

Nietzsche and the Greeks

By S. S. Prawer

J. C. O'FLAHERTY, T. F. SELLNER,
R. M. HELM (Editors):

*Studies in Nietzsche and the
Classical Tradition*

275pp. Chapel Hill: University of
North Carolina Press. £10.45.

Who would have thought it, a hundred years ago? Precipitated into a chair of classical philology while still in his twenties, the young Nietzsche found *The Birth of Tragedy*, which was to have established his academic reputation, greeted with icy silence by most of his colleagues and savagely attacked—many would have said demolished for ever—by Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, who thus began a career that was to make him the foremost classical philologist of his time. Even his students deserted the boy wonder; Nietzsche had to lecture on classical rhetoric to an audience of two young men, neither of whom was reading classics. Yet here, in this new volume under review, we find the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, hailing Nietzsche as “a greater writer than any philosopher since Plato” and *The Birth of Tragedy* as “a turning-point in modern understanding of Greek thought”.

Not that Wilamowitz and his contemporaries were wrong in their detailed objections to Nietzsche's dealings with Greek writers and Greek texts—they just could not see the wood for the trees. “Nietzsche's achievement in professional scholarship”, Professor Lloyd-Jones tells readers of this symposium, as he has already told readers of the *TLS*, “is trivial in comparison with his general understanding of Greek life and thought”. After the work of Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray, Eduard Fraenkel, E. R. Dodds and W. F. Otto we can, at last, see clearly that *The Birth of Tragedy*, “for all its blemishes, is a work of genius, and began a new era in the understanding of Greek thought”. Nietzsche's rejection of all attempts “to see in the Greeks beautiful souls, golden means and other types of perfection” was fully justified, and his analysis of the inner tensions which he designated “Apolline” and “Dionysian” has led to an understanding of the spirit of Greek culture which transcends that of the eminent professors who once looked down with scorn on their “unscientific and unscholarly” young colleague.

Lloyd-Jones's pellucid account of the place Nietzsche occupies in the history of studies of the ancient world is only one of fifteen essays contained in this well-conceived symposium. Others deal with the figure of Plato as it is reflected in

the thought of Nietzsche and Saint Augustine (R. M. Helm), Aristotle in the thought of Nietzsche and Aquinas (H. Wingler), structures of style, feeling and thought in Nietzsche and Dante (E. Biser), the applicability of structural principles suggested in *The Birth of Tragedy* to the analysis of paintings (M. Hester), the impact of ancient Greece and French classicism on Nietzsche's concept of tragedy (K. Weinberg), Nietzsche's relation to Voltaire and Rousseau (P. Heller), the figure of Socrates in Nietzsche's work and that of J. G. Hamann (J. C. O'Flaherty), reflections of the classical Goethe in Nietzsche's work (K. Schlechta), the traditions of the “Dionysian” before Nietzsche (M. L. Baeumer), Nietzsche, Byron and the classical tradition (R. S. Fraser), parody and parallel in Heine's and Nietzsche's presentations of the classical world (S. L. Gilman), Nietzsche's view of the classical world and of modern *décadence* (M. Boulby), and Nietzsche's concept of “the Death of Tragedy” (W. Kaufmann). Eleven of the essays were specially written for this volume; the others have already appeared elsewhere.

Inevitably, we find some bumbles among the contributors; but on the whole the symposium lives up to the high standard set by its opening essay. The insights and critical procedures of Wingler, O'Flaherty, Baeumer and Gilman are particularly impressive. No one will be surprised to discover that in their discussions of a writer as complex and full of self-contradictions as Nietzsche, the contributors occasionally contradict each other. Where one of them details all the insults Nietzsche heaped on Socrates (the great corrupter, the incarnation of *Pöbel*), another informs us, without qualification, that Nietzsche “harbored genuine regard” for the Athenian sage. Where one is at pains to demonstrate how deeply indebted Nietzsche's conception of “the Dionysian” is to the Romantics and to Hölderlin, another quotes, with approval, E. M. Butler's contention: “Dionysus, who came late into Greece, came late into Germany. Heine ushered him in and then left it to Friedrich Nietzsche to see that he got his rights” (reviewer's italics). And after we have heard one contributor after another paying tribute to the perennial fascination and abiding interest of *The Birth of Tragedy*, along comes Walter Kaufmann, with a passage taken over unchanged from his *Tragedy and Philosophy* (1968), to tell us that “*The Birth of Tragedy* is widely overrated”.

The importance of a symposium such as this, contradictions and all, for the Nietzsche specialist is not hard to fathom—and Nietzsche scholars all over the world have long ago learnt to look to the University of North Carolina Press for indispensable adjuncts to their studies. The present volume, how-

ever, is specifically designed to appeal to a more general readership—all contributions originally written in German have been translated into English, as have all quotations from Nietzsche's works. It is pertinent, therefore, to ask what this wider public is likely to find of interest in these essays.

One can begin to answer this by pointing out that the book can be read as a case-study in the history of reputations: a series of demonstrations of the way in which different men with different concerns have reacted to the work of the same writer in the course of a history that extends from Plato to Nietzsche and takes in St Augustine, St Thomas, Dante, Hamann, Goethe and Bachofen on the way.

Why did Hamann and Nietzsche both devote so much attention to Socrates in their first important publications? How did they assimilate him into their own (very different) mental worlds? This book provides answers to such questions, and in the process of doing so it shows us how Nietzsche transformed other writers and sages into self-images, voices of what he loved and what he hated in himself. “Anaximander, Empedocles and Heraclitus”, Ernst Howald said in what had been, before the present symposium, the most intelligent assessment of Nietzsche's relation to the ancient Greeks, “are all half-Nietzsches” in his writings. Now Hedwig Winger supplements this by showing how Aristotle, becomes for the later philosopher, “one of the collective concepts which he uses to place into relief and give contour to his own viewpoint in aesthetics and art-theory—a viewpoint which was in no case a fixed and constant one”.

Again and again, too, the book demonstrates connections between social and political conditions, general world-views, and philosophies of history: subtle analyses bring out surprising likenesses as well as differences in the writings of Nietzsche on the one hand and those of St Augustine and Dante (two of his *bêtes noires*) on the other. How strange it is to find religious structures, religious interpretations, obsessing this declared enemy of religion, this proclaimer of the death of God! How strange to find parallels between Dante's vision of the Circle of Heaven—the Celestial White Rose—and the sudden illumination which brought the idea of “eternal recurrence” to Nietzsche! The discussion of these and related topics in the volume under review clarifies many issues in the phenomenology of religion while exemplifying the philosophy and methodology of the modern historian.

The book is important, too, as a demonstration of the way in which the dreaded “influence” studies of yore have been succeeded by much more meaningful studies of “reception” and “assimilation”.



“In spite of its damaged surface the ivy-crowned head has a distinctly personal look . . . conveyed by the twist of the neck, the casual notation of the features, and the almost wilfully informal treatment of the hair”: a young man, represented as Dionysus, in the “impressionist” (as opposed to “classicizing”) style dating from the fourth century BC. From a reissue of Greek and Roman Portait Sculpture, by R. P. Hinks (93pp including 74 illustrations. British Museum Publications. £3.75; paperback £1.95), which was first published in 1935.

S. L. Gilman, who discusses Nietzsche's relation to Heine with illuminating results, puts the principles particularly clearly.

The potential goal of such a study should be threefold: first, an understanding of Nietzsche's individual reception should be obtained by examining his views of Heine; second, the greater contexts of these views should be comprehended; finally, the development of Nietzsche's image of Heine must be understood within the total development of Nietzsche's character and thought.

One could go on listing such topics for a long time; for various contributors discuss the emergence of Modernism and Nietzsche's relation to it (particularly through his definition and critique of *décadence*); the relation between myth and tragedy; the uses of quotation (how tellingly Nietzsche wrests “*écrasez l'infâme*” away from its original context and applies it to one Voltaire never dreamed of!); the history of Romanticism and anti-Romanticism (Nietzsche plays a vital part in both); the history of the term and concept “Dionysian” and its relation to vitalist theories; the reinterpretations of ancient myths (notably Nietzsche's creation of a “barbarian” Prometheus). The book demonstrates Nietzsche's anticipations of Freud and discusses how such an “obsessive cerebralist”

could come to worship the instincts. It demonstrates Nietzsche's habit of savage verbal caricature: the description of Aristotle as “that screech-owl of Minerva” (which gets Hegel into the picture too), of Dante as “the hyena who composes poetry among the tombs”, or of Schiller as *der Moraltrampeter von Säckingen*.

And for all the praise contributors lavish on him, for all their tributes to his insights and powers of formulation, the book does pertinently remind us, not only of his many lapses of taste, but also of the social and political dangers he exemplified. As Hedwig Wingler puts it: “One can read from the political history of our century just how Nietzsche's theory of irrationality turned into the practice of inhumanity.”

Studies in Nietzsche and the Classical Tradition is a valuable book—but perhaps a companion volume on Nietzsche and the Judeo-Christian Tradition would bring out more clearly what I cannot but see as the fundamental wickedness of this sensitive, intelligent, perceptive, poetic, suffering man who wanted to do away with compassion and pity; who thought of himself as *unzeitgemäss*, out of tune with his time, while he was in fact articulating what we can now, alas, recognize as the deepest desires of the contemporaries he despised.