

BECOMING WHAT ONE IS AS BECOMING NOBLE

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Nietzsche's famous dictum "Become what you are" is one of the most difficult aspects of his philosophy. Although Nehamas' (2001) influential interpretation elucidates how we can understand the apparent contradiction between being and becoming inherent in it, it does so only at the price of divorcing the dictum from the larger concerns of Nietzsche's thought. Therefore, I will interpret this dictum in the light of *Schopenhauer as Educator* and its statement that "your true nature lies not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you". I aim to show that by understanding Nietzsche's conception of human nature as it appears in the statement above we can grasp "becoming what one is" as inextricably bound together with his concepts of education and nobility and with his project of individual transformation, and thus with the core of his thought.

Keywords: F. Nietzsche – "Become what you are" – Education – Culture – Nobility

Introduction. Nietzsche's dictum "become what you are", appearing at critical places throughout his *oeuvre*,¹ is one of the most puzzling aspects of his teaching. Attempts to read it at face value immediately have to deal with the apparent contradiction between being and becoming in it. Furthermore, it is hardly clear how it is to be understood, i.e. to *what* exactly does it exhort us and what is its place in the wider context of Nietzsche's thought. Alexander Nehamas' ([1983] 2001) interpretation of this dictum, later expanded into a book (Nehamas 1985), goes a long way to explain how the issue of being and becoming inherent in it can be understood. However, it doesn't consider the distinction between the high and the low, the noble and the common, and so fails to do justice to Nietzsche's project of individual transformation – a project in which "becoming what you are" has a crucial place – by staying at the level of the common.

In this paper I will first review Nehamas' interpretation and point out where his ideas fall short of offering an account of Nietzsche's dictum that would satisfy his demand that "the only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something" is "trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it" (*SE* p. 187). Then I will offer a different solution to the puzzle Nietzsche presents us with by emphasizing the importance of *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche's most exhaustive treatment of the problematic of education, for his mature thought in general and for the issue of "becoming what one is" in

¹ From the first chapter of *SE*, through *GS* §270 and *ZIV* "The Honey Sacrifice", to the subtitle of *Ecce Homo*.

particular. I aim to show that by understanding Nietzsche's conception of human nature as it appears in the statement from *SE* (p. 129) that "your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you" we can grasp "becoming what one is" as inextricably bound together with his concepts of education and nobility, and thus with the core of his thought.

Nehamas. Alexander Nehamas' (2001) essay concentrates, as indicated above, on the ways being and becoming are related in Nietzsche's thought, and on the bearings of this relation on "becoming what one is". He rightly notes that Nietzsche sees, in his own phrase, becoming as "sovereign" (*UDH* p. 112), and that he criticizes the past philosophers for denying this and always in one way or another having "turned away from what changes and ... only tried to understand what is" (Nehamas 2001, p. 255). This means that these philosophers, caught up in the dichotomy of the real and the apparent world, have dealt only with their fictions of the world (*ibid.*). Nehamas then explains how the doctrine of sovereign becoming entails a critique of the traditional understanding of the ethical subject.

This critique works on two levels. First of them is critique of the subject as a stable and unitary entity, which began as early as the second book of *Human, All Too Human* (p. 263). Based on the understanding that "each 'thing' is nothing more, and nothing less, than the sum of all its effects or features" (p. 265), this critique argues that 1) one's self changes over time, and that 2) the self is neither a coherent (in the sense of non-contradictory) nor a singular entity, but rather a "social structure of the drives and affects" (*BGE* §12; quoted *ibid.*, p. 263), which exists in a state of constant flux and struggle of its constitutive parts. Second, as a consequence of his critique of the subject, Nietzsche's ethical thought has to reject all ethical ideals that see their end in some form of being. Hence, "becoming what one is" cannot be a variant of Aristotelian perfectionism, as the latter presupposes a fixed goal, *telos*, for the becoming, and thus again falsifies reality as becoming (*ibid.*, p. 261).

Bearing all this in mind, Nehamas sketches how Nietzsche's dictum may be understood in a way that affirms the truth of sovereign becoming. He argues that "becoming what one is" means self-creation: giving one's self a unity, a style, ultimately a "total organization of everything that one thinks, wants, and does" (*ibid.*, p. 269), in the sense of *GS* §290. This unity, "the creation, or imposition, of a higher-order accord among one's lower-order thoughts, desires, and actions" (*ibid.*, p. 272), entails grasping oneself as a product of all one has hitherto done, accepting it and assuming responsibility for it. The consequence of this unity is an acceptance of one's past, present, and future as one's very own, and thus an increase of one's freedom (*ibid.*, p. 274; cf. *TI* Skirmishes §38). The goal here is not a fixed final state, but "to want to become what one becomes" (*ibid.*, p. 275), to affirm one's entire being (or: one's entire *becoming*).²

Nehamas however takes Nietzsche's exhortations to make one's life to a work of art

² Schacht (1992, p. 274) notes that such an interpretation leaves no room for *overcoming* what one is, which was an important theme for Nietzsche as well. I'll address this issue in the next section.

literally, and thinks Nietzsche took this notion from literature, his “primary model” for understanding what character is (ibid., p. 277). He believes that it was this “literary” model of character which led Nietzsche to admire “villainous or even inconsistent” characters (ibid.), which is acceptable in the case of literary characters, but not for actual villainous people. More importantly, he believes Nietzsche’s books, in particular *Ecce Homo*, to be his (and therefore exemplary) way of self-creation, and finds this too demanding and self-defeating a task to be practicable (ibid., p. 280). “Becoming what one is” is in the end reduced by Nehamas to a fiction that cannot work in actual lived life, which therefore is a failure by Nietzsche’s own criteria (cf. *SE* p. 187).

Education as becoming what one is. The exhortation to “be your self”, because “all you are now doing, thinking, desiring, is not you yourself”, appears already on the first page (p. 127) of *Schopenhauer as Educator*. Hence, *contra* Nehamas, Nietzsche isn’t telling us to simply accept our self as it is. But neither is he telling us to become something we aren’t: soon enough the reader learns that “your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you” (p. 129). The notion of nature here does not refer to a fixed human essence, but rather to “the immediate drives and desires, namely the instincts of mankind” (Hart 2009, p. 130) and their configuration within oneself, as described e.g. in *BGE* §19. Reaching the nature that is “immeasurably high above you” – or “becoming what one is”, its equivalent – then means becoming “the true helmsman of this existence” (*SE* p. 128) by getting to know one’s present nature and developing it to its yet-unattained height and greatness. This height of spirit is furthermore understood as “liberation” and subsequent “happiness” (p. 127), which can be achieved by the means of education and culture – this achievement being their shared proper purpose.

Nietzsche specifies his meaning of the term *culture* as “transfigured *physis*” (*SE* p. 145; cf. *UDH* p. 123), i.e. as the development of one’s natural predispositions, or as “the cultivation of the mind, the taking care and improving of the native faculties of the mind in accordance with the nature of the mind”, in the words of Leo Strauss (1968, p. 3). The task of culture in general is, then, to prepare the conditions for such a transfiguration of one’s nature, and education proper is the process of this transfiguration. As everyone’s *physis* is unique to them, the process of education proper cannot be mass education, but has to be tailored to the specific needs and qualities of the student. These needs must be discovered by the student himself by a consideration of “what [he has] truly loved up to now, what has drawn [his] soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it” (*SE* p. 129),³ of the heights toward which his nature tends. On the basis of this self-knowledge one may find the “path along which no one can go except you” (ibid.), the

³ The adherence to this “fundamental law of [one’s] true self” (*SE* p. 129) forms an interesting parallel to “the constraint of a single taste”, which is the principle of self-cultivation in *GS* §290: the result of the latter way of cultivation is in fact called “constraint and perfection under a law of [one’s] own” (ibid.). We may infer that the law which constrains and perfects one in *GS* §290 manifests itself in the sequence of *desiderata* which draws one’s soul aloft in *SE*.

only path that is one's *proprium*, and choose a suitable educator (*ibid.*).

If "higher education is only for the exceptions" (*TI Germans* §5), we have to ask who will choose the fortunate exceptions. Nietzsche's answer is that these exceptions will choose themselves. Only those strong enough to master their laziness, the most common human quality and the greatest source of herd-like behavior (*SE* p. 127), and with ears to hear the injunction of their conscience to "be your self", will seek this kind of education. Yet even if one has the necessary will, the path to the height soft spirit is difficult and he can "easily so hurt himself that no physician can cure him" (*SE* p. 129). Therefore he needs to be helped by a greater man, by one who has attained his own greatness – who is already educated.⁴ To become educated, one needs an educator. Hence, when Nietzsche says that "your educators can only be your liberators" (p. 129) and that "education⁵ is liberation" (p. 130), he points both to the individual character of education proper and to the fact that this education is first of all an effort of the student himself and that the educator's role in this process is only supporting, although indispensable.

The Educator. In line with his principle that "the only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something" is "trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it" (*SE* p. 187), Nietzsche says that "I profit from a philosopher only insofar he can be an example" (p. 136). Hence the educator, as one who is already educated and has attained spiritual nobility, should be first and foremost an *example* to the student. The educator's example serves to show us the greatness which he has already reached and to which also we can aspire, and the way to reach it ourselves. Unfortunately, in the modern times Kant's example of the philosopher as a timid academic has prevailed over the Ancient Greek tradition of philosophers *living* their teaching and being educating examples (p. 137).⁶

Nietzsche claims to have found a true educator and an example of a noble man, living according to his nature, in Schopenhauer. Nietzsche ascribes to him three main virtues. First of them, and the most praised, is his extreme intellectual honesty: Nietzsche even approvingly quotes Schopenhauer's decidedly un-Nietzschean refusal to use poetry or rhetoric for the sake of intellectual honesty (p. 135). His other two virtues are cheerfulness and steadfastness, which enabled him to conquer the dangers looming at all "uncommon men who live in a society tied to convention" (p. 138): first of these is a life of solitude and isolation. Schopenhauer's steadfastness prevented him from giving up even though he was "a total solitary" (p. 139) and perpetually misunderstood, suffering and melancholic. Second, he was able to "set up before him a picture of life as a whole" (p. 141) and not despair at this picture or pursue knowledge for its own sake, but learn from

⁴ Cf. *TI Germans* §5 (emphasis original): "We need educators *who are themselves educated*, thoughtful, noble spirits."

⁵ *Bildung*; cf. *KSA* I, p. 341. Hollingdale at this point translates *Bildung* as "culture" instead of his usual "education".

⁶ Kant's disastrous influence on German education is criticized as late as *TI Skirmishes* §29.

it the ways in which he may “aid the development of the *physis*” in himself and “through [him] self in the end for everyone” (p. 142). Third, he managed to avoid intellectual “petrification” (p. 144) that comes as a consequence of recognizing one’s limitations. And finally, he did not judge the value of existence too low despite the poverty of his own time, of the only part of being he knew from experience.

This portrayal of Schopenhauer, peppered with utterances such as that he speaks like a father to his son (p. 134), or that Nietzsche has “never discovered any paradox in him” (pp. 133-4), is surprisingly far from the common perception of Schopenhauer as a curmudgeon, as well as from Nietzsche’s own later critiques of Schopenhauer (e.g. *BGE* §§16, 19, 56, 204, or *CW* §4). We can understand this image of Schopenhauer as an example of “monumental history”, which belongs to him “who needs models, *teachers*, comforters and cannot find them among his contemporaries” (*UDH*, p. 67; emphasis added). Or, in Nietzsche’s own words, “what is basically at issue [in *SE*] is not ‘Schopenhauer as Educator’ but instead its *opposite*, ‘Nietzsche as Educator’” (*EH* p. 115; emphasis original). Thus it doesn’t really matter whether Schopenhauer was as Nietzsche describes him or not.⁷ The Schopenhauer of *SE* is a man worthy of our respect and aspirations – an image which Nietzsche later, when he reaches the greatness sufficient to become an educator himself, replaces by his own image.⁸

Such an image of a great man can educate us in several ways. First, it helps us “gain insight into [our] own want and misery, into [our] own limitedness” (*SE* p. 142). Thereby we lose our pretensions to greatness (so common in an age ruled by “modern ideas”), which are one of the greatest obstacles to actually reaching it. Second, it shows us a noble human being, not just as an object of our admiration, but as a goal toward which to aim. Third, it can show what does following the “path along which no one can go except you” (p. 129) entail in practice and the obstacles on it which we have to overcome to reach this goal. Here it is important to note that one need not know his educator in person – Nietzsche had known Schopenhauer only through books as well. He calls this “a great deficiency”, but not an insurmountable one: as he “strove all the harder to see through the book and to imagine the living man” behind it (p. 136), he managed to overcome this deficiency – and so can we, the students of Nietzsche.⁹

⁷ Following Janaway (2003), who argues that “the topic of *Schopenhauer as Educator* is really education rather than Schopenhauer” (pp. 163-4) and that “the eponymous hero [of *SE*] appears primarily as an exemplar” of an educated man rather than as one whose teachings are to be followed (p. 165), we may say that although the mature Nietzsche rejects Schopenhauer’s thought, he still sees him as a great example of an educated man. Cf. *GM* III §5, where Schopenhauer is called “a genuine *philosopher* ... who has the courage to be himself” (emphasis original).

⁸ In *BGE* §292 Nietzsche describes the philosopher as one “who is perhaps himself a storm pregnant with new lightnings”, and in *EH* (p. 115) he states that “now [I] speak with lightning” (cf. Lampert 2001, p. 285).

⁹ That Nietzsche himself wanted to be an educator and “corrupt the young” (Lampert 2001, p. 3) can be seen not only in the above-quoted assertion from *Ecce Homo*, but also e.g. in *HHI* Preface §1.

Education as liberation. As quoted above, Nietzsche says that education is liberation, but it has yet to be explained liberation *from what* and *toward what* it is. The former is liberation from an age descending into “barbarism” (p. 148) at all fronts. This descent is manifest in the forces which strive to pervert the meaning of culture for their own benefit. Here belong first of all what Nietzsche later derisively calls “modern ideas”,¹⁰ whose egalitarian prejudice contradicts the requirement of education proper to focus only on those desiring it (p. 162). Besides them there is “the greed of the money-makers” (p. 164), which sees culture only as a means to profit; “the greed of the state” (p. 165), which has use for culture only insofar it produces loyal subjects; the greed of “those who are conscious of possessing an *ugly or boring content*” (p. 166, emphasis original; cf. *BGE* §264), who wish to use culture to conceal their inner ugliness; and “the greed of the sciences” (p. 169), which cares not for life, but only for knowledge.

To see why Nietzsche objects to the pursuit of science we may turn to *UDH*, where he says that he wants “to serve history [and science in general] only to the extent that history serves life” (p. 59). Science which sees knowledge, its product, as an end in itself, does not educate “for the sake of life and action” (*ibid.*), but only for the sake of further accumulation of knowledge. The product of such an “education” will not be an educated man in Nietzsche’s sense, but a “distorted and contorted” (*SE* p. 132) person capable only of producing knowledge, but not of preserving and cultivating his humanity.

In short, through education one becomes *untimely*: he overcomes his “insufficiencies insofar as these originated in the age [one lives in]” (p. 133).¹¹ This is again exemplified by the image of Schopenhauer, who in addition to the above-mentioned steadfastness travelled a lot, was independent from the state, wasn’t a scholar and avoided the scholarly vices, and had experience with the genius, in his case with Goethe (cf. *SE* §7). This independence from the decadent institutions of his time allowed him to resist “the perversity of our times” (p. 180). Some of these ways of becoming untimely are up to the student’s luck, but by studying the works and life of a great man, of our educator, we too can get acquainted with genius and recognize and resist “the perversity of our times” – and without this recognition and resistance we cannot expect not to fall prey to it.

Education and nobility. Education doesn’t liberate us for freedom from any compulsion – desire for such a freedom and its corollaries “belong ... necessarily to slave morality and morals” (*BGE* §260). For Nietzsche, “a free human being is a *warrior*” (*TI* Skirmishes §38; emphasis original), one with a task to fulfill and to fight for. Instead, education liberates us to “work continually at the production of individual great men” (*SE* p. 161), for the task of education itself, which is the greatest task of mankind (*ibid.*). Nietzsche claims that human life can “receive the highest value, the deepest significance”

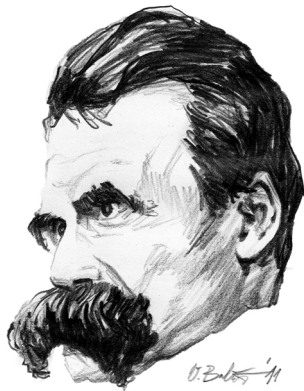
¹⁰ E.g. in *GS* §377 or *BGE* §44. The main issues with “modern ideas” are their egalitarianism, i.e. the denial of the natural order of rank among men, and their simplistically negative evaluation of suffering as something mankind would be better off without.

¹¹ Cf. p. 146, where Nietzsche argues, *contra* Hegel, that because of this the great thinkers are not the children, but stepchildren of their age.

only by being devoted to culture and education properly understood, by “living for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars [of man]” (p. 162).

To explain why this is so, Nietzsche considers the life of animals, which suffer from life, yet are incapable of understanding their suffering or giving meaning to it. The opposite is true for humans, for whom “life appears no longer senseless” (p. 157). More precisely, this is the case only for *some* humans, because the majority “only desires more consciously what the animal seeks through blind impulse” (ibid.) – some kind of external satisfaction, be it in scholarship, moneymaking, or political activity. This life ruled by an animal desire *is* in effect the life of an animal, hence Nietzsche says that “we ourselves are the animals whose suffering seems to be senseless” (p. 158).

Yet there are those who are “*no longer animal*” – the philosopher, the artist, and the saint, the “true *men* [*Menschen*]” (p. 159; emphases original). These men have followed the injunction of their conscience to “be themselves” and have gone along the path of their nature. They have grasped the vanity of what common people call highest goals, which make their lives to senseless suffering, and have reached “the great *enlightenment* as to the character of existence”, in which, as Nietzsche immediately adds, “lastingly and with open ears to participate” is “the supreme wish that mortals can wish” (p. 159; emphasis original). The lesson they have learned from this enlightenment remains, of course, unspoken: as said above, the transfigured *physis* that is the result of education is as individual as the *physis* in its basic state, and so is the insight one reaches by education.



Friedrich Nietzsche

This insight reveals to us the character of *our* existence, the “something unteachable” (*BGE* §231; cf. *SE* p. 129) that is at the core of our nature. By recognizing this “granite of spiritual *fatum*” (*BGE* §231) we can learn how to live with reverence for it – which ultimately means reverence for ourselves – that is the mark of true nobility (*BGE* §287). In this way the great enlightenment gives us “the certainty and happiness of the philosopher” (*SE* p. 160) and allows us to live without being burdened by the petty compulsions that move the common, uneducated people. Instead we can devote ourselves to the tasks which our *physis* revealed to us in the great enlightenment.

The artist, and especially the saint, does not appear to be the equal of the philosopher. They indeed aren't, but even if we set aside the overtly Schopenhauerian explanations¹² of their importance in *SE*, the mature Nietzsche still has much favorable to say

¹² The philosopher and the artist serve the “self-enlightenment” of nature, and the saint feels

about them. In *BGE* §51, he ascribes to the saint an unparalleled self-mastery, to which even “the most powerful human beings” bow. In *BGE* §271 he describes holiness of the saint as “the highest spiritualization” of the instinct of cleanliness, which separates him from common men and which gives him the pathos of distance (which is a precondition of the “self-overcoming of man” – *BGE* §257). The artist, although he cannot be an independent thinker (*GM* III §5), can be independent as a creator. For this he has to possess a high degree of educated individuality, without which he wouldn’t be able to express himself in yet-unthought-of ways, and so to affirm the life he depicts (*SE* p. 127; cf. *TI* Skirmishes §24). These two types share their deep individuality that manifests itself in their “singular value standard” that marks spiritual nobility (*GS* §3) – which is the result of being properly educated.

However, they “live within worlds created for them by others, worlds of values not of their own making” (Lampert 1996, p. 126), and so fail to grasp their nature in its full individuality. On the other hand, the philosopher does not merely *have* a singular value standard – the philosopher *creates* his value standard (*BGE* §211). The philosopher is a creator in the highest sense of the word, and this is the achievement that ranks him higher than the other noble types and makes him truly independent. Not only is his thought, his way of seeing the world most true to his nature and hence least indebted to and least directed by others, but he himself exercises this crucial yet unseen influence on those with ears to listen to him (that is: on noble, but lesser spirits). This kind of independence implies not only that the philosopher must possess the virtues of the educated man – untimeliness, cultivated individuality that follows its own law, or its own “value standard”, and the consciousness of this individuality (i.e. the pathos of distance)¹³ – to the utmost, but also that education proper is always in an important sense education in philosophy. It is namely the philosopher who seeks greatness in humanity (*BGE* §212)¹⁴ and it is the spiritual independence which reaches its peak in the philosopher that is the chief product of education.

We most probably will not be able to reach such heights ourselves. However, these great men can by becoming our educators lift us up to their heights and give us a glimpse of their exalted perspective on life, and we can “learn from it the meaning of [our] own life” (*SE* p. 141). Even if we find ourselves incapable of becoming either of the noble types, we are still capable of appreciating what we have learned in the course of our education. Thereby we can “*discover a new circle of duties*” more suitable to our capacities (p. 160; emphasis original). Nietzsche suggests that these duties center around the “fundamental idea of culture”, which is “*to promote the production of the philosopher, the*

a profound “oneness and identity with all living things”, which leads to nature’s “redemption from itself” (*SE* pp. 160-61).

¹³ Schatzki’s (1994, p. 157) discussion of the naturalistic virtues of the *Übermensch* treats the same phenomena in terms of their being the “fullest expression of the will to power”.

¹⁴ And greatness “today” entails precisely “being noble, wanting to be by oneself, being able to be different, standing alone and having to live independently” (*BGE* §212) – educated individuality.

artist and the saint within us and without us and thereby to work at the perfecting of nature” (ibid.; emphasis original) – around education.

To fulfill the duties culture sets upon us, we ourselves have to be educated first, and thus self-education is a crucial precondition of becoming an educator. And insofar as “the production of individual great men” (p. 161) is the highest human task, self-education – that is: self-*cultivation*, or “becoming what one is” – is the most urgent task we are faced with. By becoming educated and reaching the heights of our spirit we too can become an educating example to others (albeit on a lesser scale, e.g. by pointing them to our actual educators), and so lift them up to their own heights. Education not only gives us freedom from the pseudo-culture of our age and an understanding of ourselves, but also allows us to spread these gifts and so to dwell in and expand the community of noble men. Thereby we aid the development of the *physis* through ourselves “in the end for everyone” (SE p. 142). Education properly understood is Nietzsche’s way of perfecting mankind by perfecting individual men.

Conclusion. This article aimed to show that, *contra* Nehamas, “becoming what one is” is more than Nietzsche’s way of encouraging us to simply be happy with what we are. This dictum exhorts us to the cultivation of our inner nature, which in practice means the process of education properly understood. Despite his frequent and scathing criticisms of the institutional education of his day and age,¹⁵ Nietzsche didn’t reject the idea of education itself. The opposite is true: the source of his contempt is the failure of educational institutions to rise to the important but demanding task of education. Universities namely do not offer education proper, but merely “a brutal form of training ... for use – and abuse – in civil service” (TI Germans §5; emphasis original). Education proper is something no one else can do for us.

Education leads to “happiness” in at least three ways: first, by liberating one from the compulsions of the brutish life the common, uneducated people live; second, by letting one partake in “the great enlightenment” and so find the tasks that are proper to him; and third, by allowing one to enter and expand the company of educated men, the best company one can imagine. Hence, *contra* Nehamas, “becoming what you are” does not entail “admiration of villainous or even inconsistent characters” (Nehamas 2001, pp. 277-78) – quite the opposite. The product of education proper, one who has “become what he is”, is the noble man, the most consistent and beneficial kind of man there is. Finally, it should be pointed out that nobility is no fixed category. For Nietzsche, one’s tasks begin rather than end with becoming noble, as nobility does not operate on the principle of freedom, but on the principle of autonomy (literally “self-legislation”; cf. BGE §260 and §287). He who has become what he is will find himself called for tasks which no one else can assign him. But the tasks of a noble spirit are a subject unlikely to be meaningfully addressed by one who is not already noble himself (cf. BGE §213).

¹⁵ Cf. *Ueber die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten* (KSA 1, pp. 641-752), SE §8, TI Germans §§5-7, or TI Skirmishes §29.

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