The Birth of Tragedy; or, Hellenism and Pessimism

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

THE

BIRTH OF TRAGEDY

OR

HELLENISM AND PESSIMISM

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INTRODUCTION.[1]

Frederick Nietzsche was born at Röcken near Lützen, in the Prussian province of Saxony, on the 15th of October 1844, at 10 a.m. The day happened to be the anniversary of the birth of Frederick-William IV., then King of Prussia, and the peal of the local church-bells which was intended to celebrate this event, was, by a happy coincidence, just timed to greet my brother on his entrance into the world. In 1841, at the time when our father was tutor to the Altenburg Princesses, Theresa of Saxe-Altenburg, Elizabeth, Grand Duchess of Olden-burg, and Alexandra, Grand Duchess Constantine of Russia, he had had the honour of being presented to his witty and pious sovereign. The meeting seems to have impressed both parties very favourably; for, very shortly after it had taken place, our father received his living at Röcken "by supreme command." His joy may well be imagined, therefore, when a first son was born to him on his beloved and august patron's birthday, and at the christening ceremony he spoke as follows:--"Thou blessed month of October!--for many years the most decisive events in my life have occurred within thy thirty-one days,

and now I celebrate the greatest and most glorious of them all by baptising my little boy! O blissful moment! O exquisite festival! O unspeakably holy duty! In the Lord's name I bless thee!--With all my heart I utter these words: Bring me this, my beloved child, that I may consecrate it unto the Lord. My son, Frederick William, thus shalt thou be named on earth, as a memento of my royal benefactor on whose birthday thou wast born!"

Our father was thirty-one years of age, and our mother not quite nineteen, when my brother was born. Our mother, who was the daughter of a clergyman, was good-looking and healthy, and was one of a very large family of sons and daughters. Our paternal grandparents, the Rev. Oehler and his wife, in Pobles, were typically healthy people. Strength, robustness, lively dispositions, and a cheerful outlook on life, were among the qualities which every one was pleased to observe in them. Our grandfather Oehler was a bright, clever man, and quite the old style of comfortable country parson, who thought it no sin to go hunting. He scarcely had a day's illness in his life, and would certainly not have met with his end as early as he did--that is to say, before his seventieth year--if his careless disregard of all caution, where his health was concerned, had not led to his catching a severe and fatal cold. In regard to our grand-mother Oehler, who died in her eighty-second year, all that can be said is, that if all German women were possessed of the health she enjoyed, the German nation would excel all others from the standpoint of vitality. She bore our grandfather eleven children; gave each of them the breast for nearly the whole of its first year, and reared them all It is said that the sight of these eleven children, at ages varying from nineteen years to one month, with their powerful build, rosy cheeks,

beaming eyes, and wealth of curly locks, provoked the admiration of all visitors. Of course, despite their extraordinarily good health, the life of this family was not by any means all sunshine. Each of the children was very spirited, wilful, and obstinate, and it was therefore no simple matter to keep them in order. Moreover, though they always showed the utmost respect and most implicit obedience to their parents--even as middle-aged men and women--misunderstandings between themselves were of constant occurrence. Our Oehler grandparents were fairly well-to-do; for our grandmother hailed from a very old family, who had been extensive land-owners in the neighbourhood of Zeitz for centuries, and her father owned the baronial estate of Wehlitz and a magnificent seat near Zeitz in Pacht. When she married, her father gave her carriages and horses, a coachman, a cook, and a kitchenmaid, which for the wife of a German minister was then, and is still, something quite exceptional. As a result of the wars in the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, our great-grandfather lost the greater part of his property.

Our father's family was also in fairly comfortable circumstances, and likewise very large. Our grandfather Dr. Nietzsche (D.D. and Superintendent) married twice, and had in all twelve children, of whom three died young. Our grandfather on this side, whom I never knew, must certainly have been a distinguished, dignified, very learned and reserved man; his second wife--our beloved grandmother--was an active-minded, intelligent, and exceptionally good-natured woman. The whole of our father's family, which I only got to know when they were very advanced in years, were remarkable for their great power of self-control, their lively interest in intellectual

matters, and a strong sense of family unity, which manifested itself both in their splendid readiness to help one another and in their very excellent relations with each other. Our father was the youngest son, and, thanks to his uncommonly lovable disposition, together with other gifts, which only tended to become more marked as he grew older, he was quite the favourite of the family. Blessed with a thoroughly sound constitution, as all averred who knew him at the convent-school in Rossleben, at the University, or later at the ducal court of Altenburg, he was tall and slender, possessed an undoubted gift for poetry and real musical talent, and was moreover a man of delicate sensibilities, full of consideration for his whole family, and distinguished in his manners.

My brother often refers to his Polish descent, and in later years he even instituted research-work with the view of establishing it, which met with partial success. I know nothing definite concerning these investigations, because a large number of valuable documents were unfortunately destroyed after his breakdown in Turin. The family tradition was that a certain Polish nobleman Nicki (pronounced Nietzky) had obtained the special favour of Augustus the Strong, King of Poland, and had received the rank of Earl from him. When, however, Stanislas Leszcysski the Pole became king, our supposed ancestor became involved in a conspiracy in favour of the Saxons and Protestants. He was sentenced to death; but, taking flight, according to the evidence of the documents, he was ultimately befriended by a certain Earl of Brühl, who gave him a small post in an obscure little provincial town. Occasionally our aged aunts would speak of our great-grandfather Nietzsche, who was said to have died in his ninety-first year, and words always seemed to fail them when they

attempted to describe his handsome appearance, good breeding, and vigour. Our ancestors, both on the Nietzsche and the Oehler side, were very long-lived. Of the four pairs of great-grandparents, one great-grandfather reached the age of ninety, five great-grandmothers and-fathers died between eighty-two and eighty-six years of age, and two only failed to reach their seventieth year.

The sorrow which hung as a cloud over our branch of the family was our father's death, as the result of a heavy fall, at the age of thirty-eight. One night, upon leaving some friends whom he had accompanied home, he was met at the door of the vicarage by our little dog. The little animal must have got between his feet, for he stumbled and fell backwards down seven stone steps on to the paving-stones of the vicarage courtyard. As a result of this fall, he was laid up with concussion of the brain, and, after a lingering illness, which lasted eleven months, he died on the 30th of July 1849. The early death of our beloved and highly-gifted father spread gloom over the whole of our childhood. In 1850 our mother withdrew with us to Naumburg on the Saale, where she took up her abode with our widowed grandmother Nietzsche; and there she brought us up with Spartan severity and simplicity, which, besides being typical of the period, was quite _de rigeur_ in her family. Of course, Grand-mamma Nietzsche helped somewhat to temper her daughter-in-law's severity, and in this respect our Oehler grandparents, who were less rigorous with us, their eldest grandchildren, than with their own children, were also very influential. Grandfather Oehler was the first who seems to have recognised the extraordinary talents of his eldest grandchild.

From his earliest childhood upwards, my brother was always strong and healthy; he often declared that he must have been taken for a

peasant-boy throughout his childhood and youth, as he was so plump, brown, and rosy. The thick fair hair which fell picturesquely over his shoulders tended somewhat to modify his robust appearance. Had he not possessed those wonderfully beautiful, large, and expressive eyes, however, and had he not been so very ceremonious in his manner, neither his teachers nor his relatives would ever have noticed anything at all remarkable about the boy; for he was both modest and reserved.

He received his early schooling at a preparatory school, and later at a grammar school in Naumburg. In the autumn of 1858, when he was fourteen years of age, he entered the Pforta school, so famous for the scholars it has produced. There, too, very severe discipline prevailed, and much was exacted from the pupils, with the view of inuring them to great mental and physical exertions. Thus, if my brother seems to lay particular stress upon the value of rigorous training, free from all sentimentality, it should be remembered that he speaks from experience in this respect. At Pforta he followed the regular school course, and he did not enter a university until the comparatively late age of twenty. His extraordinary gifts manifested themselves chiefly in his independent and private studies and artistic efforts. As a boy his musical talent had already been so noticeable, that he himself and other competent judges were doubtful as to whether he ought not perhaps to devote himself altogether to music. It is, however, worth noting that everything he did in his later years, whether in Latin, Greek, or German work, bore the stamp of perfection--subject of course to the limitation imposed upon him by his years. His talents came very suddenly to the fore, because he had allowed them to grow for such a long time in concealment. His very first performance in

philology, executed while he was a student under Ritschl, the famous philologist, was also typical of him in this respect, seeing that it was ordered to be printed for the _Rheinische Museum._ Of course this was done amid general and grave expressions of doubt; for, as Dr. Ritschl often declared, it was an unheard-of occurrence for a student in his third term to prepare such an excellent treatise.

Being a great lover of out-door exercise, such as swimming, skating, and walking, he developed into a very sturdy lad. Rohde gives the following description of him as a student: with his healthy complexion, his outward and inner cleanliness, his austere chastity and his solemn aspect, he was the image of that delightful youth described by Adalbert Stifter.

Though as a child he was always rather serious, as a lad and a man he was ever inclined to see the humorous side of things, while his whole being, and everything he said or did, was permeated by an extraordinary harmony. He belonged to the very few who could control even a bad mood and conceal it from others. All his friends are unanimous in their praise of his exceptional evenness of temper and behaviour, and his warm, hearty, and pleasant laugh that seemed to come from the very depths of his benevolent and affectionate nature. In him it might therefore be said, nature had produced a being who in body and spirit was a harmonious whole: his unusual intellect was fully in keeping with his uncommon bodily strength.

The only abnormal thing about him, and something which we both inherited from our father, was short-sightedness, and this was very much aggravated in my brother's case, even in his earliest schooldays, owing to that indescribable anxiety to learn which always

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