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Spring 1991

# Nietzsche and the Future of the University

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## Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. "Nietzsche and the Future of the University." *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 1 (Spring 1991): 15-28.

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## NIETZSCHE AND THE FUTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY

Gary Shapiro

Nietzsche's first generation of readers tended to see him as a thinker, philosopher or prophet of the future; he was the teacher of the superman, the transvaluator of all values, the founder of a new philosophy of the will to power. In the many discourses of the early twentieth century that are devoted in various ways to 'Nietzsche and the Future' there are obvious signs of the nineteenth century cult of progress, although interpreted divergently by social Darwinism, socialism or anarchism. Now we are more sophisticated. Those first readers saw Nietzsche as radicalizing and rewriting the modernist metanarrative (substituting the superman for Hegel's absolute spirit or the good European for Marx's proletariat). Now we read Nietzsche as the paradigmatic postmodern philosopher, providing a genealogy and a deconstruction of those modernist metanarratives. He does not offer simply one more transformation - whether vitalist, anarchist or proto-Nazi - of such grand stories of legitimation but rigorously and vigilantly undermines the claims to uniqueness and legitimation that one finds in the enlightenment tradition (a tradition that includes, in the nineteenth century, such representative thinkers as Hegel, Marx, J.S. Mill, Ernest Renan, Comte, Herbert Spencer and Charles Peirce). Our Nietzsche is the radical critic of such future oriented thinking. He is the analyst of the advantages and disadvantages of history for life and the thinker of the thought of eternal recurrence that puts the concept of history into question. Above all he exposes that logic of ressentiment by which the future is laid under the obligation of redeeming the debts of the past.

Such a summary or caricature of what has been called 'the new Nietzsche' is inadequate to the extent that it does not provide an account of the function of the future (or, more generally, of the role of narrative) in Nietzsche's texts. It might be thought that the future appears there only as an early aberration; The Birth of Tragedy of 1872 does ally itself with Wagner's Zukunftsmusik and the polemics stimulated by the book turn on such associations - the establishment classicist Wilamowitz ridiculed it as a Zukunftsphilologie to which Nietzsche's friend Rohde riposted that such charges were symptomatic of Afterphilologie (that is, an ass-backwards philology). In 1886, Nietzsche described the smell of The Birth of Tragedy as 'offensively Hegelian', suggesting, perhaps, that it was not only dialectical but teleological, offering a story of the return at a new and higher level of a tragic culture that had been displaced by Socratic man. Yet in the same year Nietzsche subtitles Beyond Good and Evil 'Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future' and the rhetoric of that book plays a constant game of seduction with its readers, inviting them to identify themselves as such future philosophers. Here, we might say, Nietzsche is writing the future both in the sense of communicating with it (and consequently becoming its past to be read and interpreted) and in the prescriptive sense of laying grounds or conditions for that future. But 'writing the future' may also mean textualizing the future, that is, producing and analyzing the role that the future plays in certain significant bodies of discourse.

I propose to interrogate Nietzsche's text/lectures Über Die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten as an exemplary site of such

textualization of the future. In the antiquated English translation the title is rendered as The Future of Our Educational Institutions. But Bildung carries with it narrative suggestions as in the Bildungsroman. Bildung is attained culture, and so it is not surprising that Nietzsche's lectures tell a story concerning the younger generation's quest for culture, their search for the path of their own Bildung/formation, and the realism or cynicism of a retired professor who claims in effect that a Bildungsanstalt is (at least in nineteenth century German) an oxymoron; from his point of view the university must be described ironically as 'a cultural machine':

One speaking mouth, with many ears, and half as many writing hands - there you have, to all appearances, the external academic apparatus; there you have the university culture machine in action. (KSA 1, 740)<sup>1</sup>

Within the Goethean-Hegelian discourse of Bildung there may be a cultural institution; for example the university as envisioned by thinkers like Wilhelm von Humboldt; but to speak of a 'culture machine' is to expose a latent contradiction in the ideal of an organic social synthesis which allows the university to play the role that it does in social and political legitimation.

I want to suggest that The Future of our Cultural (or Formative or Acculturating) Institutions displays the intersection of two significant Nietzschean themes. The first, addressed with typical perspicacity by Derrida in The Ear of the Other, has to do with the philosophemes of writing and speaking and all that they bring with them.<sup>2</sup> The second involves the question of narrative and its place in philosophy. In the space traversed by these two themes, that is, in the university of Nietzsche's fiction, we can discern the social and political institution

which most obviously impinges on both the texts and the man that we call Nietzsche. It is on that site that we might begin an inquiry into the Nietzschean political unconscious; so far the only example of such an inquiry is the crudely reductionist account to be found in Lukacs' The Destruction of Reason.

Let me suggest, somewhat impressionistically, the outlines of such a contextualizing analysis by invoking one of Nietzsche's most significant 'others', that paradigmatically logocentric historian and university-man, Jacob Burckhardt. Young Nietzsche revered Burckhardt above all of his other colleagues at Basel and during his 'collapse' in Turin in January 1889 he wrote to him:

Dear Professor  
Actually I would much rather be a Basel professor than God; but I have not ventured to carry my private egoism so far as to omit creating the world on this account. You see, one must make sacrifices, however and wherever one may be living...<sup>3</sup>

(That letter sent Burckhardt to Overbeck who brought Nietzsche back to a clinic, whence he was returned to the mother and sister whom he called the greatest obstacle to the thought of eternal recurrence; the professors sent Nietzsche back home to the private world from which he had once escaped to the university). When Burckhardt was installed in the Basel Lehrstuhl he gave up writing for publication; he was a hypochondriac who saw writing as a pharmakon dangerous to his health. But Burckhardt was also concerned with the health of the body politic; the corollary of his cultural pessimism and political conservatism was the belief that sparks of the grand European tradition could be preserved only by direct communication between a wise judge of that past and an appropriate audience. That communication must take the form of a living narrative that avoids the descent into minutiae characteristic of the historical monograph. 'You had to hear him

to get the point', we say about such teachers when they manage to transform themselves into cultural institutions. Each performance was both contextualized to the immediate concerns of the day and yet had the scope of a 'world historical reflection'.

Implicit in such practice is another narrative, one which tells about the Bildung of our Bildungsanstalten, or the formation of formative institutions. It tells how there came to be historians and their audiences within the site of the university. These metanarratives show us how these institutions succeed or fail at the task of social and cultural legitimation. Here we might mention the explicit and implicit foundation narratives of Wilhelm von Humboldt. By the end of the nineteenth century the German model was available for export to the world and it arrived with metanarrative accompaniments. Consider for example the philosopher Friedrich Paulsen's The German University, an encyclopedic work of what we might now call applied ethics in which he attempts to demonstrate the validity of the lecture method, the division of the faculties, and the need for a Jewish quota of the professoriate. Paulsen's work is, as Hayden White would say, a piece of comic, organicist, synecdochic narrative exemplifying the arrogant conservatism of Germany at the turn of the century. Paulsen's book was widely translated; in the United States Nicholas Murray Butler, philosopher and president of Columbia, wrote an introduction for it, hailing it as establishing the paradigm for American universities. In more recent years the narratives of the German university have understandably been cast in more tragic tones: I cite two titles - Fritz Ringer's The Decline of the German Mandarins and Daniel Fallon's The German University: A Heroic Ideal in Conflict with the Modern World.

Nietzsche's story, The Future of our Cultural Institutions must be read against such metanarratives in which the university succeeds or fails in playing a central legitimizing role. The university is involved in social legitimation in a variety of ways. As Jean-Francois Lyotard points out in The Postmodern Condition, the university may be seen as the embodiment of knowledge, where society is construed as justified by its production of heroes of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This, we might say, is the classical (Hegelian) European metanarrative of the university. A second form of legitimation is more typical of the United States, in which the university legitimates the social future by promising to provide the training and credentials necessary for social status to correspond to ability and effort rather than to inherited wealth or class. Read in relation to these intertexts of various dates, the gaps and ruptures of Nietzsche's narrative are thrown into relief. The first has to do with the scene of instruction itself. The old philosopher interrogates the independence of mind said to be the goal of the German university:

Permit me however to measure this autonomy (or independence, Selbständigkeit) of yours by the standard of this culture (Bildung), and to consider your university solely as a cultural establishment. If a foreigner desires to know something of our university system, he first of all asks emphatically: 'How is the student connected with (hängt zusammen) the university?' We answer: 'By the ear, as a listener (Hörer). 'Only by the ear?' he asks once more. 'Only by the ear, we reply once more. The student listens. When he speaks, when he sees, when he walks, when he socializes, when he practices some art: in brief, when he lives he is autonomous that is, independent of the cultural institution. Very often the student writes at the same time that he listens; and it is only at these moments that he hangs by the umbilical cord of the university.  
(KSA, 1, 739)

Here is an inversion of the paradox of Plato's Phaedrus: there a written philosophical text is apparently the instrument for the condemnation of writing, while Nietzsche's lectures are directed against the lecture method itself. Although delivered as a set of lectures and never published by its author, the text was provided with a brief Vorrede. This Vorrede he says, is to be read before the lectures 'although it really has nothing to do with them' (KSA 1,648). In this anomalous text Nietzsche imagines a careful, slow, patient reader closely resembling the ideal reader described in his lectures on rhetoric. In these lectures or Bildungsanstalten which depict the merely listening student (Hörer) as hanging on the umbilical cord of the university, Nietzsche constantly reminds his audience of their own status, addressing them even in the midst of the lecture as meine verehrte Zuhörer. Perhaps the appropriate reader response would be to leave the lecture at such a point, thus breaking the umbilical cord. But the text seems to be sufficiently complex to preclude this as the only responsible option.

The structure of displacement is further intensified by the nature of the narrative or fiction that Nietzsche constructs about the German university (and not the Swiss one where he actually teaches; German institutions are both ours and not ours, Nietzsche seems to be saying). Because the story is unfinished its genre is uncertain. The last lecture, although announced, was not delivered and apparently was never written. But the lectures might be seen as an incomplete comedy. The story concerns two students, one of them said to be Nietzsche (so the lecturing professor appears before students portrayed or masked as a student) who are part of a culture club, an association for mutual improvement. They encounter a venerable but gruff old



philosopher and his companion in the mountains. A ludicrous struggle over turf ensues, for both parties claim the same site for a prearranged meeting. After a territorial accommodation is reached the students become eavesdroppers (Zuhörer), listening in while the old philosopher details his critique of the Gymnasium and university system. Towards the end of the extant lecture course there is some indication that the rest of the students' companions have joined with the philosopher's friend(s) in the valley below where there is singing and torchlight. The comedic expectation then is that students and professors have reached some community of understanding about their cultural institution, despite the emeritus philosopher's abhorrence of students in groups. But the signs remain unfulfilled. The effect was heightened for Nietzsche's listeners ('hanging on the umbilical cord of the university?') by the fact that he gave one lecture a week, and so holding out the prospect of providing a true path of Bildung. One is tempted to read the break in the story in the light of another of the lecturer's introductory remarks:

Thus, while I disclaim all desire of being taken for an uninvited adviser on questions relating to the schools and the University of Basel, I repudiate even more emphatically still the role of a prophet standing on the horizon of civilization and pretending to predict the future of education and scholastic organisation (KSA, 1, 694).

In other words, Nietzsche eludes the comic resolution by giving us an incomplete narrative that leaves us, teachers and students, in a somewhat indeterminate situation, like the characters in his fiction. As with some Nietzschean aphorisms we are left to fill in the space opened out by the text by ourselves. The lack of closure in these lectures marks a break with Hegelian narrative. Despite Hegel's renunciation of prophecy, as in his saying that 'the owl of Minerva takes flight only when the shades of night

are falling', it is only a minor alteration in the programme of Hegelian history to place the comedic resolution which he saw in the present (that is, his own present) in a future that is already dawning.

Nietzsche rejects Hegelian absolute narrative and its master plot; but to leave the narrative open, as he does in these lectures, is not to avoid narrative altogether. Let me suggest that the interval between The Birth of Tragedy and these lectures constitutes an epistemological break, one which makes Nietzsche's abandonment of metanarrative models and ushers in what we might call, telegraphically, a pluralistic, postmodern approach to narrative. In Derrida's two discussions of Nietzsche the question of narrative is hardly touched. Spurs proceeds by taking what might be a micronarrative ('I forgot my umbrella') and arguing that it is too indeterminate for any interpretation, narrative or otherwise. In his essay on 'Otobiographies' Derrida calls our attention to Nietzsche's figure of the ear in its labyrinthine modalities, but omits to point out either the conventional narrative structure of the text or the effect produced by its breaking off.

Also omitted from the story is precisely that process of Bildung by which the young Nietzsche who eavesdrops on the distinguished professor has grown to be the lecturer who stands before the university to question its fetishization of orality. But this very absence suggests that the cultural machine itself does not supply the means for achieving a fluent and continuous Bildung. The Bildung of Nietzsche the lecturer is inscribed in the young Nietzsche of the fiction only negatively, that is, in so far as he has a premonition of the impossibility of the university

living up to the story it tells about itself. If the lecturing Nietzsche of 1872 exemplifies Bildung, he does not do so as a product of the university culture-machine he describes. Perhaps he does so only because he has eavesdropped on tales told out of school, which would suggest that the 'truth' of the university (in a Hegelian sense) is its gossip and politics. Then again, Nietzsche makes no explicit claim to be a man of culture; it may be that he gave up the project just as he now breaks off the narrative. A decade later in Zarathustra we find the denunciation of 'the land of Bildung', in which modern, scholarly, historicist man is described as hiding his own emptiness:

With the characters of the past inscribed all over you,  
and these characters in turn painted over with new  
characters: thus have you concealed yourselves  
perfectly from all interpreters of characters.<sup>5</sup>

Let us recall now that Nietzsche entitled his lectures Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten. The old translation omits any equivalent to Über, implicitly translating it as 'on' or 'about'. But this preposition is a weighty one in Nietzsche's philosophical German, as it is in Heidegger's Über die Linie. 'Beyond the future' might suggest that the future of the Bildungsanstalten is already inscribed in its machinery. That future, given its determined place in a series of legitimizing metanarratives, is already a past. We can see that future all too clearly, the old philosopher says in effect. The task is perhaps to think beyond that future. To do so we must think beyond the politico-narratological principles that circumscribe the enormous and still burgeoning series of reports, conferences, studies and research projects that bear titles that are variants upon 'the future of the university'.

The rest of Nietzsche's story is known: he left the university and so became a writer rather than a speaker. And instead of constructing one giant metanarrative of legitimation in the style of the university's discourse, he wrote that extraordinary range of genealogies, deconstructive narratives, mythical histories and pluralizing aphorisms that we see in his texts. He transvalued the motley collection of signs called Bildung by a carnivalization of its costumes and disguises (cf. the discussion of a 'carnival in the grand style' in Beyond Good and Evil, para. 223)

However, I do not want to suggest that the encounter with the university is to be reduced simply to a phase in Nietzsche's own Bildung. Rather the Nietzschean text is susceptible of a reading that recognizes the concrete cultural formations which are its context, matrix, and principal antagonists. Let me just suggest how we might read that narrative of such obsessive interest to Heidegger and Derrida, 'How the True World Finally Became a Fable' in this perspective. In this sketch that seems to reduce the history of philosophy to comic-book proportions, Nietzsche chronicles the fate of what we now call the metaphysics of presence. But it is clear that Nietzsche never sees such histories along idealist lines as the intrinsic development of an idea; each of the six phases that he notes is marked by names and stage directions that suggest how it is related to specific practices, institutions, and discourses. Each stage direction indicates a certain scene of instruction. Consider Nietzsche's account of Plato as an analysis of the Platonic academy and its many revivals:

1. The true world - attainable for the sage, the pious, the virtuous man; he lives in it, he is it. (The oldest

form of the idea, relatively sensible, simple, and persuasive. A circumlocution for the sentence, 'I, Plato am the truth.')

The wise man identical with the truth: a teaching that will be appealing to the wise but forbidding for others, and in any case subject to envious charges of elitism. By valorizing the imaginary identification of the 'I' and truth (in Lacan's sense of the imaginary), it serves an ideological function. The ideal university for the Platonist would consist only of enlightened professors (no students need apply).

If Christianity is 'Platonism for the people' and the true world is available in the next world following a certain askesis in this one, then we have the idea of a deferred truth which holds out the possibility of a link between the ignorant and the wise. With lots of work even a 'dumb ox' like Aquinas can become one of the wise; the Christian university and Christian metaphysics are expressions of the same structure. After this, metanarratives of enlightenment will revolve around the progress - conclusive or asymptotic - which the institution makes toward the truth. In this displacement of the imaginary the future will be the site at which the professor coincides with the truth. The Kantian university will forever be divided into its several faculties, just as the human faculties of understanding, will and feeling (taste) will constitute separate realms; the rapprochement which the 'lower' faculty of philosophical critique offers to the former and which the experience of beauty and genius offers to the latter constitute what Nietzsche calls 'the old sun' - i.e. the Platonic sun 'seen through mist and skepticism'. This contains, in germ, Nietzsche's critique of Kantian aesthetics as a foggy solution to an erroneously stated problem. The positivistic university eliminates the unknown and unknowable

alleged ground of the unity of these 'faculties': the unknowable cannot be relevant to the ongoing search for the pattern of appearances. It has no place in Wissenschaft.

But, Nietzsche asks in the fifth stage of his narrative, why not abolish the idea of the 'true world' altogether? In this case we need no longer think of the positive, the apparent, and the empirical as **merely** this-worldly; so positivism is replaced by exuberant forms of this-worldliness. In the university these forms range from the insidious Nietzschean influences already noted with alarm by Friedrich Paulsen around 1900, to the Deweyan pragmatism of the 1930s and 1940s, to the politico-erotic utopianism of Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

The carnivalesque developments that we associate with 1968 embody what Nietzsche calls, in his stage direction to the fifth and penultimate part, a 'pandemonium of all free spirits'. Now Nietzsche also suggested that one day chairs would be established in universities for the teaching of Zarathustra. Presumably he did not mean that Zarathustra was to be taught as Platonic truth, or deferred in a Christian or Kantian fashion, or reduced in positivistic style to a literary document in the style of nineteenth century literary history. It was of course one (or several) of the voices or texts that entered into the 'pandemonium of free spirits'. But suppose we think of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and the Yale critics as occupying those chairs endowed in Nietzsche's name. Then consider the displaced projection of such a university:

6. The true world - we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no. With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one. (Noon; moment of the briefest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; (INCIPIIT ZARATHUSTRA)).

Might we not read this text as something like a historical-transcendental deduction of genealogy, deconstruction and other tendencies that seek to **write the future** of the university by rejecting precisely those binary oppositions between presence and absence, truth and error, current inquiry and ultimate settled results which have structured the devolution that Nietzsche traces? Certainly we must avoid the temptation of supposing that Nietzsche is providing one more right-Hegelian justification of the present (our present) or one more left-Hegelian projection of a legitimate future. Moreover, we must recall that no academic orientations, despite and because of their connection with the university can claim an immunity from the word-processing whether of the acroamatic variety that valorizes the ear or the digital kind in which the machine is no longer merely a metaphor.

#### NOTES

1. KSA = Friedrich Nietzsche, Samtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Munich 1980.
2. Jacques Derrida, The Ear of the Other, trans. Avital Ronell, New York 1985.
3. Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche, edited and translated by Christopher Middleton, Chicago 1969, p.346. The letter is dated 'On January 6, 1889' by Nietzsche, but postmarked Turin, January 5, 1889.
4. Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, translated by Geoff Bennington, Minneapolis 1984, especially pp.27-31.
5. Thus Spoke Zarathustra translated by Walter Kaufmann, New York 1966, p.119. See also my essay 'Festival, Parody and Carnival in Zarathustra IV' in The Great Year of Zarathustra ed. David Goicocheia, Lanham, Md. 1983, pp.45-62.
6. Cf. Paulsen writing in 1907: "No one can doubt that irritation and resentment are making themselves felt very generally between our older and our younger generation. In my opinion this is largely due to the hare-brained literature intended for young people, largely inspired by Nietzsche's crazy ideas." Friedrich Paulsen, An Autobiography, translated and edited by Theodor Lorenz, New York 1967, p.477.