

## NIETZSCHE ON HISTORY AND HISTORICAL EDUCATION THROUGH TRAGIC SENSE

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Nietzsche's definition of history is based on his refusal to conceive it as "pure science": We can employ history only "for the purpose of life". This vitalistic perspective led us to initially tackle the Nietzschean interpretation of life, which is concerned with a "dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself", which, in its effort to be redeemed from "the "unconsciousness of instinct", can be found in a small minority of geniuses, the human types who will ensure the fulfillment of its ultimate demand for the Self – knowledge. But this demand, given the "terror" and "horror" of life itself, essentially announces the fight of man with the tragic aspect of the cosmic Being. Thus the Nietzschean conception of history seems to fully reflect the intentions of life, aiming at the creation of a human being who is able to face the transference of suffering from the cosmic to the historical field. Nonetheless, due to the inability of life to accomplish this aim in its own right, Nietzsche had to employ the mediation of education, which should help the genius to adapt the past to his own needs, in order to finally accomplish his own uniqueness.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche – History – Life – Self – Knowledge – Suffering – Genius – Art – Transfiguration – Squander – Culture – Education – "Be yourself" – Pain – Liberation – Teacher – Knowledge – Plastic power – Uniqueness

**I. Introduction.** The point of reference for Nietzsche's conception of history is mainly his Second Untimely Meditation entitled *On the uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* which constitutes a profound critique of nineteenth – century German historiography. However, this is a criticism that is not opposed to the study of history and historical understanding as such.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, what seems to be rejected is the groundless teleology (Young 29 - 30) deriving from the Hegelian view of history (Hegel 9, 16) and arguing that reason incarnates itself through the historical process.

Specifically, Nietzsche believes that the latter, through its demand to conceive history as "pure science" (HL 1), tries to dominate (HL 10) life by means of science and knowledge, ignoring that since life is the "higher" and the "dominating force" and as "knowledge presupposes life", we must employ history only "for the purpose of life" (HL 1).

The prevalence of this particular view in the educational field led Nietzsche to further protest against the historical education of the modern man, declaring that when the "instructions do not become life" (HL 5), the historical culture seems like a "kind of in-born grey – haired ness" (HL 8), which leads the youth to finally approach the past "seek-

ing consolation through remembering what has been.”

Taking into account the above argumentation, the aim of our study will focus on the interpretation of the way in which history and historical education can be laid in the service of life. In this context, the fact that Nietzsche puts both of them in the light of a vitalistic perspective, leads us to commence with the exploration of life itself.

**II. The conception of man and history through life’s attempt for self – knowledge.** The fundamental point of Nietzsche’s conception of life is the schopenhauerian dualism between the Will and the Representation, based on which he attempted a reinterpretation of the ancient Greek culture which surpasses by far the harmonious, clear and brilliant image of Neo humanism, and places next to the apollonian impulse, an “ecstatic” (BT 1), “eternally suffering and contradictory” (BT 4) force named Dionysian, which is identical to the essence of life itself. Particularly, life for Nietzsche is a “dark, driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself”, which “unmerciful” and “unjust” as it may be, yet its judgment is “the same even if it were pronounced by justice itself” (HL 3). This is so because life acts “without any moral additive” (PTA 7), trying to “convince us that even the ugly and disharmonic are part of an artistic game” which “in the eternal amplitude of its pleasure plays with itself”(BT 24).

The fact however that the “primal and eternal suffering”(BT 4) constitutes the “sole ground” for this cosmic game, reveals the “cruelty” (BT 7), the “terror” and the “horror” (BT 3) underlying the essence of existence, and leads us to finally regard the sense of “tragic” as the main feature of Being itself. This tragic character of existence rises on the light of human consciousness through nature’s attempt to be redeemed from the “curse” of animals, which “do not possess the power ... to understand their existence metaphysically” (SE 5), and to reach by means of a small minority of geniuses the knowledge of its own self.

The formulation of nature’s demand for self – knowledge in the field of human history, led Nietzsche to look on the latter as the reflection of the two fundamental cosmic intentions: More specifically, firstly he adopts the individualistic character existing in life’s demand for self – knowledge, and declares, “What I seek in history are not the happy ages, but those which offer a favorable soil for the production of genius.”<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the fact that Nietzsche not only praises the “non – morality” (GM 170) of history and the “indispensability” (HH 1 477) of war, but he also considers them necessary<sup>3</sup> for the emergence of genius, leads us to conclude that the latter seems to signify the transmission of suffering from the cosmic to the social and historical field. The tragic results of this attempt made Nietzsche admit that:

Whatever wants to live, or rather must live, in this horrifying constellation of things is quintessentially a reflection of the primeval pain and contradiction and must seem in our eyes as ... an insatiable craving for existence and eternal self – contradiction in terms of time, therefore as becoming (GSt 179).

The man however who “looked boldly right into this terrible destructiveness of so – called world history as well as the cruelty of nature” is “in danger of longing a Buddhist

negation of the will” (BT 7), from which only art can “save him, and through the art-life”. This close relation between life and art indicates that the concept of the latter is initially composed on the basis of transcendental rather than human choices, and pertains substantially to the intention of the Will to “transfigure” (BT 24) the cosmic suffering into representations that affirm and justify the Existence. To the extent, however, that art is being regarded as “transfiguration”, it is obvious that it is not exclusively confined in the field of Fine Arts, but it also incorporates a larger number of activities (such as science, philosophy and religion)<sup>4</sup>, which, in a wider sense can be regarded as artistic means.

According to this interpretation, we can assume that when Nietzsche blames the “analytic and inartistic tendencies of modern historiography” supporting the transfiguration of history “into a work of art”<sup>5</sup>, he indicates his intention to include history among the means used to face the cosmic terror. By following this interpretative path, Nietzsche believed that he could solve the main problem of his anthropology, namely to deal with the “false”, “cruel”, “contradictory”, “seductive”, and “meaningless” (WP 853) character of the world history, by means of an aesthetic justification (BT 5) of the existence.

**III. The inability of life and the human need for education.** While until now we can conclude that the nietzschean man seems to derive the means to face the cosmic suffering from life itself, the “squandering” (SE 7) with which the latter handles its human potential, renders it unable to guarantee the development of this specific human type by its own means. Trying to overcome this inability, Nietzsche places next to the “metaphysical origin” (FEI 67) of the genius the need for his cultural composition, supporting that in this way “what is unique in a people, here comes to light in an individual; the drive of the people is interpreted as a universal drive and is employed to solve the riddle of the universe” (TPhil 6).

But in order for the genius to “signify the highest destiny” (FEI 67) of his people, it is obvious that he must first of all become a profound connoisseur of his cultural legacy. His inability however to fulfil such a mission by his own means (e.g. through his self – education<sup>6</sup>), makes the need of his historical education necessary as well as urgent.

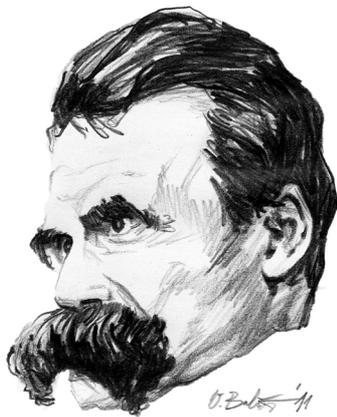
So, trying to approach the way in which Nietzsche conceives the teaching of history, we consider that we must firstly approach the basic principles of his educational model, in the context of which the command “be yourself” (SE 1) is dominant. However, taking into account that the latter is composed on the basis of the man’s attempt to “know himself” (SE 1), we can suppose that it is referred to a demand which lies far beyond the human field, and it is identical, as we have already seen, with the undertaking of life to personify in the face of genius the knowledge of its own self, i.e. to surface in the light of human consciousness all the breath of the cosmic problematic.

The identification of man’s attempt for self – knowledge with the personification of cosmic suffering, led Nietzsche: firstly, to place “pain” among the main principles of his pedagogy<sup>7</sup>, admitting that “only the great pain is the liberator of the spirit ... that long, slow pain ... forces us ... to descend into our ultimate depths”<sup>8</sup>, and secondly, to give his educational model a deep individualistic character originating from men’s segregation

according to their ability to withstand spiritual pain, since “deep suffering makes us noble; it separates.”<sup>9</sup>

On the basis of this separation, the nietzschean meaning of self – knowledge is fully differentiated from the stereotyped demand which, more or less, every man sets to himself, and it is synonymous with the genius’ attempt to shake off every kind of foreign influence, in order to finally accentuate those characteristics of his personality that make him “unique” and “incomparable” (GS 335).

During this struggle, the above mentioned inability of the nietzschean man to carry out his mission by his own means, makes the teacher’s presence necessary, in that the latter can facilitate the “liberation” (SE 1) of the genius’ true self that resembles a “granite – like spiritual fate, predetermined decisions and answers to selected, predetermined questions.”<sup>10</sup>



*Friedrich Nietzsche*

The nietzschean conception of the teacher as the liberator of the genius’ “uniqueness” gave the educational process a completely new content, leading finally to the dismissal of the latter as a mere transition of the students to the cognitive tanks of reality, and their transformation into “walking encyclopaedias” (HL 4). This is so because, concerning Nietzsche, the knowledge that a student acquires is worth only as far as it serves life (HL 1) and its pursuits, i.e. when it enables a limited minority of geniuses “to attain a wholly individual perception of the world” (HH 1 230). During this continuous struggle for uniqueness, the educational process acquired a deep competitive (HC 192) character, indeed to such a degree that Nietzsche considers a real student only him who is able to overrule his teacher’s authority – an undertaking that the ideal teacher owes not only to accept but also to incite<sup>11</sup>.

**IV. The historical education and the demand of the nietzschean man for “uniqueness”.** Taking into account the above aims, we can assume that the nietzschean teaching of history derives its meaning from the genius’ attempt to gain his uniqueness, which means that it takes on a deep individualistic character excluding<sup>12</sup> the majority of students from the real knowledge of the past. This is so because the latter, concerning Nietzsche, is applied only to the “superior man” who is “accustomed to the heroic” (HL 6), since “history can be borne only by strong personalities, weak ones are utterly extinguished by it” (HL 5).

In this context, the contribution of historical education in the genius’ struggle for uniqueness, consists in activating the “plastic power” (HL 1,4,10) existing in himself,

which is nothing but “the capacity to develop out of oneself in one’s own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign” (HL 1), in order finally to turn “the universally known into something never heard of before” (HL 6).

This conception of history through man’s attempt for “uniqueness” is very illuminative of the way in which Nietzsche himself seems to approach the past in order to discover his own self. Particularly, this effort took place during Nietzsche’s attempt to find out the hidden essence of the ancient Greek world, by using the “problem of Socrates”<sup>13</sup> as a guide. Dominant in the essence of this specific problem is the ambiguous attitude towards Socrates arising from the fact that while Nietzsche blames (BT 14, 15) him for the decline of the Greek culture, he nevertheless regards the figure of “Socrates who practices music» as the personification of the ideal philosopher (i.e. of the philosopher – artist), in order finally to acknowledge: “Socrates is so close to me that I am almost continually fighting with him” (SSW 127).

In our opinion, this sibylline acknowledgement can be cleared up, if we take into account the nietzschean choice to look on the “competition” as the climax of the relationship between teacher and student, which enables the latter to acquire his own uniqueness. According to this choice, the more Nietzsche has been admitting his philosophical relationship with Socrates, the more he has been obliged to fight against him, in order finally to avoid degenerating into a bad copy of the famous Greek philosopher. During this fighting, Nietzsche adopted an authentic as well as a simplistic re – interpretation (Silk – Stern 185 – 187) of the ancient Greek culture, in order to replace the Socratic rational optimism of his age with an aesthetic interpretation of the world revealing the tragic essence of the cosmic Will, which finally bestowed on him his own philosophical “uniqueness.”

**V. The timeliness of the Nietzschean proposal.** Having at this point completed the exploration of Nietzsche’s view of history, we can conclude that it originates from a vitalistic perspective derived from his intention to “stand history in the service of life”, in the context of which the teaching of the past is focused on the preparation of the genius to fulfil the ultimate cosmic demand for self – knowledge. While however the conception of education by means of life seems to keep up with Rousseau’s “return to nature”, the way in which Nietzsche conceives the existence differentiates him completely from the French philosopher. Specifically, Nietzsche believes that in the core of Rousseau’s claim about the “good nature”<sup>14</sup> the “insipid” and “cowardly” “nature” (WP 340, 347) concept lies hidden, one that resembles the “cult of Christian morality”, ignoring the “fearful, implacable and cynical” instinct existing “in even the most beautiful aspects” of nature.

The role of education as a facilitator of such a terrible nature gave the nietzschean proposal a completely new meaning that conflicts with the pedagogical tradition ranging from Plato<sup>15</sup> to Dewey<sup>16</sup>, which regards education as a social function formed by reason, indenting to produce a capable and enlightened citizenry. This is so because, according to Nietzsche, life is not governed by rational principles, as the assumptions behind the above interpretation would have it; it is, rather, full of cruelty, uncertainty and injustice.

Finally, while the nietzschean persistence in the tragic aspect of life seems to be in-

deed too dark and pessimistic for our modern liberal societies, we must not, for all that, forget the inability of reason to protect humanity from a chain of terrible and destructive wars. In conclusion, it is this particular inability that makes the following nietzschean prophecy about human history sounding as timeless as ever: “There will be wars the like of which have never yet been seen on earth.”<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

Nietzsche’s works are abbreviated as follows (at the end of each entry, in brackets, I give the citation format):

- BGE = *Beyond Good and Evil* [BGE, aphorism number]  
 BT = *The Birth of Tragedy* [BT, section number]  
 NCW = *Nietzsche contra Wagner* [NCW, section number]  
 D = *Daybreak* [D, aphorism number]  
 EH = *Ecce Homo* [EH, section title, aphorism number]  
 FEI = *On the Future of our Educational Institutions* [FEI, page number]  
 GM = *On the Genealogy of Morals* [GM, page number]  
 GS = *The Gay Science* [GS, aphorism number]  
 GSt = *The Greek State* [GSt, page number]  
 HC = *Homer on Competition* [HC, page number]  
 HH = *Human, All too Human* (1-2) [HH, part number, aphorism number]  
 HL = *On the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life* [HL, section number]  
 PTA = *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* [PTA, section number]  
 SE = *Schopenhauer as Educator* [SE, section number]  
 SSW = *The struggle between science and Wisdom* [SSW, page number]  
 TI = *Twilight of the Idols* [TI, page number]  
 TPhil = *The Philosopher: Reflections on the struggle between Art and Knowledge* [Tphil, page number]  
 WP = *The Will to Power* [WP, aphorism number]

<sup>1</sup> See HL 2: “life is in need of the services of history”.

<sup>2</sup> See SSW142, TPhil 3, 4, and HL 9.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche claims (see HH 1 233) that “in general history seems to furnish the following instructions regarding the production of genius: mistreat and torment men ... drive them to the limit, one against the other, nation against nation, and do it for centuries on end; then perhaps, a spark as it were thrown off by the fearful energy thus ignited, the light of genius will suddenly flare up.”

<sup>4</sup> In relation to Nietzsche’s conception of religion and science as arts see BT 15, HL 5, 10, WP 853. The transfiguration of philosophy into art is rendered obvious (see BT 15) by means of the figure of “Socrates who practices music”. For a detailed presence of this interpretation see Ibanez – Noe 3-6.

<sup>5</sup> See HL 7. Concerning the conception of history as art see also Heilke 71 – 73 and Taylor 148 – 149.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche’s intentions referring to the self – education are revealed in the lectures “On the future of our educational institutions”, where in the question (91) if the power of geniuses lies exactly in their ability to “know how to find their way and that therein their strength shows itself to be able to walk without such educational crutches as everyone else”, the answer is that (93) “a number of German heroic men had not condemned to death” if “the true German spirit had spread out its protecting roof over them in a powerful institution, that spirit that, without such an institution, drags its existence along, isolated, crumbled, degenerated”. The above claim is obviously in opposition with the interpretation [see Johnston 83, 89, 90] about the self – education of the nietzschean man.

<sup>7</sup> It’s worth mentioning here the dialogue that has opened among the nietzschean interpreters [see Hillesheim *Suffering and Self – Cultivation* 171 - 178, Rosenow 307 - 316, Hillesheim *Self – Overcoming*

211 – 215] regarding the pedagogical role of “pain” and “suffering” in the composition of the nietzschean man. These concepts, as rightly remarked by J. Hillesheim (see *Suffering and Self– Cultivation* 175 – 178), not only do not contradict with Nietzsche’s intention to positively face the tragic deadlock of existence, but on the contrary they also contribute to a large extent in the fulfillment of this specific aim. Particularly, these concepts in Nietzsche’s philosophy surpass by far the dualism of the hedonistic philosophy that - taking them for the source of evil - seeks the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. This is so because, concerning Nietzsche, the pain is a consequence of creating (see WP 702) as well as “the normal ingredient of every organic event”, which is necessary for man, since “every victory, every feeling of pleasure, every event, presuppose a resistance overcome”. In this context the pleasure not only is not the contrary of pain (WP 699), but also all pleasure includes pain” (WP 658), in such a particular degree that “if the pleasure is to be very great, the pains must be very protracted and the tremendous.”

<sup>8</sup> See GS, “Preface to the second edition”, as well as NCW Epilogue, 1.

<sup>9</sup> BGE 270. Concerning the role of the pain on the composition of nietzschean man see also HH 1 462, BGE 225 and TI 87.

<sup>10</sup> BGE 231. The same motive follows the argumentation of the lectures “On the future of our educational institutions”, in which Nietzsche (66) points out the “trademark” that nature “has burned” on the majority of people.

<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche, in a series of texts like HH 2a 268, 357, D 447, 348, GS 106, seems to conceive the relation between teacher and student as a process of continuous competition and dispute, in the context of which the real teacher owes to contribute to himself being exceeded.

<sup>12</sup> We must emphasize here that despite Nietzsche’s exclusion of the students’ majority from real knowledge, he nevertheless accepts them in his educational system. This is so because, while he supports that (FEI 66) “the education of the mass cannot be our goal: rather education of the individual, selected human beings, equipped for great and lasting works”, he nevertheless admits that (34) “this small number of truly educated ones would not for once be possible, if a great mass, fundamentally against its nature and only directed by a tempting deception, did not involve itself with the education”.

<sup>13</sup> See BT 14 as well as TI 39-45.

<sup>14</sup> See D 17, HH 1 463, WP 120.

<sup>15</sup> See Republic 377a – 415d, 502d – 521d.

<sup>16</sup> See “My pedagogic Creed”, Article 1.

<sup>17</sup> EH “Why I am a Destiny” 1.

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