BOOK SUMMARY

Homer and Classical Philology

by Friedrich Nietzsche

An inaugural lecture about Homer, authorship, and the purpose of classical scholarship.

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Key ideas

1. **The Homeric question.** The unity of a poem does not settle its author, and Homer as poet of the Iliad is an aesthetic judgment.
2. **A name, not a person.** The name Homer first stood for heroic epic as a whole and narrowed to one poet only as Greek taste developed.
3. **No poetising masses.** All poetry, including so-called popular poetry, needs an individual maker; oral and written poets differ only in transmission.
4. **Scholarship and art.** Philology combines history, the study of language and aesthetic judgment, and is torn between knowing life and living it.
5. **A philosophical horizon.** Detailed scholarship gains its meaning only when it is surrounded by a larger philosophical view of culture.

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CHAPTER 1

A Science Without Unity

Nietzsche delivered this lecture at the University of Basel on 28 May 1869, a few weeks after arriving as a professor of classical philology at the age of twenty-four. He opens not with Homer but with an admission: nobody, inside or outside the field, has a clear and consistent idea of what classical philology is. The reason, he says, is that it has no abstract unity. It is a loose aggregation of different activities held together only by a shared name, a kind of “sham monarchy” over subjects that do not naturally belong together.

He then lists the ingredients. Philology is partly history, because it tries to grasp the character of whole peoples and the laws by which things appear and vanish. It is partly natural science, because it studies language, which Nietzsche calls the deepest human instinct. And it is partly aesthetics, because out of all the ancient material it singles out a “classical” antiquity and holds it up to the present as a mirror of lasting standards. On top of all this it has always been a teaching discipline, choosing what to study by asking what has the greatest educational value.

Because the field is so mixed, its public reputation depends on the personalities of whoever happens to practise it. Nietzsche notes that his own era has produced distinguished philologists in almost every branch, yet public interest is slackening and judgment is uncertain. That uncertainty helps the field’s enemies. Some simply mock philologists as “moles” who eat dust for a living and chew over for the eleventh time what they have already eaten ten times. These critics, he says, laugh at philology but do not hate it. Nietzsche treats them as a nuisance rather than a real threat.

The more serious enemies are those who fear any ideal, who worship modern man and treat Hellenism as an outdated point of view. Against them Nietzsche says philologists must rely on artists and artistic minds, because only they understand how barbarism threatens anyone who loses sight of the simplicity and dignity of the Greeks. No progress in commerce or technology, and no amount of schooling or political education of the masses, can by itself protect a culture from barbaric offences against taste. Meanwhile philologists quarrel among themselves, divided by jealousies and by impulses that were never in harmony to begin with.

CHAPTER 2

Art, Science and the Friends of Antiquity

Nietzsche next names the tension at the centre of his field. Science and art share one trait: both make the most ordinary thing look new, as if seen for the first time. But they want different things. Art says life is worth living, science says life is worth knowing. When philology studies antiquity scientifically, comparing linguistic forms or reconstructing events like a historian, it risks losing the creative force and the "real fragrance" of the ancient world, along with the passionate feeling that drew people to the Greeks in the first place.

This, he admits, has produced a painful split. The very people philology should be able to count on, the artistic admirers of Greek beauty, accuse philologists of being the real destroyers of antiquity's ideals. Schiller reproached them for scattering Homer's laurel crown to the winds. Goethe, who as a young man had supported Friedrich August Wolf's theory that the Iliad was assembled from separate songs, later recanted in verse, complaining that clever scholarship had taken away an old devotion and insisting on feeling the poet's unity. To many artistic admirers of the Greeks, the philologist looked like an iconoclast.

Nietzsche asks whether this charge means philologists lack artistic sensitivity or have made negation into a destructive principle. He declines to argue with the cruder "realists" of the day, comparing himself to the sophist in Sparta who set out to defend Herakles and was asked who had ever attacked him. But he takes the artists' objection seriously, since even an honest philologist feels it in low moments. His answer is that classical philology as a whole is not responsible for the squabbles of its individual practitioners. The real task, he suggests, is to show what the discipline as a whole is striving for.

He offers a striking image of the discipline: a centaur, half science and half art, moving with "cyclopic slowness" to bridge the gap between ideal antiquity and real antiquity. He even suggests the ideal antiquity may be largely a product of the German longing for the south. The goal of fusing these hostile impulses may be unreachable, he concedes, but the striving is real. To show that philology's boldest steps lead toward the ideal rather than away from it, he proposes to examine the Homeric question, which Schiller had dismissed as scholastic barbarism.

CHAPTER 3

The History of the Homeric Question

The core problem, Nietzsche says, is the personality of Homer. Many scholars of his day thought that question outdated and preferred to reconstruct the poems as the work of several hands. Nietzsche disagrees. The study of Homer, he argues, was the first place where modern scholarship applied a powerful historical method: learning to see apparently solid figures of the ancient past as condensed beliefs, and recognising a people's ability to express its morals and beliefs in the form of a single person. Whether or not this worked for Homer, it was an important event in the history of science.

He then traces the question back through antiquity. Following Wolf, he places its high point among the Alexandrian grammarians, who held that one Homer wrote both the Iliad and the Odyssey and explained the difference between them by the seasons of the poet's life, likening the poet of the Odyssey to a setting sun. Against them stood the Chorizontes (the "separators" in Greek), a small sceptical minority. The Alexandrians blamed inconsistencies on oral singers and on the scribes who supposedly wrote the poems down around the time of Pisistratus. Nietzsche admires their recognition of oral transmission as a feat of ancient insight.

Moving further back, he finds a pattern. Aristotle treated Homer as a flawless artist who knew his ends and means, yet still credited him with the comic epic Margites. Before Aristotle, the less able people were to imagine a distinct personality, and the more poems they assigned to Homer. Each age reveals its critical level by how much it calls Homeric. Beyond Herodotus lies a period in which a vast flood of epics was attached to the name. In the age of Pisistratus, "Homer" covered so many dissimilar works that no clear person could stand behind it.

This leads Nietzsche to the question he calls the real Homeric question. Did a real personality gradually fade into an empty name, or did a people gather its poems together and represent itself through an invented figure? He compares the puzzle to gravity, which acts without visible connection, and to a coin whose stamp has been worn away by passing through many hands. Here are poems that make even geniuses despair of rivalling them, yet their author is only a "hollow, shaky name." Even Goethe, he notes, struggled in vain with this inaccessibility.

CHAPTER 4

Homer as an Aesthetic Judgment

One popular solution was to say that a whole people, in its happiest age, composed the poems. Nietzsche grants that the idea is intoxicating, like watching a great waterfall. But looked at closely, it replaces the poetic soul of a people with a crowd of anonymous poets, and it asks Nature, usually so sparing with genius, to lavish it all in one direction. Scholars split into two camps. One located Homer's excellence only in single songs and treated the whole as faulty. The other, following Aristotle, admired the overall design and blamed its flaws on later interpolations.

Nietzsche calls the whole contrast between "popular poetry" and "individual poetry" the most dangerous assumption in modern aesthetics. The discovery of the soul of the people, he argues, was a real achievement for historical science, but it cast a shadow: people carried a principle that applies to the will into the realm of the intellect and art, and set the laurel of genius on the empty heads of the masses. In fact, he insists, all poetry, popular poetry included, needs an individual to make it. The difference between an oral poet and a literary one lies in how their work is transmitted, not in how it is created.

From here he reaches his central claim. Scholars attributed every dull or weak passage to faulty tradition, and what remained as "Homer" was simply the set of beautiful passages each critic happened to admire. That is the root error. The name Homer was originally a material category, standing for heroic epic as such, as the legend of Homer's contest with Hesiod shows, where the two names stand for heroic and didactic poetry. Only later, as Greek taste developed, did the Iliad and the Odyssey rise above the rest and the name narrow to mean the father of poetry itself.

Nietzsche does not deny that a single great poet designed the Iliad. He denies that this poet was Homer. The design, he argues, is not an organic whole but pieces strung together by aesthetic rules: "The Iliad is not a garland, but a bunch of flowers." That arrangement came long after Homer's fame, so searching for an original perfect plan is chasing a phantom. Yet he credits the designer with a great conscious achievement. The genius behind the Iliad and the Odyssey, he concludes, belonged to a grateful posterity that sacrificed its own name on the altar of the legendary father of epic.

CHAPTER 5

What Was Philology Has Become Philosophy

Having laid out the problem from what he calls a far-off height, Nietzsche turns back to the critics of philology and reminds them of two facts. First, the “great” conceptions they accuse scholars of destroying, such as the idea of a single indivisible genius named Homer, were too large to mean anything before Wolf. When philology returns to old ideas, it pours new wine into old bottles, and everything has changed. Philology, he says, has lived alongside poets, thinkers and artists for a century, turning a heap of ashes into fertile ground.

Second, the admirers of Greek poetry and sculpture forget that this fairyland once lay buried under mountains of prejudice, and that the labour of countless scholars was needed to raise it. Philology did not compose this music, he grants, but it is a real merit to be the virtuoso who lets the world hear it again. Before Wolf, Homer was seen as a good old natural genius from a barbaric age. Nietzsche quotes a learned man writing as late as 1783 who asked where the good man lived and whether anyone could get him a silhouette of Homer.

So Nietzsche demands thanks, not for philologists, who are mere atoms, but for philology itself. He describes it as neither a Muse nor a Grace but a messenger of the gods. Just as the Muses came down to the dull, tormented peasants of Boeotia, philology enters a world of gloom and incurable sorrow and speaks of a distant, happy fairyland. The image anticipates the role Nietzsche would soon give Greek art in The Birth of Tragedy, as something that makes a suffering existence bearable. Philology, on this view, is a consolation as well as a science.

He closes with a personal confession of faith, built by reversing a saying of Seneca, who had complained that what was once philosophy had become philology. Nietzsche turns it around: what was philology has become philosophy. Every piece of scholarship, he says, should be surrounded by a philosophical view in which isolated details fall away and only large, unified views remain. The English translator notes that Nietzsche later changed his mind on two points made in the lecture. The ambition announced here, to make the study of the Greeks serve a philosophy of culture, would shape everything he wrote in the next few years.

About Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844 in Röcken, a village near Leipzig in Prussian Saxony, the son of a Lutheran pastor who died when Friedrich was four. He studied theology and then classical philology at Bonn and Leipzig, and in 1869, at just 24 and before he had formally completed his doctorate, he was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. There he became a close friend of Richard Wagner, whose music and cultural ambitions shaped his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, in 1872.

Chronic illness forced Nietzsche to give up his professorship in 1879. For the next decade he lived on a small pension, moving between the Swiss Alps, the Italian Riviera and Turin, and wrote the books for which he is best known: Daybreak, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morality and the works of 1888. In January 1889 he suffered a mental collapse in Turin from which he never recovered, and he died in Weimar on 25 August 1900.

After his collapse his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, took control of his papers and published selections from his notebooks, most famously The Will to Power, shaping his reputation in ways later scholars rejected. The critical edition by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari restored his texts. His ideas about the death of God, the will to power, eternal recurrence, the Übermensch and the genealogy of values went on to influence existentialism, psychoanalysis, modern literature and much of twentieth-century philosophy.

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