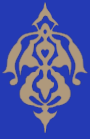

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NIETZSCHE AND PERSIA

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Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), the great German thinker, is best known as a philosopher of culture. His insightful critique of Western civilization in its different stages, classical, medieval, and modern, bears witness to his vast erudition and profound concern regarding the historical development of human culture, particularly in relation to ethical norms. But his spirit of enquiry goes well beyond European borders and in many instances and contexts he refers to the great Asiatic cultures of China, India, and Persia. Nietzsche's curiosity and interest in various cultural developments produced his unique philosophical understanding of the Oriental cultures, their traditional wisdom, and the crucial points of divergence between them and modern European culture. Here and there he puts "Asiatic" wisdom positively in opposition to modern rationalism, by exposing his radical critical attitude toward the latter's unnatural extremism (see *Asien* and *asiatisch* in *Sämtliche Werke*, "Gesamtregister," vol. XV).

Nietzsche was a brilliant student of classical philology and later occupied its chair at the University of Basel. His profound knowledge of Greco-Roman culture and history permeates his writings, appearing in innumerable discussions and references. His studies of classical philology and his deep immersion in Greek and Latin literature also introduced him to the ancient history of Persia and its culture, conceived as an Asiatic culture embodied in an imperial power in contradistinction to the Greek city-states in its neighborhood. In his collected works, including the voluminous fragments left

in his notebooks (*Nachgelassene Fragmente*), there are many references to the ancient Persians. Nietzsche's concern with Persia is well reflected in his choice of "Zarathustra" as the prophet of his philosophy and the eponymous hero of his most popular work, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*). He shows no particular interest in Persian history after the rise of Islam, though he does make occasional allusions to Moslems, including one reference to the Assassins (*Zur Genealogie der Moral* [*On the Genealogy of Morals*], Part III, Fragment 24). Among the prominent figures of Persian history from the Islamic era the name of the poet Sa'di is mentioned once in his notebooks, while there are several references to Hafez (see below).

Nietzsche and Ancient Persia. There are two references to Persia (*Persien*) in his collected writings (*Sämtliche Werke*, I, p. 792; V, p. 353) and several others in the adjectival form *persisch* (and once *vorpersisch*), that are essentially allusions to, and sometimes analyses of, the relationships between ancient Greek city-states and the Achaemenid Empire. In these remarks he is primarily concerned with Greco-Persian wars and their decisive impact on the Greek world that in turn led to the Peloponnesian War among the city-states themselves. In addition, there are 28 general references to the Persians (*die Perser*), including fragments fully reflecting his views on the Persian people of ancient times and their culture (*Sämtliche Werke*, "Gesamtregister," XV). Echoing Herodotus (Bk.I.135-151), he singles out for praise their mastery of archery and horsemanship, their war-like imperiousness, and their emphasis on the virtue of truthfulness (*Sämtliche Werke*, VII, p. 785; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I, "On the Thousand and One Goal"). These virtues correspond well with Nietzsche's highly positive appraisal of courageous and warlike characteristics in man.

Nietzsche's deepest interest and admiration for the Persians manifest themselves where he discusses their notion of history and cyclical time. This Persian concept of time resembles to some degree his own concept of the circle of the Eternal Recurrence, expressed in a highly poetic and dramatic manner in his *Zarathustra*. Through this concept Nietzsche emphasizes the cyclical nature of cosmic time and the recurrence of all beings in every "circle": "I must pay tribute to Zarathustra, a Persian (*einem Perser*): Persians were the first to have conceived of History in its full extent" (*Sämtliche Werke*, XI, p. 53). In this fragment Nietzsche uses the Persian word *hazār* referring to the millennial cycles (*hazāra*) in ancient Persian religious beliefs, "each one presided by a prophet; every prophet having his own *hazar*, his millennial

kingdom." In *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, he speaks of the great millennial ("*grosser Hazar*") kingdom of his own Zarathustra, as "our great distant human kingdom, the Zarathustra kingdom of a thousand year," ("Das Honigopfer"[The Honey Sacrifice,] Part IV).

In another posthumously published fragment, he deplores a lost historical opportunity: "It would have been much more fortunate had the Persians become masters (*Herr*) of the Greeks, rather than have the Romans of all people [*gerade die Römer*] assume that role" (*Sämtliche Werke*, VIII, p. 65). In this note, Nietzsche implicitly expresses once more his radical opposition to Greek metaphysical thought, as developed by Socrates and Plato, and its later prevalence in Western world through the supremacy of Greek culture within the Roman Empire. This process ultimately led, at the hands of the Church Fathers, to the integration of the Platonic metaphysics, as developed in Rome by the Neoplatonists, within the theological doctrines of Christianity. Nietzsche considered this whole historical development as constituting an ascetic and nihilistic worldview that denied and reviled the reality of this-worldly existence in the name of an illusory, eternal, and other-worldly life. Therefore, he thought that if the Persians rather than the Romans had been successful in gaining dominance over Greece, the predominance of their positive outlook towards worldly life and time would have prevented such a lamentable event in human history.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra and the Persian Zarathustra. Nietzsche's proficiency in classical philology, and the insertion of "Zarathustra" as the title of his most popular work, have misled some scholars of Zoroastrian studies to search laboriously for a direct reflection and representation of the ideas of the Persian prophet, or Mazdean texts, in his work (Rose, p. 174ff). Moreover, uncritical admirers of pre-Islamic Iranian history and culture, particularly among Iranians themselves, insist on seeing in Nietzsche's Zarathustra an exact replica of the original Persian prophet and his teachings. Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth, has related that many Persian visitors used to come to her weekly open house in Weimar to express "their gratitude that Nietzsche had chosen a Persian sage to be the prophet of a new and superior race of man" (Rose, p. 186).

It is true that Nietzsche, as a student of philology, lived at the time of great advancement in the study of the Avesta and Indo-Iranian philology, and he was certainly not oblivious of the achievements in this field. But it is by no means certain that he had ever read Anquetil-Duperron's translation of Zend

Avesta. It could be said that his selection of the name of Zarathustra and allusions to his solitude in the mountains for ten years, and a concept like *hazār* (see above), testify to a broad acquaintance with Zoroastrian traditions and doctrines. However, by considering the trajectory of his intellectual interests from early youth, it becomes apparent that his historical and philological studies, including his thought-provoking studies on history of Eastern and Western religions and their sacred books, was not a matter of investigative scientific concern, but aimed at a hermeneutical reading from a novel revolutionary philosophical point of view. Moreover, he had a disdainful attitude toward supposedly "objective" scholarship restricted solely to painstaking research in specialized fields in the absence of a broad philosophical view (see, "On Scholars" and "The Leech" in *Zarathustra* Parts II and IV). Thus, he never intended to merely copy or adopt Zoroaster's words and ideas uncritically.

Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* can only be understood in the context of his other works and their underlying philosophical assumptions. He conceived himself as a philosopher who was destined to change the entire vision of humanity about the meaning of being and life through "revaluation of all values." To this end, Zarathustra, the protagonist of his philosophy, is an iconic figure rather than a mere replica of the proto-historical Prophet. In the entire text of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* one finds only one indirect allusion to the Persians and their beliefs (*Zarathustra* I, "On the Thousand and One Goal"), while there is an abundance of references and allusions to the Bible, reflecting his perennial struggle and obsessive concern with Judeo-Christian beliefs and their impact on human history.

However, at least in one place, he has reminded us emphatically how to understand the teachings of his Zarathustra in contradistinction to the teachings of the original Prophet (see below). Zarathustra is a central figure in Nietzsche's poetical representation of his philosophy because the opposition to morality and moralism stands at the heart of his critical historical thought.

Nietzsche made several references to "Zoroaster" in his early writings. This familiar name in European languages, of Greek origin, was used in his notebooks of 1870-71, about a decade before writing *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. There he speaks with great admiration of Zoroaster and his religion and, in a short note, as elsewhere (see above), implicitly expresses his sympathy for the historically not improbable possibility that Zoroastrianism could have well triumphed in ancient Greece: "Zoroaster's religion would have prevailed in

Greece, if Darius had not been defeated." (*Sämtliche Werke*, VII, p. 106). Also in his posthumously published work of the same period, *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen* (*Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*), he refers to the probable influence of Zoroaster on Heraclitus (*Sämtliche Werke*, I, p. 806; English tr. P. 29). The name of "Zarathustra," as such, first appears in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*, fragment 342), published in 1882. Nietzsche inserts here the first fragment of the prologue to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, i.e. Zarathustra's prayer before the sun. This fragment appears in the following year in the published text of the first part of *Zarathustra*.

One may wonder why Nietzsche abandoned the familiar name of Zoroaster for the original Old Persian form of it, Zarathustra, at a time when only specialists in Indo-Iranian philology were familiar with the original form. As Nietzsche admits himself, by choosing the name of Zarathustra as the prophet of his philosophy in a poetical idiom, he wanted to pay homage to the original Aryan prophet as a prominent founding figure of the spiritual-moral phase in human history, and reverse his teachings at the same time, according to his fundamental critical views on morality. The original Zoroastrian world-view interpreted being on the basis of the universality of the moral values and saw the whole world as an arena of the struggle between two fundamental moral elements, Good and Evil, depicted in two antagonistic divine figures. Nietzsche's Zarathustra, in contrast, puts forward his ontological immoralism and tries to prove and reestablish the primordial innocence of beings by destroying philosophically all moralistic interpretations and evaluations of being. In this way, the ontological immoralism of the Nietzsche's Zarathustra stands, philosophically and historically, antipodal to the ontological moralism of the archaic prophet and thinker. In the intellectual outline of his life and works, *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche describes his reasons for choosing Zarathustra as harbinger of his philosophy:

What the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth, the mouth of the first immoralist: for what constitutes the tremendous historical uniqueness of that Persian is just the opposite of this. Zarathustra was the first to consider the fight of good and evil the very wheel in the machinery of things: the transposition of morality into the metaphysical realms as a force, cause, and end in itself… Zarathustra created this most calamitous error, morality, consequently, he must also be the first to recognize it.… To speak the truth and to shoot well with arrows, that is, Persian virtue —-Am I understood? —The

self-overcoming of morality, out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming of the moralist, into his opposite—into me—that is what the name of Zarathustra means in my mouth (trans. Kaufmann, pp. 327-28).

Nietzsche's Zarathustra, like the original Zarathustra according to Zoroastrian tradition, goes to the mountain for meditation when he is thirty years old, and, like him, descends ten years later to convey his message to humanity. The early Zarathustra, at the dawn of the metaphysical history of humanity, after having long dialogues with his God of goodness, descends from the mountain to proclaim the heavenly message that interprets being in moralistic terms of Good and Evil; while the "second" Zarathustra, at the end of this history, descends to announce, first of all, the dreadful news which has immense consequences for human life and thought: the death of God. The essential logical implication of this most tremendous ontological event is the impossibility of the moralistic interpretation of being, evermore. This formidable redemptive revelation is the beginning of the emancipation of humanity from all bonds of illusions and superstitions imposed on it by religious and philosophical metaphysics throughout history. The second Zarathustra, by proclaiming this new fundamental knowledge about the death of God, removes all eschatological prospects from the horizon of the human life. He refutes all theological teachings in all disguises as enemies of Life, and replaces them with a thoroughly new and absolutely positive, this-worldly, life-affirming philosophy. This philosophy of the "laughing lions" looks sarcastically at all otherworldly metaphysical notions which, by looking for eternal life instigated by a sense of fear from mortality, necessarily interprets being and human life in moralistic, and, therefore, eschatological terms.

Nietzsche, Sa'di, and Hafez. Sa'di and Hafez are the only Persian names of the Islamic era mentioned in Nietzsche's writings. In his notebooks there is an anecdote from Sa'di which originally belongs to the preface of his Rose Garden (*Golestān*). Nietzsche's immediate source for this quotation has not been traced (*Sämtliche Werke*, XIV, p. 650). The anecdote, according to his citation, says: "'from whom did you learn that much?' asks Sa'di from a wise man. And receives the reply: 'from the blind who never put a foot forward without first examining the ground with their sticks.'" (*Sämtliche Werke*, IX, p. 606) Nietzsche provides no comments on this story. But, in the context of his philosophy, one can say that he certainly sees in this maxim the typical example of the miserably cautious rational attitude toward life, the rationality of the "blind," which stands in stark contrast to his favorite way of life: the

courageous, ecstatic, and reckless way of the insightful man of wisdom. (The "wise man," in the preface to the *Rose Garden*, is Loqmān, a legendary figure and purveyor of wise aphorisms in Arabic and Persian literature.)

Hafez, however, provides him with a prime example of "Dionysian" ecstatic wisdom, which he extols so extensively in his writings. There are several references to the poet in Nietzsche's works. Obviously, Goethe's admiration for Hafez and his "Oriental" wisdom, as expressed in *West-östlisches Divan*, has been the main source of attracting Nietzsche to the Persian poet. The name of Hafez, usually in association with Goethe, appears about ten times in his writings. He admires both poets for reaching the zenith of joyful human wisdom. For him Hafez exemplifies the Oriental free spirit who gratefully receives both the pleasures and sufferings of life. Nietzsche commends such an attitude as sign of a positive and courageous valuation of life.

There is even a short poem in Nietzsche's collected works, entitled *An Hafis. Frage eines Wassertrinkers* (To Hafez: Questions from a Water Drinker). The poem celebrates the insightfulness of Hafez and his poetical achievements. At the end, he asks Hafez, as a "water drinker," why he demands wine while he himself has the power of making everybody intoxicated (*Sämtliche Werke*, XI, p. 316). It must be remembered that, for health reasons, Nietzche himself was apparently a lifelong abstainer. He considered "alcohol and Christianity" as the two harmful narcotics for the European soul, and particularly pernicious in regards to the German Geist (see "Was den Deutschen abgeht," fragment 2, in *Götzen-Dämmerung* [*Twilight of the Idols*]).

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