

Christa Davis Acampora

‘The Contest Between Nietzsche and Homer’: Revaluing the Homeric Question¹

However, the greater and more sublime a Greek is, the brighter the ambitious flame breaks out of him, consuming everyone who runs with him on the same path. Aristotle once made a list of such hostile contestants in the great styles: among them is the most striking example—that even a dead man can still excite a living one to burning jealousy. Thus Aristotle designated the relation of Xenophanes of Colophon to Homer. We do not understand the strength of Xenophanes’, and later Plato’s, attack on the national hero of poetry, if we do not also think of the monstrous desire at the root of these attacks to assume the place of the overthrown poet and inherit his fame. Every great Hellene passes on the torch of the contest; every great virtue sets afire new greatness. (HW: KSA 1/787-88)²

Nietzsche introduced himself to his Basle colleagues and the larger community of philologists by tackling what was arguably *the* most central and vexing question for those studying the texts of ancient Greece—the so-called ‘Homeric Question’. In his inaugural lecture, *Homer and Classical Philology*,³ Nietzsche summoned the diverse

¹ While the bulk of this paper is the text that was presented at the 1997 meeting of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society at St. Andrews, this version has been modified in light of subsequently published research and the development of my own ideas.

² The translation is my own, which also appears in ‘Re/Introducing “Homer’s Contest”’: A new translation with notes and commentary’, *Nietzscheana* 5/6 (Fall 1996) pp. i-vi and 1-8.

³ The lecture was entitled *Über die Persönlichkeit Homers* (On the Personality of Homer) when it was first presented. The title *Homer and Classical Philology* appeared on the subsequent, privately published version. Nietzsche had already begun to develop his lecture while he was a student at Leipzig, and he had made a similar presentation to the Philology Club at Leipzig in 1866 (reported by Heinrich Stürenberg in *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of His Contemporaries*, ed. Sander L. Gilman, trans. David J. Parent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 29).

approaches that defined nearly a century of German philological and philosophical scholarship addressing the authenticity, authorship, and significance of Homeric literature. The task he set for himself was to bring about a tense reconciliation of opposing approaches, which was to be accomplished by asking the question anew, by setting the inquiry on a different course. Nietzsche sought not merely to introduce new evidence regarding the authorship and dating of the texts that were attributed to Homer, but rather to redefine the significance of asking the question ‘Who is the real Homer, and what did he write?’ in order to indicate its contemporary relevance, in short, to *revalue the Homeric Question*. Nietzsche saw the revaluation of the Homeric Question as relevant not only to providing a basis for understanding ancient Greek culture but also for defining the role such texts might play in the development of contemporary culture, especially the role they might play in the activity of *Bildung*, broadly conceived.

The tasks of this paper are, first, to situate Nietzsche’s early accounts of Homeric significance—in his *Homer and Classical Philology* and his study of the anonymous ancient text *The Contest Between Homer and Hesiod*—in the philological tradition from which Nietzsche’s ideas emerged and, second, to indicate the relevance of that work for ideas that Nietzsche later developed about aesthetics and his own practice of philosophy. Nietzsche’s refashioning of the contest with Homer, in which he places himself in the role of an agonist, forms the basis of his lifelong engagements not only with Homer but also with other agonists he draws into skirmishes throughout his writings. Finally, I consider the culmination of Nietzsche’s own contest with Homer in his effort to recreate for modern German culture what he thought Homeric literature provided for ancient Greek culture, namely, the opportunity to cultivate a kind of taste, the possibility of an exercise of judgement, which could provide the basis of a superior cultural formation.⁴

⁴ I further develop these ideas in my ‘Nietzsche’s Problem of Homer’ in *Nietzscheforschung*, 5-6 (2000), 553-574 and my ‘Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates, and Paul’, forthcoming in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*.

The first section of the paper briefly sketches Nietzsche's revision of the 'Homeric Question' and the relevance of Homer for Nietzsche's views on competition. In the second, I explore Nietzsche's rather traditional views on education and cultivation—*Bildung*, broadly conceived—and the ways in which those views were shaped by his conception of *agon* (contest). Finally, I conclude with some suggestions regarding how Nietzsche *qua* agonist strove to enact those ideas, when, in his *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, he endeavored to challenge the monumental educator of the Greeks he so greatly admired in pursuit of a culture that would better even that of his rival.

I.

Nietzsche's approach to the 'Homeric Question' is driven by his concern with questions of taste and the goal of cultivation or *Bildung*. The intersection of these two concerns illuminates numerous aspects of Nietzsche's allegiance and antagonism with the German tradition. Wholly steeped in those conventions, Nietzsche's work still challenges that of his predecessors on several key points. The most significant is his characterization of the goal of aesthetic cultivation. While Schiller and Humboldt strive for harmonization, Nietzsche seeks perpetual and renewable tension and conflict. This difference shapes both the divergence of their ends and Nietzsche's vision of his own philosophical practice. Nietzsche not only praises agonistic interaction, his treatment of his predecessors, including the exemplars he finds in antiquity, reflects his efforts to practice a serious but playful, agonistic—contestatory—mode of philosophical engagement.

Throughout his career, Nietzsche wrestles with temptations to portray the Greeks either as idealized genteel noblemen or as exotic primitive human beings. He particularly opposes the view that the legacy of the Greeks is the 'noble simplicity and serene greatness' they exhibited, a thesis developed by Winckelmann and those who followed him. Nietzsche writes, 'One sort of consideration is left: to *understand* how the greatest creations of the spirit have evil and terror

as their background' (WPh: KSA 8/19 3[17]).⁵ He strives to see the ancient Greeks as real human beings, whose greatness was not so miraculous but rather reflected their struggles and political turmoil, their sensuality, and their decadence in addition to their excellence: 'The *human element* that the classics show us is not to be confused with the *humane*. The antithesis to be strongly emphasized; what ails philology is its effort to smuggle in the humane'(WPh: KSA 8/17 3[12]). In an effort to try to make sense of what appeared to many to be the 'miracle' of the development of classical Greek culture, Nietzsche aims to cast it in the light of what preceded it. His explanation is similar to the one Jacob Burckhardt suggests in lectures that form the basis of his *History of Ancient Greek Culture*: the principle around which the entire culture evolved was a competitive drive to excel.

Nietzsche did not simply inherit the idea from Burckhardt. Nietzsche's most extended work on the significance of *agon*, 'Homer's Contest', dates back at least as far as two years prior to his appointment at Basle where he was Burckhardt's colleague. Nietzsche also had occasion to think about the role of *agon* in Greek culture as he edited the ancient text *The Contest Between Homer and Hesiod* (anonymous author) and as he prepared his commentary on the same while a student at Leipzig. Burckhardt's lectures did not begin until 1870 (although he had been working on them since the early 1860s) and there is no evidence that Nietzsche had any knowledge of Burckhardt's thesis before he came to Basle. Although Burckhardt is credited by classicists with 'discovering' the agonistic element of the so-called 'Greek spirit', Nietzsche had earlier recognized and began to trace its serious dangers.⁶ Homer figures prominently in Nietzsche's account of how that culture came to be organized.

⁵ Cf. 'Escape from reality to the classics: hasn't the understanding of antiquity already been falsified in this manner?' (WPh: KSA 8/19 3[16])

⁶ See Nietzsche's article, 'Der Florentinische Tractat über Homer und Hesiod, ihr Geschlecht und ihren Wettkampf', I-II. *Rheinisches Museum* 25 [1870], 528-40; repr. in KGW II.1, 271-337.

In his inaugural lecture of 28 May 1869, Nietzsche challenges two prevailing approaches to the question of the authorial unity and transmission of the writings attributed to Homer: first, the ‘scientific’ approach, which aims to dissect to catalogue every detail and to expose every possible corruption of the text not attributable to ‘the real Homer’ and, second, the approach characterized by its efforts to generate a ‘beautiful’ and ‘complete’ Homer regardless of the degree to which such a project requires pure fabrications.⁷ Nietzsche’s understanding of what is at stake in investigating Homeric literature and Greek history is informed by a variety of traditions in classical scholarship, including humanism, idealism, and realism. Neohellenism in Germany came to fruition in the eighteenth century in the work of Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), whose work represented a break from the then current Latin humanism and served to revive the study of Greek literature. His principal concern is to elucidate the harmonic coordination of individual artistic achievements with cultural and social advancement. Winckelmann’s chief work, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), was well-received. Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Humboldt, and many others took interest in and were significantly influenced by his writing. Winckelmann’s texts are versatile: he employs a literary approach to his study of art, and this framework has proven fruitful for the study of literature, history, and philosophy.⁸

Winckelmann’s biographer and devotee, Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824) made significant contributions to the study of Homer and of Plato. The best known is his *Prolegomena ad Homerum* (1795). In that work Wolf employs various literary and linguistic tests to determine the authenticity of the Homeric epics, concluding that they were not the products of a single individual but of a group of rhapsodes. Although a great number of those principles were actually

⁷ A good summary of the tensions, especially between classicism and historicism, and Nietzsche’s attempts to address them is found in James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 68-70.

⁸ See Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship from 1300-1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) p. 171.

formulated by J. G. Eichhorn,⁹ classical philology credits Wolf with formalizing the methods and approaches to the study of classical texts. And while many of his specific arguments were subsequently refuted or undermined, Wolf's work was extremely influential in his day, and continues to be so. It intensified a long-standing debate that continued for more than a century following concerning the authorship, authenticity, and dating of the so-called Homeric corpus.¹⁰

Against those contemporaries whom Nietzsche describes as realists, whose primary interest was applying a strictly scientific approach to the study of antiquity, and those he describes as artists, whose aim was to capture the 'wonderful creative force; the real fragrance, of the atmosphere of antiquity' (HKP, p. 148), Nietzsche argues that the most important concern with regard to the study of the texts to which we append the name 'Homer' is not whether there were one or several authors but what kind of personality the epics suggest, what judgment the appearance of Homeric literature reflects. As the inaugural lecture makes clear, Homer represents for Nietzsche what he describes as 'a productive point of view'. His interest in Homeric literature focuses upon the cultivation of a particular taste or

⁹ For an elaboration of the similarities between Wolf's *Prolegomena* and Eichhorn's earlier *Einleitung ins Alte Testament* (1780-83), see Wolf's introduction to his *Prolegomena To Homer*, trans. and ed. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and James E. G. Zetzel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), esp. pp. 18-26.

¹⁰ Pfeiffer, p. 175. Wolf's line of argument was supported and expanded in the twentieth century by Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, ed. A. Parry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Additional studies of the controversy can be found in J. Russo, 'Homer Against His Tradition', *Arion*, (Summer 1968), 275-95; Norman Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer's Odyssey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975); Piero Pucci, *Odysseus Polytropos. Intertextual Readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); David Shive, *Naming Achilles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Richard P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). See also David R. Lachterman, 'Die ewige Wiederkehr der Griechen: Nietzsche and the Homeric Question,' *International Studies in Philosophy*, 23/2 (1991) pp. 90-91. For a recent discussion of the debate, see Gregory Nagy, *Homeric Questions* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996).

judgement. The value of Homeric literature for contemporary audiences, Nietzsche suggests, lies not in determining the history of the transmission of the text, but in the ways in which it serves as an instrument for creating and shaping values. Nietzsche's abiding aim is to reveal that mechanism in hopes of utilizing it for the enhancement of his own culture.¹¹

The upshot of Nietzsche's lecture seems to be that the so-called 'problem of Homer,' that had significantly defined and directed the efforts of many of his fellow philologists is 'like a coin long passed from hand to hand, [and consequently] has lost its original and highly conspicuous stamp.' The 'real' Homer, the 'truth' of the Homeric works is like those metaphors described in Nietzsche's drafts for the essay *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*: 'metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins' (WL: KSA 1/881). Both the realists and the idealists obscure the aesthetic qualities of the work, either by draining it of its life through dissection, or by obscuring it completely through fabrication in the interest of rendering it as a unified whole, obscuring its joints perceived as blemishes. Nietzsche writes:

Poetical works, which cause the hearts of even the greatest geniuses to fail when they endeavor to vie with them, and in which unsurpassable images are held up for the admiration of posterity—and yet the poet who wrote them with only a hollow, shaky name, whenever we do lay hold on him; nowhere the solid kernel of a powerful personality. "For who would wage war with the gods: who, even with the one god?" asks Goethe even, who, though a genius, strove in vain to solve that mysterious problem of the Homeric inaccessibility.' (HKP, p. 156)¹²

¹¹ In his *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*, Porter explains Nietzsche's solution as an outrageous attempt to reconcile or at least unite Wolf and Goethe (see pp. 68-78). My focus centers less on the Homeric Question as it was traditionally conceived and more on Nietzsche's concern with generating new problems that the phenomenon of Homeric literature potentially presents.

¹² Porter interestingly connects Nietzsche's emphasis on personality in this lecture with Nietzsche's later pervasive interest in the personality of Socrates and with Nietzsche's reception of F. A. Lange. See his discussion of Lange's conception of *Personlichkeit*, pp. 58-60.

The task, then, is to make the personality of Homer accessible, not by picking apart the epics to show that, in fact, no ‘Homer’ exists, and not by so embellishing the work, covering over its blemishes, that we replace it with something it is not. Rather, the challenge for philologists who wish to tackle the Homeric question is to *play* the works, that is, to serve as the virtuoso who ‘let[s] the world for the first time hear that music which lay so long in obscurity, despised and undecipherable’ (HKP, p. 169). And this requires a ‘philosophical view of things’ that organizes those principles of performance. In other words, what is needed are philosophical concepts that guide the hermeneutic activities that invariably come with bringing forth the meaning of ‘Homer,’ thereby reanimating, reinvigorating the ‘sensuous force’ of Homeric literature. In his lecture, Nietzsche claims that such an approach would unite or mollify the differences between the diverse aims and methods of the idealist and realist approaches in his discipline. But as he himself then strives to ‘restamp’ the name Homer, it is unclear that he heeds his own call. Nietzsche’s Homer seems to belong nearly entirely to the idealist camp even though he takes on some different qualities under Nietzsche’s gaze.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche portrays Homer as the embodiment of the first artist of values. His artistic feat is accomplished through his reversal of the so-called wisdom of Silenus. Both Sophocles and Theognis testify to Silenus’s grim view of the character of human existence. When Midas encounters Silenus in the forest, he tells him that what is best for humankind is not to be born and second-best is to die soon.¹³ Through his depiction of human life as extending the possibility of exceptional glory, Homer, as Nietzsche reads him, effects a reversal of Silenus’s judgement such that “‘to die soon is worst of all for [human beings], the next worst—to die at all.’” (BT 3) At their most basic core—namely the value of human

¹³ See ‘Oedipus at Colonus’, ll. 1224ff. Theognis expresses a similar view in his *Elegies*: ‘For man the best thing is never to be born, / Never to look upon the hot sun’s rays, / Next best, to speed at once through Hades’ gates / And lie beneath a piled-up heap of earth’ (ll. 425-28), in *Hesiod and Theognis*, trans. Dorothea Wender (New York: Penguin Books, 1973) p. 111.

existence as such—the values available to the Greeks were set upon a new axis following this transformation. It is *that* accomplishment to which Nietzsche seeks to draw attention and to have it serve as a model for the formation or cultivation of judgement generally. Nietzsche's revaluation of the 'Homeric Question' is an effort to redirect our concern about Homer from the authenticity of what are designated as Homeric texts to an investigation of both the specific values that Homer transformed and the structure of revaluation that we might be able to recognize in the process of our pursuits. Nietzsche's essay *Homer's Contest* sketches those features, which he further develops and explores in greater detail in the contexts of the studies of other monumental shifts in values that form the basis of his subsequent writings.

Homer's revaluation took the form of a contest in several ways. In addition to portraying life as a series of contests through which circulated the honor and prestige that gave meaning to one's life, Homer's crafting of a contesting spirit resulted in the proliferation of agonistic institutions. Those institutions effectively tapped the productive possibilities of that spirit through appropriate *Bildung*, by cultivating a mode of action that supported the maintenance of those structures. In other words, the effect of introducing contest as a means to honor was twofold: first, it articulated a structure through which meaning (e.g. excellence) could be created and meted out; and, second, it simultaneously cultivated a commitment to a certain way of competing within those structures. That combination, Nietzsche claims, accounts for the exceptional accomplishments of later Greek culture. A brief review of the main arguments of *Homer's Contest* illuminates these points.

At the beginning of *Homer's Contest* Nietzsche reflects on what is ordinarily understood as 'humanity':

underlying this idea is the belief that it is humanity that *separates* and distinguishes human beings from nature. But, there is, in reality, no such distinction: the "natural" qualities and those properly called "human" grow inseparably. (HW: KSA 1/783)

He highlights the ‘uncanny dual character’ of human beings: while capable of nobility, we also bear the capacity for the terrifying and the inhuman. This curious entanglement of the great and the vile leads Nietzsche to reconsider traits ordinarily conceived of as bad, or perhaps even evil, in order to explore whether they might spring from the same soil as some other good. As evidence that others have held such views, Nietzsche cites Hesiod’s passages about the good and bad Eris-goddesses—who shared the same origin but who were regarded quite differently.

What distinguishes the two, Nietzsche claims, are their associations with the different kinds of actions they inspire: one promotes destruction, the obliteration of its opposition, what Nietzsche characterizes as ‘Vernichtungslust’. The other Eris draws inspiration, propelling human beings to strive to better their opposition in fights of contest, *Wettkämpfe*. In the second volume of *Human All Too Human*, Nietzsche further distinguishes those two actions when he writes, ‘Someone who is envious senses every way in which another protrudes beyond the common measure and wants to force him back to it [*bis dahin herabdrücken*]—or to elevate himself to it [*sich bis dorthin erheben*]: out of which there arise two different modes of action [*Handlungsweisen*], which Hesiod designated as the evil and the good Eris’ (MA II/2 2:29).¹⁴ These modes of action—*forcing back* and *elevating above*—distinguish not only individuals, but also varieties of culture. Nietzsche argues that the achievements of Greek culture were made possible by the proliferation of outlets organized on an *agonistic* model in which praiseworthy accomplishments (in art, politics, education, etc.) were determined through public contestation that encouraged competitors to express their desire for recognition by rising above one another rather than seeking the destruction of their opposition. By simultaneously cultivating not only a desire to win, but a desire to compete well (which included respect for one’s competitor and the institutions that sets forth the terms of the

¹⁴ The translation is my own.

engagement),¹⁵ the Greeks established a culture capable of deriving their standards of excellence internally and of renewing and revaluing those standards according to changes in needs and interests of the community. Throughout much of his career, Nietzsche appears optimistic that this legacy of the Greeks might be claimed.

So what does it mean for Nietzsche to ‘revalue Homer’? Nietzsche’s revaluation aims both to reorient the ‘Homeric Question’ and to restore the value of that which Homer represents: a particular taste that informed a capacity for making judgements. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche writes:

In the Greeks the ‘will’ wished to contemplate itself in the transfiguration of genius and the world of art; in order to glorify themselves, its creatures had to feel themselves worthy of glory; they had to behold themselves again in a higher sphere, without this perfect world of contemplation acting as a command or a reproach. This is the sphere of beauty, in which they saw their mirror images, the Olympians. With this mirroring of beauty the Hellenic will combated its artistically correlative talent for suffering and for the wisdom of suffering—and, as a monument of its victory, we have Homer, the naïve artist. (BT 3)¹⁶

¹⁵ For a brief but insightful discussion of the virtues of agonistic engagement that can be derived from Nietzsche’s conception, see David Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 139-46.

¹⁶ This passage begins with an indication that it is qualifying the sense in which Homer is a naïve artist: ‘The Homeric “naïveté” can be understood only as the complete victory of Apollinian illusion [...]’. Schiller draws the distinction between naïve and sentimental poetry in his *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* (1795). When Nietzsche characterizes Homer as a so-called ‘naïve’ artist, he is challenging Schiller’s assessment. Schiller appears to have believed that the vision of the beautiful found in Homeric literature somehow stems from a greater proximity to nature that lends greater access to it; hence its naïveté refers to the fact that it is less mature, that its worldview is less complex. Naïve artists stand in contrast to those Schiller designates as ‘sentimental’; they must successfully overcome certain cultural impediments that mediate their access to nature. Schiller appears to have thought that sentimental poetry was more admirable because it represented a more significant accomplishment (overcoming the obstacles to nature). Nietzsche’s emphasis on Homer’s exemplary status as a revaluator depicts Homer’s *apparent* naïveté as *accomplished*.

The taste for the preferences embodied in Homeric literature is not the only fruit of this victory. What fascinates Nietzsche is also the way in which the victory was achieved. *Agon*, Nietzsche argues, was not only a way of achieving honor but also provided an arena in which the standards of excellence could be negotiated and transmitted. In other words, agonistic interactions provided opportunities both for applying standards of measure and judgement and for determining, revising, and recreating what those standards would be. Hence, perpetuating the *agon* was important for having access to the means for distinguishing oneself and for claiming one's place in the community that authorizes those standards and judges the outcomes of other contests.

But, even if we find Nietzsche's account of the utility of competition compelling, we nevertheless might be unwilling to go so far as to say that the kinds of contests Homer displayed are appropriate models for emulation. The struggles that earned Homer's heroes their honor and glory were anything but productive. They were bloody, ruthless, and fraught with cruelty, more closely resembling what Nietzsche associates with the blood-lust of the original Eris than the healthy inspiration her sister allegedly provided. Homer supplies not only the images of victory associated with the sacred games but also the agony of fights to the death on the battlefield. Accounts of how productive competition can be cultivated and the ways in which it can contribute to the development of a healthy culture still remain to be given. Nietzsche's attempts to do so are found in his efforts to adopt and adapt the agonistic model in his views on education and cultural development, particularly in his concerns for *Bildung*.

II.

The concept of *Bildung* as a personal and cultural ideal has a long tradition in German culture. The design of the German university system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was strongly linked to the cultural programs of intellectuals such as Humboldt. Revival of interest in myths about the origins of Germanic peoples, the evolution of the German language, and the characteristics

of ‘what is German?’—a question Nietzsche often posed—preoccupied much reflection on the status of German culture and its future as the modern state of Germany was organized. How to shape ‘the German soul’, how to put it in a productive relation to society at large were concerns that echoed in much of the work written during the period of German romanticism. *Bildung* was understood as a process, a way of effecting the sought for harmony and unity of cultural ideals that were perceived to be lacking in the wake of significant influence of French culture.

It is unsurprising, then, that the German romantics would draw on conceptual traditions that had their roots in fourteenth-century German mysticism. ‘*Bildung*’ was a figurative term used to describe the advance toward and the goal of becoming united with God, becoming complete—whole. It was a process of striving for perfection, an activity of transcending the discordant chaos and frailties of life. The German romantics adopted and adapted that language for secular purposes as *Bildung* came to mean ‘formation, education, constitution, cultivation, culture, personality development, learning, knowledge, good breeding, refinement,’¹⁷ and more.

Bildung was a theme, which reverberated not only in what we might call educational theory, but also in political theory, religion, philosophy, drama, and literature. Fichte (1762-1814) provided an account of how the ego realizes itself through resistance and struggle with the non-ego. Hegel (1770-1831) articulated the universal and historical unfolding of the *Bildung*-process in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which he described the manner in which the individual evolves from his *ungebildete* condition to a state of absolute consciousness. Hegel described his work as providing an account of the spirit’s *Bildung*. Schlegel (1772-1829) likened the process of self-development, *sich bilden*, to becoming divine. Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-96) exhibited striving that aimed not at becoming a deity of the heavens but at becoming ‘a god of the earth’. Related to

¹⁷ Klaus Vondung, ‘Unity through *Bildung*: A German Dream of Perfection’, *Journal of Independent Philosophy*, 5/6 (1988), 47-55 (47). I am indebted to this article for providing most of the references cited in the next paragraph.

striving to attain divinity is the goal of securing absolute mastery. In the work of Novalis (1772-1801), one finds *Bildung* linked with both mastery and freedom. In *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, *Bildung* is understood as leading to a heightened power of creativity, which in turn is identified as the fundamental principle of all being.¹⁸

Schiller argues that cultural and individual development are best achieved through conflict. In the context of discussing why the Greeks excelled in so many cultural and intellectual endeavors, Schiller writes, 'There was no other way of developing the manifold capacities of Man than by placing them in opposition to each other'.¹⁹ But for Schiller, that dynamic cannot last if we are to achieve the ideal state toward which we strive: the individual as 'constant unity' (Schiller §11). Schiller frequently refers to the ideal model for life as one who is far along the endless path in pursuit of the 'divinity within himself' (Schiller §11), one who holds 'a pure ideal man within himself, with whose unalterable unity it is the great task of his existence, throughout all his vicissitudes, to harmonize' (Schiller §4). Disharmony, discord, and opposition are useful but not ideal; the 'antagonism of powers is the great instrument of culture, but it is only

¹⁸ See J. G. Fichte, *Das System der Sittenlehre*, in *Ausgewählte Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Fritz Meicus, vol II (Darmstadt, 1962), 485-87; G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. J. Hoffmeister, 6th edn (Hamburg, 1952), p. 26 (for Hegel's own description of his project); Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenäums-Fragmente,' in *Schriften zur Literatur*, ed. Wolfdietrich Rasch (Munich, 1972), p. 54.; J. W. Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, in *Goethes Werke*, ed. Erich Trunz, 6th edn, 14 vols (Hamburg, 1965), vii, 71 and 82; and Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, ed. Wolfgang Frühwald (Stuttgart, 1978), pp. 173-74. It is important to note that, in *Wilhelm Meister*, the goal of reaching the status of a divinity is not attained and that the definition of the goal of *Bildung* shifts such that, by the end of the novel, 'the aim bildung is defined as 'being active in a dignified way,' 'without wanting to dominate' (see Vondung, p. 49 and *Goethes Werke*, vii, 608). For a concise and useful account of *Bildung* in the plays of Schiller, Goethe, and Kleist, see Margaret Scholl, *The Bildungsroman of the Age of Goethe* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1976).

¹⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Ungar, 1965), Letter 6, p. 43. Subsequent references, cited in the text, are drawn from this translation and indicate the letter in which the citation appears (e.g. Schiller §12).

the instrument; for as long as it persists, we are only on the way towards culture' (Schiller §6). The best life, as well as the most advanced culture, according to Schiller, is one in which the developmental force of opposition is exhausted and overcome and a harmonic ideal is realized.

For Schiller, the Greeks are exemplary models of a harmonic ideal; relating them in a critical way to his own time facilitates the progress of his own culture toward the same goal. Schiller, like Humboldt, understands harmonization as a complicated dynamic. He identifies two fundamental principles at work in human life and the world as a whole. One aims at mutation and the other is inclined toward immutability (Schiller §13). The first Schiller designates the 'sense impulse,' the second, the 'form impulse.' The sense impulse facilitates the development of ourselves as matter, which Schiller describes as 'alteration, or reality which occupies time' (Schiller §12). When occupied only by the sense impulse, 'Man [...] is nothing but a unit of magnitude, an occupied moment of time—or rather, *he* is not, for his personality is extinguished so long as sense perception governs him and time whirls him along with itself' (Schiller §12).²⁰ The formal impulse aims at harmonizing the diversity that the sensuous impulse encourages. The formal springs from our rational nature, and its goal is to inhibit change so that what is proper to our individuality will be stabilized.

Although these impulses are generally opposed, they need not come into direct conflict, Schiller claims, because they do not abide within the same entity. Schiller seems to think that to the degree to which these two impulses are manifest in different aspects of human existence, they are able to simultaneously achieve their aims. The two forces are mutually subordinate, and here Schiller distinguishes

²⁰ Schiller describes the sense impulse as that 'in which the whole phenomenon of mankind is ultimately rooted.' He further claims that the sensuous 'absence-of-self' is what is ordinarily described as being '*beside oneself*—that is, to be outside one's ego', as one is when one is overwhelmed by some kind of sensation. Schiller argued that we are always only 'beside' ourselves so long as we only perceive. See Schiller's note at §12.

between ‘uniformity’ and ‘harmony’. Citing Fichte, Schiller calls for ‘reciprocal action’ between the two impulses, claiming that this notion marks an improvement over what is implied by some forms of transcendental philosophy in which the material, sensuous impulse is an impediment to the rational, the formal, and therefore was to be minimized and held as an object of disdain. Genuine *Bildung*, Schiller claims, strives for a coordination in which the sensuous impulse is amply stimulated by a variety of experiences, and the formal impulse is permitted independence from the sensuous. ‘Where both qualities are united, Man will combine the greatest fullness of existence with the utmost self-dependence and freedom, and instead of abandoning himself to the world he will rather draw it into himself with the whole infinity of its phenomena, and subject it to the unity of his reason’ (Schiller §13). That process allows us to incorporate and to fully become united with the multiplicity that is characteristic of the totality of existence. Only through this transformation, Schiller claims, can we become the kind of people who rightly deserve recognition as ‘humane.’ Schiller writes:

In order to make us cooperative, helpful, active people, feeling and character must be united, just as susceptibility of sense must combine with rigour of intellect in order to furnish us with experience. How can we be fair, kindly and humane towards others, let our maxims be as praiseworthy as they may, if we lack the capacity to make strange natures genuinely and truly a part of ourselves, appropriate strange situations, make strange feelings our own? ... In this operation, then, consists for the most part what we call the forming of a human being; and that in the best sense of the term, as signifying the cultivation of the inner, not merely the outward, man. (Schiller §13, note 1)

Bildung is a transformative process that shapes the kind of people we are. It organizes *who* we are by coordinating without stultifying *what* we are.

Tragic art in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* educates its participants by engaging them in a highly charged and tautly strained reconciliation of the Dionysian and the Apollinian, which are dangerously disposed toward eradicating each other. Tragic art is transformative for Nietzsche because the process of its enactment

renders a similar union in the psyches of its audience. Organized in this way, Nietzsche thinks such people are in the best possible condition to find their own life and the world justified: it reconciles them to life. Agonistic *Bildung*, at least in Nietzsche's early writings, both facilitates our internal development and synchronizes us to the whole of nature.

Nietzsche and Schiller part company regarding the conception of how the impulses interact in play and how play is achieved.²¹ We recall that the kind of play manifest in tragic art, as described in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is one in which the two opposed impulses harness their opposition in such ways that they ultimately advance each other's ends while remaining essentially distinct. What makes the experience of tragedy fruitful is that through it the opposing needs of unification and distinction that the impulses express are simultaneously met. The union of the Dionysian and the Apollinian does not destroy either one. In Schiller's work, by contrast, the Beauty that results from play yields the elimination of opposition—a third condition, which marks the annihilation, or in Schiller's terms, the cancellation (*Aufhebung*) of the sensual and formal impulses:

Beauty *combines* those two opposite conditions, and thus removes the opposition. But since both conditions remain eternally opposed to one another, they can only be combined by cancellation. Our second business, then, is to make this combination perfect, to accomplish it so purely and completely that both conditions entirely disappear in a third ... (Schiller §18)

Freedom achieved in play, Schiller claims, freedom from constraint of incessant striving for satisfaction, which the two drives necessarily manifest.²² Clearly the kind of harmony that Schiller seeks is more

²¹ I do not suggest that there are not significant similarities between Nietzsche's and Schiller's views. For a more thorough account of the similarities and differences see Nicholas Martin's valuable work, *Nietzsche and Schiller: Untimely Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²² See Schiller §19: 'Each of these two fundamental impulses, as soon as it has developed, strives by its nature and by necessity towards satisfaction; but just because both are necessary and both are yet striving towards opposite objectives, this twofold constraint naturally cancels itself, and the will preserves complete freedom between them both'.

complex than a simple cessation of struggle or a kind of relaxation and abdication of the difficulties of life. Still, the ideal toward which he strives is *annihilation* of the need to resist and oppose purchased at the expense of *overcoming* struggle. In his early writings, at least, Nietzsche denies both the possibility and the desirability of the kind of perfection that is the object of Schiller's work. The drives that call us to play, the exercise of impulses that find their fulfillment in that experience, are what make us human; to eliminate those drives is to cease to be humane. Freedom for Nietzsche is the free expression of these drives,²³ which is not our right but our earned accomplishment.

We can look to Nietzsche's 'Homer's Contest' for his view that agonistic institutions contribute to the health of individuals and the culture in which these institutions are organized. By extending the means for attaining personal distinction by defining oneself creatively through resistance to what one is not the *agon* provides outlets for the acquisition of meaningful freedom. Nietzsche takes upon himself, in his own writing, the task of making these kinds of challenges for his readers: 'To make the individual *uncomfortable*: my mission! Appeal of liberating the individual by struggling!' (WPh: KSA 8/91 5[178]).²⁴ Providing the conditions for the acquisition of strength through endurance and the overcoming of significant challenge is what Nietzsche conceives as the mission of culture—broadly construed. That is the mission of *Bildung*, a transformative activity of cultivating individuals as well as cultures, that Nietzsche sought to effect.

III.

Rather than abandoning or rejecting the traditions of his discipline and vocation, Nietzsche engages that intellectual heritage—making it

²³ Nietzsche qualifies this sense of freedom. It is not simply freedom from restraint: each depends upon the opposition of the other, in the context of the art of tragedy, in order to achieve its free expression.

²⁴ 'Das Individuum *unbehaglich* zu machen: meine Aufgabe! Reiz der Befreiung des Einzelnen im Kampfe!'

‘groan,’ as Foucault describes his appropriation of Nietzsche’s work—and adapts it to fit his own concerns. The strategy Nietzsche uses in revaluing the Homeric Question is one that he employs throughout his works: he seeks to make Homer problematic in order to contest prevailing interpretations of the significance of Homer and to introduce new perspectives as potential opponents of other contemporary ideas. Another way in which we might make Nietzsche’s work ‘groan’ is to read him in the context of the agonistic models discussed above. It is clear that Nietzsche views his own writing as playing a role in creating a contentious arena for the pursuit of new standards of literary and philosophical excellence. Among the numerous opponents Nietzsche seeks (e.g. Socrates, Plato, Paul, Wagner), we find Homer. Although the confines of this paper do not permit an extensive account, I wish to explore several possible ways in which such a reading might be pursued and the fruit it might bear.

Nietzsche seeks to rival Homer in his creation of a work of art that would both cultivate a taste for new values and would enhance the critical faculties of those affected to make future judgements. These twin objectives are the same as those in his *agones* with his other rivals, but Nietzsche’s approach to Homer is uniquely different: in the case of Homer, Nietzsche’s actions do not take the form of an attack. To read Nietzsche as a contestant with Homer is, in part, to see him joined with the group named in the epigraph at the beginning of the paper—Xenophanes and Plato, who were consumed by ‘the monstrous desire [...] to assume the place of the overthrown poet [Homer] and inherit his fame’. Nietzsche longs to pick up the ‘torch of contest’ he claims to receive from Homer in order to ‘set afire new greatness’. But we would be hard-pressed to argue that Nietzsche’s contest of Homer is organized on terms similar to what are found in his contest with Socrates. The contest with Homer lacks the kind of attacks characteristic of his *agones* with others. Why? Part of the reason, it seems, is that unlike the others *it is not necessary to defeat Homer*. As we learn in *The Birth of Tragedy*, optimism of the sort that Homer is supposed to have embodied was replaced by a Socratic form of optimism. Nietzsche himself writes in *Ecce homo* that he only

attacks causes that are victorious.²⁵ Instead of assaulting Homer, Nietzsche strives to surpass him. We witness this both in his creation of the literary work *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, which depicts a modern Odyssey, and in his numerous efforts to engage his readers in revaluations.

I have already claimed that Nietzsche's contest with Homer is one in which Nietzsche attempts not so much to overthrow Homer as he seeks to excel the standards that he set. Another reason for that difference is the fact that Homeric values are not radically opposed to those Zarathustra espouses.²⁶ Of the contest between Plato and Homer, Nietzsche writes, 'Plato versus Homer: that is the complete, the genuine antagonism—there the sincerest advocate of the 'beyond,' the great slanderer of life; here the instinctive deifier, the golden nature' (GM III 25). Nietzsche's contest with Homer does not take a form similar to that between Plato and Homer (or even that of Nietzsche and Plato), because unlike Plato, Nietzsche has no 'genuine antagonism' with Homer. Nietzsche and Homer are not opposed in that way. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche is more interested in the *form* of valuation and the ways in which judgements regarding values are legislated and transformed. So, what is the form of the contest with Homer? What are its outcomes? And what bearing does this have for the questions of taste and judgement mentioned above?

²⁵ EH, 'Why I am so Wise' 7.

²⁶ This is not to say that Nietzsche advocates a 'return' to ancient Greek culture. There is ample evidence that Nietzsche thinks it is neither possible nor desirable to do so. However, consider a few examples from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: Zarathustra's citation of the Greek 'law of overcoming' in part I, 'Of the Thousand and One Goals': 'be bravest and pre-eminent above all' (Homer, *Iliad* 6.208 and 11.784); Zarathustra's allegiance with Achilles when he claims that he would rather be a day laborer in Hades than join the chairs of higher education (cf. BT 3); Zarathustra's estimation of life and the importance of death at the right time (see part III, 'Of the Three Evils'; Za III, 'Of Old and New Tablets'; Za I, 'Of Free Death'; Za III, 'The Convalescent'; and BT 3). Even his reversals of Homeric material appear as coy word-play: In 'The Tomb Song' (Za I), Zarathustra tells us that, unlike the hero Achilles, he is invulnerable 'only in the heel'.

A brief glance at *Zarathustra* should enable us to make some general claims and indicate several preliminary conclusions.

IV.

Zarathustra is less concerned about the specific values his disciples will eventually have than he is about whether they will become legislators of values, that is, that they will: 1) have opportunities to engage in revaluation (i.e. that they will have institutions that facilitate the creation of values); and 2) be enabled to participate in what he describes as redemption (i.e., that they will be able to engage in a productive mode of acting within the new contest). Zarathustra's new form of contest—self-overcoming—transforms the destructive internalized contests that Nietzsche associates with Platonic and Christian moralities by harnessing the productive features of what he earlier describes as Homeric forms of contest.

We recall from the discussion of *Homer's Contest* above, that Nietzsche identifies two important features of the kind of competition that propelled ancient Greek culture: 1) the proliferation of formal structures that provided opportunities for competitors to meet and be judged by their communities, and 2) the cultivation of a productive way of acting within those institutions. Zarathustra shares these concerns. Self-overcoming aims to provide the *structure* of the new form of contest, and what Zarathustra describes as a new kind of redemption (in the form of a backwards willing) provides the proposed *mode of action* within that new structure.²⁷

The objective of self-overcoming is to strive for what Zarathustra describes as a 'comprehensive soul': the 'soul that has the longest ladder and reaches down deepest'; it 'can run and stray and roam

²⁷ I elaborate these ideas in the context of articulating Nietzsche's alternative conception of individual development in my 'Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as Postmodern *Bildungsroman*', in *Nietzsche, Postmodernismus und was nach ihnen kommt*, ed. Endre Kiss and Uschi Nussbaumer-Benz (Cuxhaven and Dartford: Junghans, 2000).

farthest within itself.’ It tests values and its strength as a value creator. It is selfish in the sense of self-loving and ‘self-enjoying’ (Za III, ‘Of Old and New Tablets’). The comprehensive soul ‘out of sheer joy plunges itself into chance’ (ibid.). It challenges itself; it risks itself. It is the soul that

having being, dives into becoming; the soul which *has*, but *wants* to want and will; the soul which flees itself and catches up with itself in the widest circle; the wisest soul, which folly exhorts most sweetly; the soul which loves itself most, in which all things have their sweep and counter sweep and ebb and flood (ibid.).

That is certainly one form of the loving (as esteeming) message Zarathustra brings to his pupils. One cannot give another a comprehensive soul, nor can one instruct another to develop it. The comprehensive soul has and exercises certain capacities to enhance its own growth. Throughout *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Zarathustra wrestles with activating such capacities in himself and others.

Redemption for Zarathustra is a creative backward willing, such that one wills the past as if it were one’s own responsibility, as if it were the result of one’s own willing it to be so. It is not simply a reconciliation with suffering, not a passive acceptance of the past, but a passionate affirmation of the present and past: ‘All “it was” is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident—until the creative will says to it, “But thus I willed it.” Until the creative will says to it, “But thus I will it; thus shall I will it”’ (Za II, ‘Of Redemption’). Zarathustra’s redemption consists in a mode of esteeming, from which value can be self-generated.

It is only through this kind of willing that we are able to overcome revenge, Zarathustra believes. Revenge is the by-product of our impotency with regard to the past. The unliberated will is powerless in the face of history. The inability to undo what has already been done provokes anger and incites revenge against any and all that do not experience the same sense of hopelessness. Zarathustra speaks, ‘This, indeed this alone, is what *revenge* is: the will’s ill will against time and its “it was”’ (ibid.). Zarathustra describes the propensity to punish as a futile and destructive attempt to undo the

past: ‘No deed can be annihilated: how could it be undone by punishment?’ (ibid.). Interpretations of life that hold that existence is a form of punishment show themselves to be motivated by revenge: ‘this is what is eternal in the punishment called existence, that existence must eternally become deed and guilt again. Unless the will should at last redeem himself, and willing should become not willing’ (ibid.). At this point Zarathustra recognizes that his portrayal of the overman as a future goal needs to be abandoned. What he must do is communicate the urgency of redeeming the human past and present, thereby creating the conditions in which all life can be affirmed: its past, present, and future. The philosophers of the future that Nietzsche anticipates are of this sort: they are oriented toward becoming; they *are* the future. As creators of values, they provide an opening to the future for themselves and for others. Zarathustra later contrasts them with others who are unable to create: ‘they are always the beginning of the end: they crucify him who writes new values on new tablets; they sacrifice the future to themselves—they crucify all man’s future’ (Za III, ‘Of Old and New Tablets’). The creators of new values are capable of esteeming and thereby also giving meaning to the past. As they value the past, they redeem it: ‘To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all “it was” into “thus I willed it”—that alone should I call redemption’ (Za II, ‘Of Redemption’).

Zarathustra conceives of authentic human existence as an ongoing activity that amounts to an exercise of taste—pursuing what is esteemed and valued in the activity of willing. Willing as esteeming is an exercise of taste, according to Zarathustra: ‘all of life is a dispute over taste and tasting. Taste—that is at the same time weight and scales and weigher; and woe unto all the living that would live without disputes over weight and scales and weighers!’ (Za II, ‘Of Those Who Are Sublime’). In Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra* we find examples of the development and cultivation of taste. As Zarathustra acquires that sensibility, he also comes to learn that it is through that kind of transformation that he advances the goal of attaining a higher form of life. Nietzsche tells us that ‘Zarathustra was the first to consider the fight of good and evil the very wheel in the machinery of things’ (EH,

‘Why I am a Destiny’ 3). It is Socrates’ absolute and dogmatic insistence on the use of those standards that explains why it is that Nietzsche finds his practice so corrupt, and hence, in need of an attack. It excludes the critique of those standards and pretends that they do not need justification whereas Zarathustra’s new contest requires that such standards be subject to constant revaluation or perish when that is no longer possible.

Recall the passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* in which Nietzsche, reflecting on the philosophers of the future, asks,

Are these coming philosophers new friends of ‘truth’? That is probable enough, for all philosophers so far have loved their truths. But they will certainly not be dogmatists. It must offend their pride, also their taste, if their truth is supposed to be a truth for everyman—which has so far been the secret wish and hidden meaning of all dogmatic aspirations. ‘My judgment is *my* judgment’: no one else is easily entitled to it—that is what such a philosopher of the future may perhaps say of himself. (JGB 43)

The elitism of the passage should not cloud our understanding of what having judgements and acquiring them meant to Nietzsche. One’s judgements, one’s values, as I have argued, are the products and projects of one’s will. To be entitled to those values is to have willed them, to have participated in the struggle for their creation. It is not merely ignoble to adopt the values of others *carte blanche*, it is an offense to taste itself, to the very activity of esteeming. That is what Nietzsche strives to resist.

Nietzsche attempts to enact similar struggles in his own writings.²⁸ In *Ecce homo* Nietzsche describes himself as ‘warlike by nature,’ but he qualifies this claim with a description of how strength is developed in opposition and how he chooses his battles:

The strength of those who attack can be measured in a way by the opposition they require: every growth is indicated by the search for a mighty opponent—or problem; for a warlike philosopher challenges problems, too, to single combat. The task is *not* simply to master whatever happens to resist, but what requires us to stake all our strength, suppleness, and fighting skill—opponents that are our

²⁸ I develop these ideas in my ‘Nietzsche’s Agonal Wisdom’, forthcoming in *International Studies in Philosophy*.

equals. (EH, 'Why I am so Wise' 7)

He claims to temper his combative practice with four propositions: 1) he attacks only 'causes that are victorious'; 2) he compromises only himself in his attacks and does not attack causes that others are eager to challenge; 3) he aims to attack cultural deficiencies, not the shortcomings of individuals—when he calls people by name in these attacks, it is not the person he aims to fight but the ideal his opponent embodies; and 4) he never attacks in the interest of settling some personal dispute (ibid.). Nietzsche has an interest in what he calls 'an *honest* duel': 'Where one feels contempt, one *cannot* wage war; where one commands, where one sees something beneath oneself, one has no business waging war' (ibid.). We might challenge Nietzsche by claiming that his work offers evidence that he did not always act on these principles, but we can still read these remarks, especially in the light of his earlier work, as clarifying Nietzsche's conception of the practice of agonistic philosophy as an endeavor that was meant to be life-enhancing and enabling.²⁹

Nietzsche's contest with Homer perhaps realizes the enabling features of contest more than his other battles. It is in the contest that follows from Nietzsche's revaluation of the Homeric Question that Nietzsche truly appears to strive to surpass without destroying that with which he wrestles. As evidence of my claim, I have sought to identify several necessary, if not also sufficient, features of a creative and productive contest, and I have provided examples from Nietzsche's texts in which, I argue, he aims to meet precisely those criteria: the creation of an appropriate arena of contention, and the

²⁹ Compare these passages with Foucault's description of the task of his writing: 'It is thus necessary to bring into struggle as much gaiety, lucidity and determination as possible. The only sad thing is not to fight. ...Writing interests me only in the measure that it incorporates the reality of combat, as an instrument, a tactic, scouting. I would like my books to be like lancets, Molotov cocktails, or minefields, and have them burn up after use in the manner of fireworks.' ('An Interview with Michel Foucault', *History of the Present*, 1 (1985), 14) For an insightful account of how Nietzsche's agonistic philosophical praxis aims to empower, see H. Siemens, 'Nietzsche's Hammer: Philosophy, Destruction, or the Art of Limited Warfare', *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 2 (June 1998), 321-47.

achievement of a productive mode of action. The contest with Homer is but one of numerous matches Nietzsche arranges in his works. The result, if not a victory, is the illumination of some of Nietzsche's most affirmative formulations of the alternatives he envisions for contemporary culture. Finally, the contest between Nietzsche and Homer serves as a useful model with which we might contrast his other duels as we continue to evaluate Nietzsche's own philosophical practice and its legacy for a future philosophy.