

**‘MÉDITERRANISER’: THE FLIGHT FROM NORTH TO SOUTH. A READING OF
NIETZSCHE’S POEMS ‘PRINCE VOGELFREI’ AND ‘IN THE SOUTH’¹**

BY MARTINE PRANGE (MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY)

Soon after receiving a mechanical typewriter from his sister Elisabeth, in February 1882, Nietzsche wrote a substantial amount of poems, abiding in the ‘electric-free’ and ‘cloudless’ atmosphere of his ‘favourite’ city Genoa.² In the 1882 spring issue of his editor’s magazine, the *Internationale Monatsschrift*, he published eight of those poems. Later, they were published separately as *Idylls in Messina*. With those, Nietzsche presented himself expressly as the poet-philosopher, ‘Dichter-Denker’ or ‘musical Socrates’ that he appreciated so much, and that confirmed his ideal of making a unity of ‘Art and Reason’ (‘Kunst und Vernunft’) out of oneself.³

Some time later, in 1884, Nietzsche rewrote six out of the eight *Idylls*, and published them as *Songs of Prince Vogelfrei* in an appendix to the *The Gay Science*’s second edition, published in 1887. The poem ‘Prince Vogelfrei’ opens the *Idylls* and returns, substantially modified, in *Songs of Prince Vogelfrei* under the name ‘In the South.’ In the 1886 preface to *Human, All Too Human I*, written in Nice (or ‘Nizza,’ as Nietzsche preferred to call the rather newly independent city), Nietzsche discusses his painfully regained health. He describes a ‘midway condition’ in between convalescence and health, ‘characterized by a pale, subtle happiness of light and sunshine, a feeling of bird-like freedom, bird-like altitude, bird-like exuberance.’⁴ This bird-like condition in between convalescence and health (often already disguised as health) speaks from the poems ‘Prince Vogelfrei’ and ‘In the South.’ These poems reveal the explicit influence that his stays along the Mediterranean Sea, in Genoa and,

¹ This article is a translation, abbreviation, and (slight) modification of pp. 120-127 of my book *Lof der Méditerranée: Nietzsches vrolijke wetenschap tussen noord en zuid* (Kampen: Klement, 2005). The title in English would be: ‘The Praise of the Mediterranean: Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* in between North and South.’

² Compare e.g. Nietzsche to Carl von Gersdorff, end of August 1882 (KGB III/1, p. 248). The typewriter was a Malling-Hansen writing ball from Denmark, and broke quite soon. Nietzsche expected the typewriter to help him write blindly, and to be the solution for his eye problems (which prevented him from writing more than 20 minutes a day). The first lines he wrote on the machine are the ones published as *Joy, Cunning, and Revenge* nr. 13 (‘Für Tanzer. Glattes Eis/ Ein Paradeis/ Für Den, der gut zu tanzen weiss’) – which therefore should be understood for what they say: ‘the typewriter is heaven for the one who knows how to use it.’ Cf. KSA 9. 673 and Nietzsche to Peter Gast, 17 February 1882 (KSB 6, pp. 171-172).

³ Cf. GS §290 (p. 163/ ‘Kunst und Vernunft,’ KSA 3, p. 530). Of course, Nietzsche wrote poetry throughout his life, but with *Idyllen aus Messina*, *Scherz*, *List und Rache* and *Lieder des Prinzen Vogelfrei*, he came forward as a poet much more expressly than in previous books.

⁴ HH I §4 (p. 8/ ‘Es giebt einen mittleren Zustand darin, dessen ein Mensch solchen Schicksals spatter nicht ohne Rührung eingedenk ist: ein blasses feines Licht und Sonneglück ist ihm zu eigen, ein Gefühl von Vogel-Freiheit, Vogel-Umblick, Vogel-Uebermuth,’ KSA 2, p. 18).

later, Nice, exercised upon his thought. While ‘Prince Vogelfrei’ confines itself to the point that the free spirit must learn how to sing (as a sign that the old Christian morality is conquered), ‘In the South’ shows straightforwardly that this singing can only be mastered in the south. Hence, the recovery and health that Nietzsche is looking for by placing himself under the restraint of an ‘*anti-romantic* self-treatment’ (‘*antiromantischen Selbstbehandlung*’), includes the journey to the south.⁵ This suggests that the ‘revaluation of values’ that Nietzsche expects from the ‘new,’ ‘good European’ philosophers, can only be carried out successfully on the condition that these (northern, German) philosophers have transformed themselves into a ‘mix of cultures,’ i.e. ‘supra-national’ ‘*Mittelländler*,’ that are (like Goethe) ‘*more* than a German.’⁶ In other words, the revaluation of values seems to require the kind of ‘*méditerranisation*’ that Nietzsche requested from music.⁷

Let us take a closer look at the poems, first ‘Prince Vogelfrei’ and then ‘In the South.’⁸

‘*Prince Vogelfrei*’

The main character Prince Vogelfrei recounts in ‘Prince Vogelfrei,’—which consists of five stanzas of five verses each—that he learned how to fly from the birds. The poem elucidates the meaning of flying to Prince Vogelfrei. In the first stanza, the technique of flying is central. Prince Vogelfrei learns the technique of sitting in tall trees and beating his wings by imitating the birds:

So hang ich den auf krummen Aste
 Hoch über Meer und Hügelchen:
 Ein Vogel lud mich her zu Gaste—
 Ich flog ihm nach und rast’ und raste
 Und schlage mit den Flügelchen.

⁵ HH II §2, p. 210/KSA 2, p. 371. Nietzsche also calls his ‘Freigeisterei’ books HH I, HH II, D and GS his ‘travel books’ HH II 6 (p. 213/ ‘meine Wanderbücher,’ KSA 2, p. 376). Cf. 23[169], KSA 8, pp. 473-474. See also Martine Prange, *Nietzsche’s Ideal Europe* (Gornigen: University of Groningen, 2007 [diss.]), pp. 209-218, esp. pp. 216-218.

⁶ BGE Preface (p. 4/KSA 5, p. 13), AOM §302 (p. 282/KSA 2, p. 502) and BGE §254 (p. 147/KSA 5, p. 200).

⁷ ‘*Il faut méditerraniser la musique*,’ Nietzsche writes in WA §3 (p. 236/KSA 6, p. 16).

⁸ I am only interested in interpreting the content of the poems here; I will not discuss their formal aspects. .

The second stanza shows that flying has a wider meaning to Prince Vogelfrei than just learning a new technique. It offers him the possibility of forgetting his origin, terminus, and morals:

Das weisse Meer ist eingeschlafen,
 Es schläft mir jedes Weh und Ach.
 Vergessen hab' ich Ziel und Hafen,
 Vergessen Furcht und Lob und Strafen:
 Jetzt flieg ich jedem Vogel nach.⁹

As a consequence, Prince Vogelfrei goes where the winds take him instead of taking one step at a time towards a set goal, as the third stanza demonstrates. The limited, one-sided perspective of taking one's ambition as guidance on life is interchanged for the experience of the multi-perspectivism of life, for an openness to and enjoyment of the spontaneity and lightness of being:

Nur Schritt für Schritt – das ist kein Leben!
 Stäts Bein vor Bein macht müd und schwer!
 Ich lass mich von den Winden heben,
 Ich liebe es, mit Flügeln schweben
 Und hinter jedem Vogel her.

In the fourth stanza, human reason is defined as the source of all human errors—an important Nietzschean insight. In contrast, flying does not cost much power and effort, but it provides new energy and, surprisingly, also teaches one (or, the prince) how to sing. Singing takes the position of morality and traditional expectations of the future. As it turns out, by learning to fly Prince Vogelfrei also learnt how to romp around and sing. This is more worthwhile to him than his old ideas, which is the antithesis that is drawn in stanza four between reason as 'ein bos Geschäfte' and flying, which taught the 'schönere Geschäfte,/ Gesang und Scherz und Liederspiel.' The birds teach Prince Vogelfrei to fly and to turn his purposeful life into enjoyment of the moment:

⁹ In GS §45, Nietzsche speaks of a 'wide, whitish sea' (p. 59/ 'ein weites weissliches Meer,' KSA 3, p. 411), at which Epicurus' eye gazes. This eye is a happy, secure, and calm eye, 'before which the sea of existence has grown still' (ibid./ 'vor dem das Meer des Daseins stille geworden ist,' ibid.). Nietzsche seems to hint at a similar experience with the verses 'Das weisse Meer ist eingeschlafen,/ Es schläft mir jedes Weh und Ach.'

Vernunft? – das ist ein böses Geschäft:
 Vernunft und Zunge stolpern viel!
 Das Fliegen gab mir neue Kräfte
 Und lehrt' mich schönere Geschäfte,
 Gesang und Scherz und Liederspiel.

In the final stanza, Prince Vogelfrei encourages communal singing and calls the birds to join in:

Einsam zu denken – das ist weise.
 Einsam zu singen – das ist dumm!
 So horcht mir denn auf meine Weise
 Und setzt euch still um mich im Kreise,
 Ihr schönen Vögelchen, herum!

The singing indicates that Prince Vogelfrei has abandoned morality and the concomitant organization of life. The 'bird perspective' has freed him from his rational way of living. He understands that reason is not sanctifying, but, contrarily, a source of errors, an approach and morality that are hostile and unnecessarily strict towards life. Nietzsche indicates the dominant, linear view of time with the phrase 'Ziel und Hafen,' in the first stanza. 'Ziel,' or 'purpose,' points to the future and the 'Hafen,' 'harbour,' to the traditional morality of the past. The words 'Furcht und Lob und Strafen' intimate morality. The misleading and erroneous character of reason is revealed by the first two verses of the fourth stanza, while the hostility towards life is expressed by the first verse of stanza three, 'Nur Schritt für Schritt – das ist kein Leben!'

The birds have taught Prince Vogelfrei how to fly. In stanza one, flying appears as a technique, in stanza two as source of forgetfulness, in the third stanza as source of lightness and purposelessness, in contrast to verses three and four of stanza two. In stanza four, flying functions as a breeding ground of new powers and beauty, in the form of pleasure in singing. In the fifth stanza, singing indeed substitutes thought. Here, it is clarified that the poem must be interpreted within this opposition of singing and thinking: flying, it turns out, has realized the transition of thinking to singing. In the end, Prince Vogelfrei wants to learn how to sing. But in order to sing, he must first learn how to fly.

‘In the South’

In the reworked poem ‘In the South,’—which consists of five stanzas of five verses and a sixth stanza of six verses—the bird metaphor returns, now accompanied by the north-south perspective. The purposeful and strict, straight thought above that Prince Vogelfrei flies, in this poem, is now explicitly tied to Germany, at the beginning of the third stanza:

‘Nur Schritt für Schritt – das ist kein Leben,
Stets Bein vor Bein macht deutsch und schwer.’

‘Müde’ has become ‘deutsch.’ In addition, the north is unambiguously connected with the ‘Vernunft,’ the ‘verdriessliches Geschäfte,’ that causes a lot of distress, and the will to truth, in which the poet does not believe any longer.¹⁰ This is how ‘In the South’ ends:

‘Im Norden – ich gesteh’s mit Zaudern –
Liebt’ ich ein Weibchen, alt zum Schaudern:
“Die Wahrheit” hiess dies alte Weib...’

The hesitation and shudder in this confession seem to be occasioned by a certain feeling of shame for an old love, of which one recognizes its absurdity.¹¹ The hesitation, shudder, and shame that this ‘I’ is said to feel opposes his supplication addressed to the ‘Unschuld des Südens’ in the second stanza to accommodate him. The southern innocence comes in the stead of the love of truth. But what does this innocence consist of? In any case, it consists of a constellation of things that, put together, form an idyllic environment:

¹⁰ Compare with the following note from 1870-1871: ‘Alle Erkenntniss der Wahrheit ist unproduktiv: wir sind die Ritter, die im Walde die Vogelstimmen verstehen, wir folgen ihnen’ (5[44], KSA 7, p. 104).

¹¹ This is more understandable when the reach of this metaphor is taken into account. The truth as ‘alte Weib’ indicates that the philosopher has given up the battle of thinking out of tiredness and settles for his acquired knowledge (see D §542). The truth can be fixed now, because he does not [put it up for discussion any longer/choose to discuss it any longer?]. Hence, his scientific attitude towards truth (?) is no longer ‘heroic.’ He is ashamed of this, but he just cannot longer afford the loneliness that this attitude requires (see D §487). He is now looking for ‘party followers’ (D §542, p. 216/ ‘Parteigänger,’ KSA 3, p. 312) rather than enemies. The weariness has come in the place of the passion of knowledge and instinct for truthfulness. The philosopher does not experience any ‘Not’ and therefore he has achieved the opposite of life.

‘Das weisse Meer liegt eingeschlafen,
 Und purpurn steht ein Segel drauf.
 Fels, Feigenbäume, Thurm und Hafen,
 Idylle rings, Geblök von Schafen, —
 Unschuld des Südens, nimm mich auf!’

This time, the writer does not learn to fly with the birds, wherever they go. In contrast, he has a clear destination, because he flies from the north to the south, in stanza three:

‘Ich hiess den Wind mich aufwärts heben,
 Ich lernte mit den Vögeln schweben, —
 Nach Süden flog ich über’s Meer.’

In this resides the poem’s main re-working; in the new version, it is not so much flying that liberates (in preparing the transition from thinking to singing), but the voyage to the south. Indeed, here too the soaring and flying oppose the ‘Schritt für Schritt,’ but the ‘I’ is not taken up by the winds to go wherever his wings take him. This time, he is taken up by the wind that takes him and other birds to the south. There, he finds the opportunity to discuss his passion for his ‘old love’ the truth and open up new ways for philosophical reflection. The south supplies him with the courage, blood, and energy for a new life, a new kind of play, as we can read in the fourth stanza:

‘Im Fliegen lernt’, ich, was mich äffte, —
 Schon fühl’ ich Muth und Blut und Säfte
 Zu neuem Leben, neuem Spiel...’

Because this poem does not mention ‘Gesang und Scherz und Liederspiel,’ the singing of stanza five comes as a surprise. On top of that, the ‘I’ suddenly speaks to the birds, which he continues to do in stanza six, in which he talks of love to them. He tells them that he thinks they are made for love and confesses that he, when he was still living in the north, loved the ‘alte Weib’ truth.

Even though ‘Im Süden’ is unbalanced, it becomes clear what the speaker wants to convey.¹² Due to his stay in the south, he was able to take a distance from the convictions he was raised in and in which he still believed when he lived in Germany and Switzerland. As a matter of fact, he does not need the bird metaphor any longer. The new title also indicates this. But because Nietzsche did not want to abandon this metaphor, for some reason, the components have become a bit too much for him. But what is the point? The point is not that the poem is not a success as a poem. The important thing is that Nietzsche wanted to present himself as a philosopher-poet (or composer of songs). His poems ‘Prinz Vogelfrei’ and ‘Im Süden’ voice the change of perspective that took place when Nietzsche learned to love the south and adopt a foreign culture.¹³ He manifests himself as a troubadour, who sings about his own life experiences and passions, as a ‘poet of his own life,’ ‘Mittelländer’ and ‘good European.’¹⁴ He shows that the kind of ‘light’ and ‘joyful’ philosophy he proclaims is the result of his ‘recovery.’ He made the transition from northern morality and mentality, revolving around ‘Selbstlosigkeit’ (GS §21) to the ‘Unschuld der höchsten Selbstsucht’ (GS §99). In other words, to the ‘Glaube an die grosse Leidenschaft als an das Gute an sich’ (GS §99), what Nietzsche used to appreciate in Wagner’s *Siegfried*. This means so much as the liberation from imprisonment in the common herd and gaining personal freedom.

Conclusion

As birds migrate to the south in winter, Nietzsche also migrated to the south every winter, only to return to the north towards the end of spring time. From ‘Prince Vogelfrei’ it transpires that Nietzsche develops himself by imitating successful examples, birds that master the technique of flying. ‘In the South’ teaches us that the goal of self-development requires more than just flying; in addition, one needs to visit pagan, sensual, and vital environments. This poem attests to Nietzsche’s thankfulness for Italian and Mediterranean culture, without which he would have remained imprisoned in the northern coldness and morality instead of developing a new view on things, undergoing a strange and unique experience of life.

¹² The poem is unbalanced for the following reasons: 1. The fifth and sixth stanza do not add to the content of the poem; 2. The function of the singing, in stanza five, remains unclear, in contrast to ‘Prinz Vogelfrei’; 3. The rhythm of the second verse of the sixth stanza deviates from all other second verses, which breaks the rhythm of the poem as a whole; 4. With his confession to the birds towards the end of the poem, a new topic is introduced, which remains unclear, without being mysterious in the good sense of the word; 5. This is reinforced by the forced rhythm of the sixth stanza: the question mark after ‘Zeitvertreib’ breaks the rhythm, as does the mystifying or shameful silence to which the ellipses point.

¹³ Prince Vogelfrei is among two forms of ‘Ernst’ (cf. KSA 14, p. 712). We must probably think here of the ‘Priesterernst’ and the intellectual seriousness that comes in its place.

¹⁴ Nietzsche initially thought of calling The Songs of Prince Vogelfrei: ‘Prinz Vogelfrei. Oder: der gute Europäer’ (KSA 14, p. 712).

Nietzsche understands and is thankful that due to his stay in Italy he gained the necessary distance to himself so as to regard his ‘romantic’ disease—German culture—and life in general as a comedy or, to say the least, a short and tragic moment in ‘the eternal comedy of existence.’¹⁵ Without his visits to the south, Nietzsche would never have been able to act out his fight against the power of numbers, against the lack of form and one-dimensional mass at the expense of quality, nuance, and multi-perspectivism with the help of laughter, jokes, and mockery. Without the south, Nietzsche would never have found the weapon of cheerfulness as partner of wisdom. In that case, Nietzsche would never have experienced the ‘convalescence,’ which founds his philosophy. A long visit to the Mediterranean is, henceforth, a prerequisite of ‘gay science.’

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¹⁵ Cf. GS §1 (p. 29/ ‘die ewige Komödie des Daseins,’ KSA 3, p. 370).