ON THE USES AND DISADVANTAGES OF HELLENIC STUDIES FOR POLITICAL AND SOCIAL LIFE

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Zeus, who guided men to think,
who has laid it down that wisdom
comes alone through suffering.
Still there drips in sleep against the heart
grief from memory; against
our pleasure we are temperate.

Aeschylus, Agamemnon, 176–80 (Lattimore trans.)

In what follows I ‘use’ Nietzsche's essay ‘On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’ as a framework for thinking in a general way about the uses and disadvantages of classical texts for contemporary political and theoretical life. I will spend most of my time engaging that essay, considering Nietzsche's idea of untimeliness and his claims for classical studies, his characterization of his own time and his ‘method,’ his explicit argument and the structure and prose of his text. Mostly I will treat his reflections as he does Hellenism: as an earlier time with which we can struggle to better understand

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1 George Shulman and Wendy Brown have offered close readings of this essay and contributed substantively to its final argument and tone.
2 I have used the Hollingdale translation edited by Daniel Breazeale in Untimely Meditations (New York, 1997). In those few occasions when I have not, I have used The Walter de Gruyter edition of Vom Nutzen und Machtheil der Historie fur das Leben (Berlin & New York, 1972).
3 I am not using Nietzsche's work as a whole to do this, which means that I am avoiding the challenging question of Nietzsche's view of ‘The Greeks’ as a whole and the way he comes to differentiate among them, e.g. in his critique of Socratism, admiration for the sophists and Thucydides, his assessment of Homer and Hesiod, analysis of pre-Socratic philosophy, his judgments about Greek drama, Athenian democracy and the role of the Dionysian. Who the Greeks were for him and the role they come to play (or not play) in his thought changes substantially from this essay, The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals through Twilight of the Idols to Zarathustra. In part it is the ‘un-Nietzschean’ things he says in this essay that attracted me to it. One could say that in terms of many contemporary uses of Nietzsche my reading is untimely. Cf. Foucault's 'use' of Nietzsche in ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’ in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, ed. Donald Bouchard (Ithaca, 1977), pp. 139–64, esp. 95–97.

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our own. In his terms I want to become a pupil of his text in order to become less a product of contemporary ones. But I also want to follow Nietzsche's example and treat ancient Greece as another time engagement with which can ‘augment’ and ‘directly invigorate’ our activity.

I write in the belief that there now is an opportunity and a need to make what Nietzsche calls classical studies, an interlocutor in contemporary debates about the quality of public life, the aims of political theory, and the nature of academic research, including that done in classics. The opportunity is provided by the challenge to historical teleologies which had consigned the past, including the Hellenic past, to the dustbin of history. The need comes from the disrepute of politics, and the narrowing of theoretical discourse (by excising Marx from it), both of which have contributed to what Jurgen Habermas has called ‘the exhaustion of utopian energies.’

I

Nietzsche begins his ‘Betrachtung’ with a quote from Goethe: ‘In any case, I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity.’ The essay that follows is an elaboration of Goethe's sentiment intended, Nietzsche tells us, to show why instruction without invigoration, knowledge unattended by action, and history as a superfluity and luxury must ‘be seriously hated by us — hated because we still lack even the things we need and the superfluous is the enemy of the necessary’ (59). There is no question but that we need history and that historical consciousness is a distinctively human achievement. But we need history for life and action not for mere amusement or to justify self-seeking, and that requires limiting that historical consciousness lest it destroy our humanity. So we must make sure that we serve history only to the extent that history serves life.

Good teaching and real (as opposed to decorative or idle) knowledge are less matters of doctrines taught and information conveyed than of enlarging and intensifying our capacity for thought and deed. That means that any doctrine, no matter how highly it praises vigor and life, pacifies if it is made blandly or allowed to occupy a safe place within dominant discourse. So one question to ask of any text, theory, idea, or culture is whether it quickens the pulse, not in the interest of frivolous excitation but in the interest of energizing our sense of agency. For teaching and knowledge to accomplish this they must be ‘untimely.’

Each of us cannot help but be a child of our times, shaped if not nurtured by the conditions that give us physical and cultural identity. This is where we began and must begin, which means acknowledging that we live in the pre-