

Dale Wilkerson: **Nietzsche and the Greeks**, Continuum, London/New York, 2006.
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I.

Dale Wilkerson's study approaches its complex topic, namely the value and function of the role of the Greeks in Nietzsche's early writings and their influence on his later work, from a perspective of an intellectual historian. "Achieving a fuller understanding of Nietzsche will involve us in the project of looking at his work historically, as historians of ideas." (1). However, there is hardly any motivation given for this methodological choice, nor is there an explication of its implications and the manner in which it might yield a fuller understanding of Nietzsche. Wilkerson seems to attempt to supplement "the new methodology that Foucault employs" (7), by examining, other than Foucault and with regard to Deleuze's criticism of him, an "ancient sovereign society" (7). Wilkerson's study will "argue that Nietzsche plays the role of philosophical-historian by reconstructing a social and political 'diagram' of that particular 'sovereign society' which Nietzsche has identified with the Greeks of the tragic age" (7). He thus portrays Nietzsche as a Foucault *avant la lettre* by pointing to the similarities of Foucault's and Nietzsche's "historical inquiries" (6). The fact that a Foucaultian approach and the perspective of a history of ideas do in fact create a methodological tension is neither addressed nor solved. Rather, Wilkerson seems to proceed as a historian of ideas who considers Nietzsche as a precursor of Foucault, which, however, does not clarify the advantages of such an approach.

Although the focus of Wilkerson's study is the way in which Nietzsche's engagement with early Greek society enables him to construct his cultural criticism of the present, Wilkerson does not consider the most recent in-depth studies of the complex relationship between philology and cultural criticism in Nietzsche on the one hand, or of his corpus, namely Nietzsche's Basel lectures, early essays and the *Birth of Tragedy* on the other hand; he does not situate his own argument or methodological approach within the rich scholarship that already exists on the topic, such as Enrico Müller's *Die Griechen im Denken Nietzsches* (Gruyter, 2005), Christian Benne's *Nietzsche und die historisch-kritische Philologie* (Gruyter, 2005), the work of Glenn Most, and *Centauren-Geburten. Wissenschaften, Kunst und Philosophie beim jungen Nietzsche* (Gruyter, 1994). There are also two recent dissertations focusing on the early Nietzsche and his relationship to the Pre-Socratics, especially Heraclitus (the very detailed and carefully argued *Friedrich Nietzsche's kinship to Heraclitus*

of Ephesus, by Mark Balto, New School, 2004, and *Anthony K. Jensen: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Psychology of Antiquity*, Emory, 2006). Considering the lack of a bibliography at the end of the study, it is indeed a cumbersome task to isolate the texts and the scholarship Wilkerson does draw upon.

Despite the fact that Nietzsche's early works might be "lesser-known" and "under-appreciated" (2), and some of the early materials "recently made available" (1) have "yet to receive a full hearing from Nietzsche scholar's" (1), Wilkerson is not the first scholar to approach them; since his study does not include unpublished or archival materials, and, it appears, not even all of the very early notebooks, some of which have only become available in 2006 (KGW, I, 3), it is dubitable to which extent Wilkerson is able to base his study on analyses of 'some of these early unpublished materials' (11), referring to Nietzsche's private notebooks. It appears, however, that Wilkerson's main focus is on the Basel period, lecture notes, "assorted essays and other materials Nietzsche produced during his time as a professor" (10), from which he then proceeds, on which basis remains hidden, to claim that "what seems clear to me, at least, is that the bounty of thought Nietzsche had amassed in this early period would directly influence his most well-known work in the 1880s." (10-11). It appears as if some non-intuitive hermeneutic or anti-hermeneutic principle should have been applied here, at least when making a claim of such a scope, considering the varied, contradictory, and often indirect nature of Nietzsche's philosophical rhetoric and development.

The main argument with regard to the role of the Greeks for Nietzsche put forth by Wilkerson in fact also raises questions about his concept of the hermeneutic status of his reading of Nietzsche; how does he conceive of the relationship between earlier and later works? What does it mean precisely that "in order more fully to grasp his engagement with the Greeks, and thus with modernity, work remains to be done" and that Wilkerson would "even go as far as to add that the most significant problems and concepts arising in Nietzsche's philosophy developed through his engagement with Greek culture and thought and that for this reason studies of Nietzsche failing to take into account these problems and concepts from their origins run the risk of misconceiving Nietzsche's idea by a considerable margin" (7)? Wilkerson rarely mentions examples or relates evidence for comprehensive claims like these. What other scholarship is he referring to? It would be worthwhile, it seems, to first focus on clearly delineated problems and the way they indeed yield insights into Nietzsche's thought before resorting to claims that a book of about 150 pages will not be able

to address in sufficient depth itself, especially when ignoring the detailed studies that have already been undertaken.

II.

We should at this point not hesitate to inquire into the “significant problems and concepts” (7) that Wilkerson analyses with regard to Nietzsche and his reflection on the Greeks. These concepts will include, over the course of the book, “Nietzsche’s uses and critiques of diverse speculative accounts of power, force, natural selection, mechanical necessity, materialism and other ancient and contemporary theories related to the natural sciences” (11). Already in the first chapter on Nietzsche’s uses of history, a historical perspective is absent. It would seem that an argument attempting to show how Greek thought influenced Nietzsche’s scientific perspective would have to differentiate and focus on either ancient or modern influences of his assimilation of scientific thought, a task, that, with regard to Nietzsche’s readings, is difficult enough and has been begun by scholars such as Gregory Moore, Thomas B. Brobjer and others (*Nietzsche and Science*, 2004) in the wake of scholars like Montinari, Müller-Lauter and Stegmaier. And in fact, Wilkerson does not hesitate to say that the topics just raised will “often reside in the background of my discussion” and that he will consider “more directly, Nietzsche’s interpretation and, at times, his appropriation of ancient theories regarding physical phenomena, social necessity, political moods and individual dispositions. We will see that under Nietzsche’s direction, ancient philosophy responds to questions related to purpose, meaning, natural laws, identity and the natures of being and becoming. As I reconsider the problems of identity and variation that were introduced...extending my focus to problems concerning ‘the form’ and ‘becoming’ as such, my analysis will also be brought to bear upon Nietzsche’s attitudes regarding how knowledge is determined, attitudes that have perplexed Nietzsche scholars past and present.” (12). Thus, by page twelve we are already confronted with a large catalogue of intentions, but we still have problems to conceive of the way Wilkerson’s conceives of the relation between antiquity and present in Nietzsche’s view.

Wilkerson’s argument is manifold, but not clearly discernible. The book is divided into five chapters, each of which engages aspects of Nietzsche’s Greeks. The focus and argument of each chapter, however, are not lucidly presented. While the first chapter considers Nietzsche’s overall attitude toward the study of history by way of introduction, it also gives a cursory, contradictory and confusing overview of the other chapters. Thus,

Wilkerson writes in the first chapter that the second chapter will examine “Nietzsche’s struggle against eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conventional readings of the Greeks, by showing how these conventions initially formed in works such as that by Johann Winckelmann and by discussing what is at stake in this struggle for Nietzsche: what it entails and what significance it could have to his critique of modernity” (9), an endeavour that would, if undertaken in detail, already be the worthwhile subject of a book-length study. Wilkerson then also says that “Chapter Two will attempt to identify the untimely perspective as such, asking “‘what benefit could the critic of modernity gain by forming such a vantage point?’ This chapter will survey Nietzsche’s interest in Greek culture and philosophy, identifying those components characteristic of a healthy culture and the roles of the philosopher, the sage, the genius and all forms of ‘the exemplary type’ of individual. I will also examine here Nietzsche’s struggle against the scholars of his time and suggest what is at stake in such struggles.” (13). These announcements leave us with high, and conflicting, expectations for a short chapter. Before we in fact turn to this second chapter, let us briefly review the substantial content of the first one.

Wilkerson acknowledges that a study of Nietzsche’s view of antiquity has to confront his view of the past. Claiming that Nietzsche uses his classical knowledge for a fight against contemporary culture, he proposes to regard the structure of temporality in this constellation. “Readers of Nietzsche have called his work a *Kulturkampf*. Yet, without the perspective afforded by time, commentators have not fully understood Nietzsche’s ‘struggle’ with the ‘culture’ of his contemporaries...Unfortunately, more than the usual complications exacerbate our difficulty in understanding Nietzsche’s classicism and its stated purpose....That is to say, as we attempt to identify how his experiences help fashion his portrait of ‘the Greek way’, and how these ‘Greeks’ help form his later thoughts, we are also charged with reflecting on our own ‘retroactive’ roles in these exchanges.”(6). We should expect to find methodological traces of this realization that Nietzsche studies are a ‘rather dynamic affair’ (6) in the book.

What we find in the first chapter is the statement of Nietzsche’s classicism without a definition or reason for this claim. What is “Nietzsche’s classicism” (6)? Does Wilkerson refer to his position vis-à-vis German classicism, classical scholarship or his own notion of the classics? The first chapter is interested in Nietzsche’s view of history. His laying ‘bare the structure of history in its various temporal modes’ (7) enables Nietzsche to conceive of the possibilities of history’s uses and abuses. His reflections on the tragic age of the Greeks help him to ‘open up modernity’s potential’ (7) and to elevate the quality of life through cultivating the instincts, social form and the exemplar that he considers superior in Greece.

Rather than analyzing this problematic presupposition, Wilkerson seems to subscribe to it. He remains on the level of reporting the qualities (health, integrity, uniformity of style) that Nietzsche diagnoses in Greek antiquity and presumably opposes to modernity in critique of it. This is Nietzsche's untimeliness; however, in the same chapter Wilkerson is also interested in 'acknowledging Nietzsche's place in an academic discourse, notwithstanding his concerted attempts to achieve the 'untimely' perspective of a critical historian" (11).

Wilkerson claims that he will take a cue from Walter Kaufmann and focus on Nietzsche's view of the pre-Platonic philosophers. They, albeit not adhering to a uniform worldview, served Nietzsche, Wilkerson proclaims to argue in chapter three, as human ideals and moral exemplars for Nietzsche because each of them created a "unique standpoint from which to view the chaotic mass of existence" and this service "has the greatest significance to the preservation of the species" (14). Thus, it is not a matter of truth or untruth of their individual philosophies, but the fact that they created what is termed here "Hellenic culture's greatness" (14). Somehow Hellenic and Pre-Platonic seem to be used synonymously. The parallel that Nietzsche sees in modernity and the Greek world is located in the advent of a technological and scientific transformation of society. "The Greek world" avoided a decline because it "mastered its theories on nature with aesthetic principles seated deeply in its own cultural ideals." (15). Modernity, in contrast, seems unable to meet this challenge, but Nietzsche sees an opportunity "to elevate human potential with a new kind of narrative" (15), although he also sees the danger of failure here. So far, the account given by Wilkerson does not take into consideration, nor critically analyze the implications of Nietzsche's, at any rate, complex view of pessimism and nihilism and its possible or impossible remedies.

The first chapter does not go beyond stating the importance of the examples of the Pre-Platonic philosophers in meeting a cultural crisis that came about through the advent of technology, which is, according to the set-up of the book, the argument of the third chapter. What then does the first chapter achieve beyond establishing that there is a relationship between Nietzsche's view of history as possibly invigorating present life and his view that the Greeks serve as such an invigorating example? We mainly learn a lot about the following chapters, thus we will turn to them in order to learn more about Nietzsche and the Greeks.

III.

We have already addressed the announcements with regard to the second chapter. The title of the chapter suggests an analysis of Nietzsche's portrayal and notion of the Greeks: "Who are Nietzsche's Greeks?" What, however, is its content? "In this chapter I will examine

Nietzsche's attempt to fuse his studies of antiquity with his critique of modernity...I will work...towards situating Nietzsche's study of the Greeks in the context of a European cultural crisis." (20). Wilkinson rightly points out that Nietzsche's view of the tragic Greeks runs counter to the tradition established by Winckelmann. This is a topos of Nietzsche scholarship. Clearly, neither is Winckelmann's concept of imitation as facile as Wilkerson describes it, nor is Nietzsche's idea of the Greeks for a cultural transformation of modernity. Wilkerson attempts to elucidate Nietzsche's "strategies for critiquing nineteenth-century Europe and for influencing its future. Such strategies include searching the past for discontinuities in thought and for paradigmatic shifts that are at once informative and inspirational." (22). Wilkerson thus rightly points out that Nietzsche conceived of antiquity as a kind of anthropological, social, philosophical and historical model. He also draws attention to Nietzsche's view of the Greeks as violent and the difference that Nietzsche locates between modernity and antiquity. He moreover examines the hermeneutic problem that Nietzsche reflects: namely the contemporary impossibility to understand the Greeks in a Greek, not in a modern way. He claims that the distance that Nietzsche acknowledges between past and present affords him the untimely position to understand culture as such.

Wilkerson then focuses on the differences that Nietzsche locates and that turn the Greeks into a model of a positive culture. These are health, art that unites and contains the Dionysian in the Apollonian, and the ability to posit a unifying worldview, that is to integrate a cultural model of genius and society in which there are no atomizing tendencies. The Greek philosophers (Pre-Socratic?) functioned in a way that allowed them to master culture and conceive of a meaningful unity despite their heterogeneity: "the Greeks somehow enjoyed greater freedom because their culture functioned to unify the Greeks in the pursuit of meaning, without merely normalizing them in convention...." (24). The main point here is that despite the acceptance of the individual genius and the heterogeneity of the "free-thinking artists and philosophers" (24), the Greek social world did not disintegrate; this is due not only to the identification of society with their best, but also to the fact that their philosophy was able to master meaning. The proper function of the philosopher as a legislator of greatness is what Nietzsche delineates as model for the present in antiquity: "Hence, Nietzsche's classical studies teach him this much about the philosopher's two-fold function in a healthy culture: the philosopher, on the one hand, controls the drive for knowledge by mastering the scientific impulse...On the other hand, the philosopher masters the mythical element in society, establishing rational standards for knowledge by grounding in scientific discourse the unifying conceptual assumptions of a culture..." (27).

Thus, the Greek world serves, Wilkerson claims, as a functional model for a healthy culture; the role of the philosopher is the main focus of this chapter. Rather than a reiteration of this claim and its specific aspects, it would have been worthwhile to also find a critical examination of such a position and, in the context of the nineteenth-century, an analysis of Nietzsche's not so untimely position in this regard. Other than promised, there is hardly any engagement with Nietzsche's institutional and cultural position and with his contemporaries in this chapter. Wilkerson in fact locates Nietzsche's special position in his emphasis on the difference of antiquity that "attempts to uncover the fundamental components of culture as such" (29) without an awareness of the cultural theory that Nietzsche was inspired by and knew of (Creuzer, Burckhardt, others). Wilkerson reports on Nietzsche's position with regard to the status of the Pre-Platonic philosophers, but he does not analyse this view, and then moves on to, again, present Nietzsche's view of the relationship between philosopher and society (*Volk*, he says) in Greece as 'healthy'. The chapter also engages the way (self-) mastery (as *arete*) and control over culture are conceived of by Nietzsche in his references to the Greek world. Wilkerson emphasizes the importance of the social and integrative function of Greek ingenious individuality and argues against a view that does not sufficiently consider the socio-political aspects that Nietzsche isolates with regard to antiquity. However, a clear analysis of the status of the Greeks does not follow from this discussion. Wilkerson rather reiterates the claim that Nietzsche studied the Greeks in order to influence modernity. Mastery, formal variation and the position of the philosopher with regard to culture and society are the aspects Nietzsche focuses on according to Wilkerson.

"At this point, it seems to me, we have shown, at the very least, that Nietzsche studies the Greek for the purpose of influencing modernity in a positive way." (46). This chapter in fact reported on the Nietzsche's portrayal of the Greeks and on the ability to create a unified cultural identity as hallmark of the "characteristics of a healthy culture" (46) without making a clear argument how Nietzsche's view functions with regard to the present other than resorting to the claim that he recognized the differences between this "healthy" culture and modernity. There is no methodology that would allow Wilkerson to question this view, to conceive of its constructivist nature, or to analyse the cultural dialectics that are implied in it. The next chapter, however, will investigate the social landscape of the Greeks in order to further elucidate the positive function that Greece played for Nietzsche.

IV.

Large parts of the third chapter follow Jaspers view of Nietzsche, his humanistic focus on the great human of the future, the indeterminability of the future and the political aspect, i.e. the function of the state, in Nietzsche's view of Greece. Wilkerson seems to think that the term 'great politics' was coined by Jaspers (53). The chapter is conceived of as a contribution to Nietzsche's view of the Greeks "for the purpose of getting a better grasp upon his critique of modernity" (51), although the fundamental basis, the relationship that enables a reading of his Greeks as critique of modernity has not yet been sufficiently proven.

Wilkerson locates four domains in the "social landscape" that Nietzsche's "philosophical vision brings forth" (54). These he terms barbaric, expansive, discontented and flourishing. Not only, but mostly, have they conformed to different historical societies and their stately, social, and individual organization. These different states are circumscribed in the following manner: "I will examine, then, why, in Nietzsche's view, some societies develop a healthy culture while others fail, arguing that Nietzsche's investigations of human socio-political relationships suggest the following patterns: less distinguished individuals and societies remain diminished in the rudimentary battle for survival, where they will struggle for as long as they are able, meaning "until they die"; in the fortunate event that some types successfully disentangle themselves and emerge from barbarism, they will then have brought into closer proximity the possibility of advancing themselves even further. The most important consequence of having achieved their freedom from barbarism is the freedom they have gained for an even greater advance. Some of these free types, however, will simply lack the qualities necessary to form a more distinguished identity and to leave the vulgar old ways behind, even though these barbaric struggles are no longer matters of survival. These types continue to struggle, then, in order to accumulate an even wider expanse of goods. Other free types will simply become tired of the struggle and fall into a kind of nausea with existence. Exemplary types, such as the Greeks of the tragic age, learn to detect new and higher possibilities in every region of the socio-political landscape, bringing themselves ever and ever closer to the most elevated peaks of humanity." (58).

The chapter then proceeds to elucidate the different mechanisms that mark these different domains of the "social landscape". The Greeks are a successful, "flourishing" culture, mostly due to the *agon* and their ability to ward off scepticism. The Pre-Hellenic Greeks ultimately turn out to be, once again, other than the post-Socratics and the Romans, as model for a healthy culture. At this point, we can't help the impression that has accompanied

us for a while: Wilkerson's study, in fact, rather than discriminatingly analyzing the modes and contexts that enable Nietzsche to construct his view of the Greeks, contributes to mythologizing the "Greeks" by more or less clearly reconstructing his view on them.

V.

The fourth chapter treats the Greek paradigm of "formal variation" as a basis for Nietzsche's hopes for the "prosperity of humanity" (91), an idea that Nietzsche discovers in Pre-Platonic philosophy and supplements by modern science. Indeed, according to Wilkerson, Nietzsche sees the evocation of these ancient material theories in modern science, and thus, the possibility for the genius to return; the genius, that, as the previous chapters elaborated, is able to exert a mastery and thereby allow for a unified culture, who "understands himself, the instincts of the age, the 'inner coherence and necessity' of all things." (91). Formal variation is the doctrine that forms develop from one element as well as the doctrine of unity in heterogeneity. Wilkerson nowhere lays out what it entails, but suggests that it applies to natural development as much as to cultural formation and thus also explains the mode of becoming of 'Greek culture' (90). The chapter proceeds to outline the importance of formal variation, since "For Nietzsche, the Greek world's maintenance of its own cultural health through formal variation helps define the Greek character." (92). The chapter also attempts to open up "a possibility for a new reading of those familiar concepts in Nietzsche's thought generally considered to be the most definitive fruits of his genius" (92), by locating "traces" of this paradigm e.g. in the *Genealogy of Morals* as exceptions to 'slave morality', e.g. Napoleon, whose personality "and actions exhibited the coherence of all things through formal variation". (93). This argument is not convincing, in fact neither is the paradigm of formal variation clearly articulated, nor is there any coherent way in which it would be shown in Nietzsche's social reflection. Wilkerson also insinuates that the paradigm of formal variation functioned for the Greeks in a way that Nietzsche's 'will to power' served him as a 'cosmology', which then in turn served him to critique modernity.

The final chapter analyses the affinity of Nietzsche and Heraclitus. Heraclitus' personality "'formally varied' the Greek instinct for self-affirmation and struggle..." (136), paralleling Heraclitus and Nietzsche with regard to their standpoint also vis-à-vis their philosophical tradition in a struggle against pessimism, the hallmark of the mastering genius, and with regard to the importance granted to "becoming". Heraclitus is thus seen by

Nietzsche, Wilkerson contends, as “the exemplar of hope for humanity” (139). He functions as a model of the exemption in society. Heraclitus offers concepts “uniquely suited for responding to modernity’s challenges” (148). The book ends by discussing the influence of Nietzsche on Heidegger and Derrida: “Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzsche and other representative figures of twentieth-century thought have sought to refashion fundamental notions of the West by identifying formal structures of temporal, spatial, and conceptual variation. This is done as a response to the nihilism that is perceived to be widespread before, during and after the cataclysmic events of the twentieth century...” (149).

By way of conclusion, it might be best to summarize some problems of the book that have the tendency to overshadow its insights. First, there is the conceptual problem. The ubiquity of intensions and previews (‘I will show’, four times on the first couple of pages of chapter 4 etc.) leads to contradictions and disappointment in the reader, it also makes for a very cumbersome prose. The structure of the book and of the individual chapters is nowhere transparent; indeed, there is a lot of redundancy in all of the five chapters. The German, when employed, is often misspelled. Often, there are quotations without source citation. The individual chapters shed light on Nietzsche’s vision of the Pre-Platonic philosophers. They do not question Nietzsche’s view, and hardly manage to analyse how he in fact used them as a critique of modernity.

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