



Nietzsche Transformed

How the Philologist Became Modernity's Philosopher with a Hammer

Chad Wellmon

IT'S HARD TO READ THE OLD-FASHIONED way, slowly and deliberately. Few of us have the patience, the concentration, or the time. When we do read, we skim, trying to get a quick "take" on the topics of the day, often conveniently served up as prepackaged excerpts by our modern media machine. We flit from one thing to the next, never pausing to think about what we've just read, because in our media-saturated, technology-obsessed age we just don't have time. Worse, our bad reading habits are symptomatic of a deeper malaise. Real learning, real knowledge, and real culture have been supplanted by the shallow, utilitarian instrumentalism of modern life. The evidence is mounting. Humanities departments are losing students to the sciences and other more useful majors, where they are stuffed with facts and outfitted with skills, better to serve the state as productive citizens; our cultural models are the average heroes of a popular culture. Our culture is in decline. And we read only the headlines.

That may sound like the latest jeremiad in *The New Criterion* or *The New Republic*, but it's

actually a paraphrase of Friedrich Nietzsche's preface to a series of lectures he delivered in the winter of 1872, seven years before he left his job as a philologist at the University of Basel and became the self-proclaimed prophet of modernity. In five lectures collectively titled *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, Nietzsche diagnosed the decline of German culture before a public audience at Basel's city museum. Alternating notes of anxious pessimism and apocalyptic prophecy, he warned that schools, universities, and modern newspapers were forming drones for a state in need of docile citizens. They were cultivating an individuality that wasn't, a modern man bereft of character and substance.

From Philologist to Philosopher

In his Basel lectures, we can begin to see how Nietzsche the philologist became Nietzsche the philosopher, the moral psychologist who would go on to diagnose the ills of modernity. He would have his readers believe that his observations were

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Left: Portrait of Friedrich Nietzsche, c. 1906, by Edvard Munch (1863–1944); Munch-museet, Oslo, Norway; De Agostini Picture Library/Bridgeman Images.

untimely, indeed timeless, but they were only partly so. Even as a young, increasingly disaffected professor of classics, Nietzsche assumed a prophetic voice, but his prophecies were woven out of the particularities of late nineteenth-century German culture in transition.

Nietzsche arrived in Basel in 1869, just two years before the Prussian victory over Napoleon III in the Franco-Prussian War and the declaration of the German *Kaiserreich*. He was a keen observer of Otto von Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*—the decades-long conflict between the Catholic Church and a Protestant-dominated German state. Bismarck's battle to secularize the German state was waged through bureaucratic chicanery, but Nietzsche saw it as a mere skirmish in the larger battle to define Germany's religious and cultural future. Writing to a friend in 1870, shortly before Prussia's military triumph, Nietzsche cautioned that "we must be philosophers enough to remain sober in the universal ecstasy so that the thief does not come and steal or diminish something to which—for me—all the greatest military deeds, even all national uprisings, cannot compare. For the coming period of culture, fighters will be needed. We must save ourselves for this."¹ For Nietzsche, the confessional conflict of the new German empire portended a larger and more significant struggle for culture. And like many of his contemporaries, he doubted that political unity would easily translate into cultural and spiritual unity.

Throughout the lectures, the voices of Nietzsche's own time can be read between the lines. One such voice was that of the conservative nationalist historian Heinrich von Treitschke. In *The Future of the German Gymnasium*, Treitschke framed his otherwise dry proposals for reform of Germany's academic secondary schools with an anxious account of the country's cultural decline. While decrying government attempts to open up the educational system and introduce a broader curriculum, he wondered who would "maintain the aristocracy of our learned culture and preserve

the education of our youth from leveling" by the modern liberal outlook.² How, he asked, could the "decline of culture" be prevented?

The decline Treitschke described affected not just educational institutions but also an entire culture of attention. "The greatest danger that threatens the culture of modern man," the historian wrote, is that he "reads in never-ending distraction from his inner life, in that excess of mental impressions and information of all kinds, which assail us daily."³ Distracted by modern life's relentless demands for attention, the modern human was incapable of ethical self-reflection. He could not tend to his self.

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For Treitschke, nothing better epitomized the modern culture of distraction than its reading habits. Invoking Socrates's worries about the invention of writing in the *Phaedrus*, he claimed that the "danger" of "false knowledge and false thinking" had grown immeasurably since the invention of the printing press and the proliferation of newspapers and periodicals. The modern reader, he wrote, struggled to get through "on average ten times more than he can mentally manage" and thus skimmed from page to page.⁴ Such bad reading practices contributed not only to "cursory" thinking but also to a shallow character formed by ephemeral impressions, one incapable of recognizing anything of lasting value.⁵

Nietzsche saw this image of modern print culture embodied in modern journalism's endless pursuit of the news. In the face of the modern

media machine, he longed for timelessness, but one not simply stripped of its time and place. Instead, it was an ethos of active resistance to the “idoltrous” need for the new, the latest headline, the latest commentary, the latest *feuilleton*. It was intended to enlist those few who were not, as he put it in the Basel lectures, “caught up in the dizzying haste of our hurtling era” and dependent on its short-lived pleasures. It was a call for calm readers.

The modern media, however, were only one element in Nietzsche’s story of cultural decline. His polemics repeatedly returned to the tragedy of modern educational institutions. High schools and universities had been entrusted with maintaining the culture by forming people into it. Their degeneration thus represented an unparalleled threat to the vitality of culture, to the practices, habits, and knowledge that bound people together. From early in his career, Nietzsche had planned—as he wrote in November 1870, while recovering from dysentery and diphtheria he had contracted as a medic in the Franco-Prussian War—on “exposing” Prussian education “publicly.”⁶ His Basel lectures made good on that plan.

The Gymnasium vs. Realschulen

In the lectures, Nietzsche saw himself as contributing to a particularly German debate about the future of educational and cultural institutions, but he was trying to make himself heard in a crowded and complex arena. Critics of the traditional humanist *Gymnasium*, which emphasized mastery of Latin and Greek, called for a “modern” curriculum that went beyond the classical education that had defined the *Gymnasium* for almost a century. Over time, those demands led to significant increases in the number of *Realschulen*, secondary schools that expanded the traditional curriculum to include more mathematics, science, and modern languages. Between 1890

and 1914, the number of *Realschulen* increased from 138 to 180 in Prussia, while the number of *Gymnasien* increased by only thirteen, to 367. But despite such changes, the *Gymnasium* and the educated middle class that it produced maintained their cultural privilege.⁷

Some of the more radical critics of the classical *Gymnasium* fulminated against the humanist pedantry as well as the class privilege the *Gymnasium* so dutifully defended. German nationalist and anti-Semite Paul de Lagarde argued that a general humanist education was a pernicious pedagogical ideal, both impractical and inadequate for a modern world that was morally, spiritually, and socially corrupt.⁸ Similarly, Friedrich Lange, president of a leading advocacy group for *Realschulen*, derided the sterile “scholasticism” of the *Gymnasium*-educated middle class that had come to dominate German culture.⁹

Other, more moderate critics lamented what they saw as the decline of a genuinely humanist philological education. Kaiser Wilhelm II even confessed his disappointment with the *Gymnasium*. Writing to a friend in 1885, he decried the “scalpel of the fanatical philologists,” under which every sentence of antiquity was “halved and quartered until the skeleton was found,” while students were malformed into spiritless dolts.¹⁰ Such critics denounced a bureaucratic philology profession that had vivisectioned antiquity into the vestiges of a culture, thereby undercutting its own reason to exist. Yet other critics, such as the German anthropologist Rudolf Virchow, complained that *Gymnasiums* students graduated with inadequate knowledge of the natural and physical sciences.

In 1888, several sides of the debate joined forces and organized a “Mass Petition for Thoroughgoing School Reform,” in which they called for specific measures. Almost two years after receiving the petition and only after Kaiser Wilhelm II had expressed his support for reforms, the Prussian minister of education

convened a conference on the future of German education. No one expected anything good to come of it. Conservative defenders of the humanist *Gymnasium* and university feared that the rigor and distinction of their beloved institutions would be sacrificed to the “demands of the present,” either by a relaxation of classical language requirements or an expansion of university admission to *Realschule* students.¹¹ But reform advocates feared that no meaningful changes to the system would come out of a conference that had been organized by the education minister, a staunch defender of the classical *Gymnasium*. The Kaiser opened the conference with an implicit rebuke of his own minister’s failure to extricate German secondary schools from the “monastic” model of the Middle Ages,¹² but the conference ended with resolutions on only minor reforms.

These debates about the future of secondary education were taking place just as the dominance of more traditional humanist disciplines in German universities was beginning to wane. Between 1841 and 1881, enrollments in philosophy, philology, and history within philosophy faculties, which housed all disciplines except law, medicine, and theology, declined from 86.4 percent to 62.9 percent of all students, while math and natural sciences enrollments increased from 13.6 to 37.1 percent.¹³

Nietzsche responded to such changes not with the charts and tables that filled most pedagogical reform tracts, detailing how many hours of Greek or mathematics *Gymnasium* students should take, but with fiery polemics. In his lectures, this son of a small-town pastor assailed Germany’s modern media and cultural institutions for denying a deeper cultural need to find meaning and direction in life after the death of God. For Nietzsche, the twilight of the gods and idols didn’t spell the end of religion. Humans would always contrive and pursue religion, which Nietzsche understood broadly as an all-too-human set of practices created and followed

to give order and meaning to life. But in a post-Christian world, worried Nietzsche, what kinds of practices would emerge and what kinds of people would they form? In his Basel lectures and other texts on antiquity written around the same time, including *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche posed the same question: What forms of life could sustain a culture after the Christian ones were gone or had lost their hold? For Nietzsche, of course, Christian practices, even when they reigned unchallenged, produced an unhealthy attitude toward life, a slavish, cerebral disposition that made people despise this world and long for one to come. What were needed now were new formative practices that would make people strong, healthy, and creative—and that would encourage them to embrace their earthly life.

The Fate of Philology

Yet the new forms and practices of self-making that Nietzsche saw emerging from liberal Prussian Protestantism were little more than Christian ethical practices made palatable for the masses. They produced wan, superficial, commodified creatures characterized by meaningless preferences and opinions that were, in fact, shaped by mass education, mass media, and other institutions and components of a market, consumerist society. Modern culture required ethical resources that could help resist this “leveling.”

For Nietzsche, antiquity provided such resources. But in what he saw as one of the deeper tragedies of modernity, he believed that the very scholars charged with preserving the accomplishments and practices of ancient cultures had, through their bloodless dissections and annotations, made this cultural heritage inaccessible and incoherent. In a series of notes from 1875 for a planned work titled “We Philologists,” Nietzsche identified with his fellow scholars but deplored what had become of them. True philology, he wrote, had been “falsified through the incapacity

of the majority” of scholars with their “false standards.”¹⁴ There once was a true form of scholarly knowledge that demanded admiration. But over the course of the nineteenth century, it had collapsed. Now, Nietzsche wrote, “99 out of 100 philologists...shouldn’t be philologists.”¹⁵ Like most modern scholars, he asserted, the vast majority of philologists had entered their field under the assumption that it was merely a profession. Hence, they treated it as just another form of modern labor, taking on piecemeal tasks assigned by senior scholars in a sort of intellectual version of the factory work of the Industrial Revolution.

The failure to recognize philology as something more than a profession, as something closer to a higher hermeneutic calling, had made it only more difficult for modern people to recover the values of antiquity as an ethical resource. Professional philologists disassembled antiquity and its exemplary culture, as Nietzsche put it, “reason by reason.”¹⁶ With their endless historicizing and critical microscopy, they hastened its irrelevance. True philology, Nietzsche believed, a philology that saw ancient Greece as a culture of genius, had been supplanted by a pedantic professionalism, whose reductive historicism blunted the respect and awe for a healthier culture that could inspire self-transformation.

“The objective-castrated philologist,” Nietzsche lamented, was another form of the liberal philistine, the sad, pathetic figure of modernity, who sat “lazily and inactively” as the machinery of modernity—be it in the form of the media, the state, or the university—ground on.¹⁷ The university required the philologist to sacrifice himself for academic knowledge and the scholarly monuments of specialized research, and suppressed any questions as to what academic knowledge might mean “for us today.”¹⁸

For Nietzsche, the fate of philology exemplified the “complete secularization of culture and education.” Like so many other elements of modernity, philology had been decoupled from its ethical resources and subordinated “to

material gain under a crudely understood earthly happiness.”¹⁹ And this is the point at which Nietzsche’s ironic critique of contemporary philology—ironic because it was equivocal and slippery—presaged his account of the death of God in *The Gay Science*, first published in 1882.

In his notes for “We Philologists,” Nietzsche compared the decline of philology to the decline of religion. “For religions, which believe in gods, providences, rational world orders, miracles, and sacraments, it is over, as well as for certain kinds of holy living, forms of exercise [*askesis*]. Because now sickness, disaster, misfortune, are explained by scientific assumptions and conclusions. Who still believes in the immortality of the soul!”²⁰ This atrophy of belief and the commitment to living according to belief had infested philology, and threatened to destroy what had once sustained it: its confidence in the supremacy of Greek culture. Like Christianity, Greek culture had ceased to be a vital ethical resource; it had been rationalized out of existence. And with the collapse of Christian forms of life, modern culture was left with “no basis,” no resources to fund its moral life.²¹

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Philologists were thus the consummate modern skeptics, blind to the consequences of their lust for knowledge. They were the fore-runners of the townspeople who mocked the madman running around the marketplace crying incessantly, “I’m looking for God! I’m looking for God!” only to realize that “we have killed him—you and I!” Like the townspeople whose haughty laugh betrayed their inability to grasp fully the consequences of the death of God, philologists had no idea what their destruction of antiquity had wrought.

The collapse of philology was just a sign of what had become of *Wissenschaft* (academic knowledge). What had once been a culture dedicated to the unity of scholarship and life had devolved into a shallow, deluded culture of “eunuchs.” The best hope for philology, Nietzsche sadly concluded, was its “destruction.”²²

The modern, positivist philologist was also a Faustian figure caught in the fraught relationship of ethics and epistemology, action and knowledge.²³ Like the anatomist who studies life by dissecting it, the philologist studied antiquity by collecting and organizing discrete facts. Antiquity, and thus its particular forms of life, would never be revived. Yet Nietzsche continued to insist that modern humans need antiquity in order to develop their own forms of life in the post-Christian world to come. They needed, he wrote, a “doctrine of health,” a higher form of oversight, a form of “surveillance.”²⁴ But ultimately, philology and ancient history, like history more broadly, were necessary only to the extent that they could be overcome. Every epoch had to adapt “antiquity” to the needs of the day, and fashion it anew.²⁵ The goal of philology, Nietzsche claimed, was mimesis, a creative adaptation for the present.

The purpose of philology and the study of antiquity was to understand one’s epoch better and to develop practices for living now. In this sense, Nietzsche’s vision of philology was unabashedly presentist.

In the notes for “We Philologists,” Nietzsche recounted a story about the seventeenth-century English philologist and biblical scholar Richard Bentley. When asked by his daughter if he regretted having expended his talents and energy on the critique of others’ works instead of his

own compositions, Bentley replied that he had been drawn to the genius of the ancient pagans. And, doubtful that he could reach their heights in any other way, he had decided “to climb up and sit upon their shoulders so that he might look out over their heads.”²⁶

By this account, antiquity was not merely a cultural form that had been overcome by the movement of time and was now simply to be recalled as an exemplary historical artifact. It was not a ready-made form of life that could be repeated in a different historical moment. It lived on in an eternal, untimely present. And in a post-Christian world, it continued to provide a model of alternative forms of life, other ways of living and fashioning one’s life. Indeed, it was a necessary alternative to the “sick” practices of “*Christianum*,” a word Nietzsche used not merely to describe a particular religion but a set of “unhealthy” metaphysically infused and other-world-oriented practices.²⁷

The purpose of philology and the study of antiquity was to understand one’s epoch better and to develop practices for living now. In this sense, Nietzsche’s vision of philology was unabashedly presentist. It shared the same ends as all forms of education, history, and science—the crafting of an individual life, of a way of living in a modernity that Nietzsche diagnosed as deleterious to health. There is no institution, he wrote, that you should respect more “than your own soul.”²⁸ When he claimed in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the “world is only justified as an aesthetic phenomenon,” Nietzsche meant that the world had meaning and value only to the degree that it was engaged through forms of *askesis*, that is, forms of training, practice, and habit. The purpose of philology, like all forms of the pursuit of knowledge, was to shape and craft the self. Philology at its best was the curation and cultivation of ancient forms of life. Yet ancient history had to be put to the service of life, to ways of living in the modern world. Antiquity had to be overcome. This was the basic paradox that would

structure Nietzsche's entire oeuvre. Cultures need examples, models for attaining greatness, but the only way to become healthy was ultimately to break those models. The capacity to extricate oneself from this paradox was, as Nietzsche understood it, genius.

Nietzsche's Basel lectures, configured as a discussion of culture and education among two young German students, a prophetic and cantankerous old philosopher, and the philosopher's sometimes slow-witted apprentice, were not published in his lifetime, but he did write a preface in anticipation that they one day would be. It appears below. Written after the lectures were delivered, the preface describes the kind of reader Nietzsche hoped would attend his lectures. As might be expected, he wanted a reader who would take his polemics and pessimism seriously—but only seriously enough to “consign [them] to destruction and forgetting” and to learn to read on his own.

“Preface, to be read before the lectures, although it doesn't actually refer to them.”

The reader from whom I expect something must have three qualities: He must be calm and read without haste; he mustn't always insert himself and his “culture” into his reading; and finally he must not expect a concrete result, some tables and charts at the end. I have no charts and revised Gymnasium or Realschulen timetables to offer. In fact, I admire the supremely energetic nature of those who are able to survey the entire path, from the depths of the empirical up to the heights of real cultural problems and then back down to traverse the barren lowlands of regulations at their most arid and charts at their most detail-oriented. I myself am satisfied when, gasping for breath, I have clambered up a relatively high mountain and can enjoy a clear view. The present book will never satisfy the chart-lovers.

But I can imagine a time when serious people, working together in the service of a completely

renewed and purified culture, will once again legislate over common education—education toward that new culture. They will probably draw up tables and charts then too. But how far away is this time! And how much has to happen before then! Between now and that point in the future may lie the destruction of the Gymnasium, maybe even the destruction of the university, or at least such a total restructuring of these educational institutions that their old charts and tables will look to future eyes like Bronze Age relics.

This book is meant for calm readers, those who haven't yet been caught up in the dizzying haste of our hurtling era and don't yet feel an idolatrous pleasure in being crushed under its wheels—in other words, it is a book for the few. But these few cannot get used to judging a thing on the basis of how much time it saves or wastes: They “still have time.” They still allow themselves to choose and gather the best hours and most productive and powerful moments of the day and to spend them reflecting on our culture's future, without blaming themselves for so doing. They even think they have spent such days well, in a truly useful and worthy manner, namely in meditatio generis futuri [contemplating the shape of the future]. Someone like this has not yet unlearned how to think. As he reads, he still understands the secret of reading between the lines; he is even inefficient enough to think about what he has read, sometimes long after he has put down his book. And not to write a review, or another book, but just like that, just to think! It's criminal, being so wasteful! He is calm and unconcerned enough to set out with the author on a long road whose destinations will only be glimpsed by a much later generation. When, on the other hand, the greatly agitated reader springs immediately into action, when he wants to pluck fruits hard-won over many decades and centuries, and pluck them now, then, we must fear; he has not understood the author.

Finally, the third and most important requirement is this: Under no circumstances may the reader constantly use himself and his cultural education as the sure measure and criterion of all things, as modern man is so wont to do. We would rather he be educated enough to think little, think scornfully

even, of his own education; then he can follow most trustingly the lead of an author who ventures to speak to him in this way only from a place of ignorance and of knowing that he does not know. This author claims nothing more for himself than a painfully burning feeling for what is specific to our contemporary German barbarism—what distinguishes us, as nineteenth-century barbarians, so remarkably from the barbarians of other times.

Now, with this book in hand, he searches for others driven to and fro by a similar feeling. Let yourself be found, you singular individuals—I believe you exist! You selfless ones, suffering within yourselves the sorrows and depravities of the German spirit; you contemplative ones, whose eyes don't fumble about hastily peering at the outside of things, but know how to gain access to the core of their essence; you great-hearted ones, whom Aristotle praised for going through life hesitant and passive except where a great honor calls you and a great work needs you! It is to you I appeal! This time, do not crawl into your caves of seclusion and mistrust! At least be readers of this book, so that later, through your actions, you can consign it to destruction and forgetting! Think of it as meant to herald you: When you yourself first appear on the battlefield, in your own armor, who will still have any desire to look back at the herald that summoned you?²⁹

Endnotes

- ¹ Nietzsche quoted in George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 234.
- ² Heinrich von Treitschke, *Die Zukunft des deutschen Gymnasiums* [The future of the German gymnasium] (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1890), 8.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 6–7.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁶ Nietzsche *Briefwechsel*. *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Volume 2:1. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 155.
- ⁷ Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750–1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 134; James C. Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 84, 288.
- ⁸ See Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Romantic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 71–81.
- ⁹ Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, 134.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Albisetti, *Secondary School Reform*, 174–75.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 208.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 210–15.
- ¹³ Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, 137–38; J. Conrad, *Das Universitätsstudium in Deutschland während der letzten fünfzig Jahre* (Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1884), 136.
- ¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Nachlaß 1875–1879*, vol. 8, Friedrich Nietzsche: *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1999), 31.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 69, 80.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche: *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1869–1874*, vol. 7, Colli and Montinari, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke*, 243.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 77.
- ²³ Marchand makes a similar comparison in *Down from Olympus*, 140–151.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 807.
- ²⁵ Colli and Montinari, *Nietzsche: Nachlaß 1875–1879*, 31.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Peter Sloterdijk, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern: Über Anthropotechnik* [You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics]. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009), 58.
- ²⁸ Colli and Montinari, *Nietzsche: Nachlaß 1875–1879*, 30.
- ²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Anti-education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, eds. Paul Reitter and Chad Wellmon, trans. Damion Searls (New York: New York Review Books, forthcoming).