a harmony of words and deeds” (193 e); in the *Republic*, Socrates counsels avoidance of the Lydian, Mixolydian, and Ionian modes, but implicitly recommends Dorian or Phrygian modes for soldiers (398 d – 399 c; Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 132, 137, 643-44), while Aristotle in his *Politics* describes the effect of the Dorian as being able to produce “a moderate and settled temper” (1340 b; Aristotle, *Basic Works*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1312). In Nietzsche’s own time, Gilbert in Oscar Wilde’s dialogue “The Critic as Artist” (1891) says of the overture to Wagner’s *Tannhäuser*: “To-morrow, like the music of which Aristotle and Plato tell us, the noble Dorian music of the Greek, it may perform the office of a physician, and give us an anodyne against pain, and heal the spirit that is wounded, and ‘bring the soul into harmony with all right things,’” perhaps alluding here to Plato’s *Republic*: “Rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost

the Athenians called “*tragedy*” is something which, if we had to find a term, we would call “*Grand Opera*”; at least, this is what Voltaire did in a letter to Cardinal Quirini.¹⁵ By contrast, a Greek would recognize in our tragedy almost nothing corresponding to his tragedy; although he would certainly guess that the entire structure and fundamental character of Shakespeare’s tragedy is borrowed from what he would call *New Comedy*.¹⁶ In fact, it is from *this* source, after incredible stretches of [170] time, that the Romanic-Germanic mystery- or morality-play, and finally Shakespearian tragedy, arises: in a similar way that, in its external form, the genealogical relationship of Shakespeare’s stage to that of the New Attic Comedy cannot be overlooked.¹⁷ Whilst we can recognize here a development that progresses naturally across the millennia, modern art has deliberately immunized itself against the real tragedy of antiquity, the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles.¹⁸ What, today, we call *opera*, the distorted image of the music drama

soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace” (401 d; *Collected Dialogues*, p. 646). Wilde’s character concludes: “What is true of music is true about all the arts. Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world” (Oscar Wilde, *Plays, Prose Writings, and Poems* (London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1930), pp.1-65 [p. 28]). Elsewhere, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (§2 and §4), Nietzsche uses the term Doric with reference to one of the four major tribes of ancient Greece, singling out Doric art as immortalizing “the majestic and rejecting attitude of Apollo” (KSA 1, 32), describing the music of Apollo as “Doric architectonic in tones” (KSA 1, 33), and calling the Doric state a “military encampment” of the Apollonian (KSA 1, 41). In 1888, Nietzsche returns to the problem of the drama and the Doric, noting in a footnote in *The Case of Wagner*: “The word *drama* is of Doric origin: and according to Doric usage it means ‘event,’ ‘story,’ both words in a hieratic sense. The most ancient drama represented the legend of a place, or the ‘holy story’ on which the foundation of a cult rested (— in other words, not something that is done, but something that happens: *drām* in Doric doesn’t mean ‘to do’) (§9; KSA 6, 32; cf. KSA 13, 145[34], 235). A better understanding of the thinking and implications behind Nietzsche’s equation of the Dorian and the Locrian remains a desideratum for further research, beyond the scope of this translation.

¹⁵ See Voltaire’s poem of 1751, addressed to Angelo Maria Quirini (1860-1755), an Italian cardinal and a member of the Academies of Science of Berlin, Vienna, and Russia. See Voltaire, Epître 81, “À Monsieur le Cardinal Quirini,” in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, ed. Louis Moland, 52 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1877-1885), vol. 10, pp. 357-58.

¹⁶ Of the various periods of ancient Greek comedy, New Comedy, following the periods of Old Comedy and Middle Comedy, is associated with the writings of Menander, and Latin adaptations by Plautus and Terence.

¹⁷ This constitutes Nietzsche’s first use of the term *genealogisch*; in his later works, he will argue that the meaning of an object can be revealed by tracing its origin, which is uncovered by genealogy.

¹⁸ Aeschylus (c. 525 to c.455-456 BCE) was considered by many (including A.W. Schlegel, in his *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, lecture 6) to be as the creator of tragedy, and Sophocles (c. 497-496 to 406-405 BCE) as one of its greatest exponents, For a recent discussion of the significance of

of antiquity, has arisen through a direct mimicry of antiquity: without the unconscious force of a natural drive, but formed in accordance with an abstract theory, it has behaved like an artificially produced homunculus, as if it were the evil imp of our modern musical development. Those noble and scholarly Florentines to whom opera owes its origin at the beginning of the seventeenth century had the clearly articulated intention of renewing precisely *those* musical effects which music, according to numerous eloquent testimonies, had had in antiquity. It is quite remarkable! The first thought concerning opera already involved a striving for effect. Through such experiments the roots of an unconscious art nourished by the life of the people were cut off or at least severely mutilated. Thus, in France popular drama was displaced by so-called classical tragedy, in other words a genre that had arisen in a purely scholarly way and supposedly contained the quintessence of tragedy, without any admixture. In Germany, too, the natural root of drama, the Shrovetide play, has been undermined since the Reformation; ever since, the new creation of national form has hardly ever been tried, instead the models of foreign nations govern our thinking and writing. [171] The real obstacle to the development of modern art-forms is erudition, conscious knowledge and an excess of knowledge: all growth and development in the realm of art has to take place in deepest night. The history of music teaches us that the healthy progressive development of *Greek* music in the early Middle Ages was suddenly blocked and hindered in an extreme way when one used scholarship in theory and practice to return to the age of antiquity. The result was an unbelievable impoverishment of taste: [...].¹⁹ This was “literary music,” music to be read. What seems to us like an obvious absurdity may well have immediately appeared as such only to a few in the field I wish to discuss. I maintain that such well-known writers as Aeschylus and Sophocles are known to us only as librettists, as writers of lyrics; in other words, that we do not know them at all. While in the sphere of music we have long gone beyond the scholarly shadow-play of music to be read, in the sphere of poetry the unnaturalness of writing accompanying texts is itself so dominant that it requires considerable

tragedy in general, see Charles Freeman, *The Greek Achievement: The Foundation of the Western World* (New York: Viking, 1999).

¹⁹ The Musarion and the *Großoktavausgabe* editions omit the following passage, which can be found in the *KGW* and *KSA*: “In the incessant contradictions between what had supposedly been handed down and one’s natural sense of pitch one ended up no longer writing music for the ears, but for the eyes. The eyes were supposed to admire the contrapuntal dexterity of the composer. How was this to be brought about? The notes were coloured with the colour of things that were mentioned in the text; hence green, when plants, fields, vineyards, or crimson, when the sun and the light were mentioned” (*KSA* 1, 517).

effort to tell oneself just how unfair we must be to Pindar, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, which is the reason why we do not really know them. If we call them poets, we mean writers of lyrics: but for precisely that reason we lose the insight into their being that we can only have if we present the *opera* to our mind's eye in a moment of imaginative power and in such an idealized way that we are granted an intuition into the music drama of antiquity. For, however distorted all its relations to so-called grand opera are, and however much it is a product of distraction, rather than composure, the slave of the poorest rhyming and unworthy music: however much everything connected with it is lies and shamelessness: nevertheless, there is no other means of understanding Sophocles than [172] to try to discern the original image in this caricature, excluding from thought in moments of enthusiasm all its distortions and deformations. That fantasy image then has to be carefully examined and, in its individual parts, held up against the tradition of antiquity, so that we do not over-Hellenize the Hellenics and invent a work of art that has never existed anywhere in the world. This is no small danger. After all, until recently it was considered to be an unconditional axiom of art that all idealistic sculpture had to be uncoloured, and that sculpture in antiquity did not permit the use of colour. Quite slowly, and encountering the resistance of all those ultra-Hellenists, it has gradually become possible to accept the polychrome view of ancient sculpture, according to which we should no longer imagine that statues were naked, but clothed in a colourful coating. Similarly, general approval is now given to the aesthetic principle that a union of two or more art forms cannot produce an intensification of aesthetic pleasure, but is rather a barbaric error of taste. But this principle proves above all the bad modern way we have become accustomed to, the idea that we can no longer enjoy as complete human beings: we are, as it were, torn into little pieces by absolute art-forms, and hence enjoy as little pieces — in one moment as human beings who listen, in another as human beings who see, and so on. Let us contrast this view with what the brilliant Anselm Feuerbach has to say about the drama of antiquity as a total work of art.²⁰

“It is not surprising,” he says, “that a profound elective affinity allows the individual art forms to blend together again into an inseparable whole, into a new art-form. The Olympic Games brought the separate Greek tribes together into a political and

²⁰ Anselm Feuerbach (1829-1880) was a German classicist painter, the son of the archaeologist and philologist Joseph Anselm Feuerbach (1798-1851) and the grandson of Paul Johann Anselm Ritter von Feuerbach (1775-1833), among whose other sons was the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872).

religious unity: the dramatic festival is like a festive reunification of the Greek art-forms. [173] The model for this already existed in those temple festivals where the plastic appearance of the god was celebrated in front of a devout audience by means of dance and song. As there, so here architecture constituted the framework and the foundation, by means of which the higher poetic sphere is visibly separated from reality. We see the painter at work on the backdrop and all the charm of a bright display of colour in the magnificence of the costumes. The art of poetry has taken over the soul of the whole; but it has done so, not as a single poetic form, as in the worship of the temple, for instance, as a hymn. The reports of the *Angelos* and the *Exangelos*,^[21] so important for the Greek drama, or of the actors themselves, lead us back to the epic. Lyric poetry has its place in the scenes of passion and in the chorus, in all its various degrees from the unmediated outbreak of feeling in exclamations, from the most delicate blossoming of song up to the hymn and the dithyramb. In recitation and song, in the playing of the flute and in the rhythmic steps of the dance, the circle is not entirely closed. For if poetry is the innermost basic element of the drama, it is in its new form that it meets together with sculpture.”²²

Thus Feuerbach. What is certain is that, when confronted with such a work of art, we have first of all to learn how one enjoys as a complete human being: while it is to be feared that, confronted with such a work, one would take it to pieces, in order to be able to get it.²³ I even believe that if one of us were to be suddenly transported back to an Athenian festival performance, he would have the impression of being at an entirely strange and barbaric spectacle. This would be the case for many different reasons. In the bright light of the daytime sun, without the mysterious effects of evening and the stage lighting, in dazzling reality he would see an enormous open space [174] full to bursting with people: everyone’s gaze would be directed towards a crowd of men below, wearing masks and moving in a wondrous way, and a

²¹ The figure of the “messenger” (*angelos* or *exangelos*) is exemplified in *Oedipus the King* by the first messenger, who announces the choice of Oedipus as their king by the people of Isthmus, and the second messenger, who narrates the death of Jocasta. For further discussion, see James Barrett, *Staged Narrative: Poetics and the Messenger in Greek Tragedy* (Berkeley, LA, and London: University of California Press, 2002).

²² Anselm Feuerbach, *Der vatikanische Apollo: Eine Reihe archäologisch-ästhetischer Betrachtungen* [1833], 2nd edn (Stuttgart and Augsburg: Cotta, 1855), pp. 282-83; translated by PB According to Giorgio Colli’s and Mazzino Montinari’s commentary, Nietzsche borrowed this book from the University Library in Basel on 26 November 1869 (KSA 14, 99).

²³ Here Nietzsche uses the verb *aneignen*, in much the same way that Goethe, in *Faust I*, writes: “What we are born with, we must make our own / Or it remains a mere appurtenance / And is not ours” (*Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast, / Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen*) (ll. 684-85; Goethe, *Faust: Part One*, trans. David Luke (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 25). These lines were one of Freud’s favorite quotations from Goethe.

few superhumanly sized puppets, marching up and down a long, thin stage in slow, regular steps. For what else, other than puppets, would we call those beings, standing on high heels or on *cothurni*, with giant-sized, gaudily painted masks in front of their faces and covering their heads, their chests and bodies, arms and legs padded out and filled with stuffing in an entirely unnatural way, hardly able to move, weighed down by the burden of a trailing cloak and massive headgear? At the same time, these figures have to speak and to sing through the wide open mouth-holes as loudly as possible, in order to be understood by an audience of more than 20,000 people: to be sure, an heroic task, worthy of a marathon fighter. Our wonder will become even greater, however, when we realize that an individual actor-singer has to recite across a ten-hour period some 1600 verses, among them at least six larger and smaller sung set-pieces. And all this in front of a public that unforgivingly punished every slip of pitch, every incorrect emphasis — or did in Athens where, as Lessing put it, even the rabble had a fine and delicate sense of judgement.²⁴ What concentration and exercise of human forces, what protracted preparation, what seriousness and enthusiasm in the sense of the artistic task we have to presume here, in short: what an ideal concept of the actor! Here tasks were set for the most noble citizens; here a marathon fighter, even in the event of a mistake, suffered no loss of dignity; here the actor, just he as in his costume represented an elevation above the day-to-day level of human beings, experienced an internal sense of uplift, [175] in which the pathos-laden, immensely powerful words of Aeschylus must have seemed like a natural language.

²⁴ Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, vol. 1, No. 2: “There was only *one* Athens, and there will only ever be *one* Athens, where even in the masses the ethical feeling was so fine, so delicate, that actors and authors of a dubious morality ran the risk of being hounded from the theater!” (Lessing, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, ed. Karl Balsler, 5 vols (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau-Verlag, 1982), vol. 4, p. 19); translated by PB.