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**Henning Ritter**  
***Notebooks***

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## INTRODUCTION

This volume contains notes from the years 1992 to 2009. It represents a selection, roughly one tenth of the commentaries. The ideas and reflections were committed to writing in notebooks, half a hundred of which accumulated over the course of years, and for a long time publishing them was not under consideration. But then the regularity of the activity and the rich diversity of the notes tempted me to make them available to friends, who, in turn, recommended that they be published.

Reaching the decision was facilitated by an experience that will be familiar to anyone who has kept a notebook for a longer period of time. Bit by bit, the notebook itself steps in as director and decides what the succession of observations should include. So there is a doorkeeper who exerts a subtle censorship, barely noticeable to the writer, that prevents one from being able to write anything one chooses. The entry must first overcome the threshold which the notebook has set. This results in a continuity of motives and impulses that can persist for a long time and is not

necessarily more obvious to the writer than to the reader who approaches.

This objectification took place behind the author's back and exerted a certain pull of its own. In addition to my professional activities as an editor and the amount of daily reading and writing they entailed, I increasingly felt the attraction of unstructured reading. The freedom and spontaneity of it repeatedly enticed me to take new excursions to favorite authors and epochs.

In these readings as well, a certain predetermination is evident. There are books for which a place has been reserved in the reader's mind; at least, the illusion of this is created in retrospect. On the other hand, there are empty spaces in the mind, and one believes that one knows the kind of reading needed to fill them. Sustained reading makes both kinds of intellectual experience possible. In one instance, it makes empty spaces in one's awareness accessible, in another it cleans house in a crowded mind. In each instance, the reader experiences a different story. The following notes are meant to stimulate the one type of experience as well as the other.

Frankfurt, June 2010

Which outweighs the other: moral failure or intellectual failure? In his *Double Life*, Gottfried Benn comments on his correspondence with Klaus Mann, which he reread after the war in connection with calling himself to account. According to his portrayal, at that time, in 1950, the criteria for defining failure had not yet been established. And it was not clear which kind of failure carried more weight. Later, beginning in the mid-1950s, a consensus arose that the failure vis-à-vis National Socialism represented a moral failure. Benn stresses that the moral coloration of the concept of emigration was also acquired only gradually. In 1933, the concept did not exist in Germany: "One knew about political refugees, but emigration as a concept with massive ethical underpinnings, as it was commonly used after 1933, was unknown . . . Consequently, when members of my generation and my intellectual circles left Germany, they were not yet emigrating in the later polemical sense but were instead exercising a personal preference for staying out of harm's way. Presumably, none of them foresaw the exact length and intensity of their stay abroad. It was more a demonstration than an offensive, more avoidance than emigration."

Benn arrives at these observations when he rereads the letter from Klaus Mann. "I hadn't read that letter in 15 years, and when I turned to it again today, I was completely amazed. This twenty-seven-year-old assessed the situation more correctly, had precisely foreseen the way things would develop, and had greater intellectual clarity than I, while my response . . . was by comparison romantic, effusive, and melodramatic. To my credit, however, it did include problems, questions, and inner difficulties which remain acute for all of us, even today." It is the intellectual, not the moral superiority that Benn becomes aware of as he rereads the letter from Klaus Mann.

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While the figures of speech used by the French moralists, which Nietzsche so greatly admired, were intended to lighten the weight of the world, Nietzsche himself used them for the opposite purpose. His goal in every instance was to heighten the intolerability of existence, to make the wound of existence more sensitive. That is

his perspective on suffering. The intention is to create a higher pact between language and life, beyond *Leiden* (suffering) and *Mitleiden* (*mit + leiden*, suffering "along with," i.e., compassion).

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If you want to evaluate my generation's relationship to Walter Benjamin, you must expand the calculation to include the number of people who gained academic titles by writing papers on him—a man who was denied postdoctoral academic qualifications—or even those who wrote their postdoctoral theses on his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the book that sealed his departure from the academe. There can be no doubt that this represents a lack of tact toward the venerated author, even though the respective individuals may well have persuaded themselves that they were taking revenge for him on the institution of academia. In the process, however, this generation has not delivered an elaboration of Benjamin's ideas because it adopted them somewhat mimetically. Rolf Tiedemann turned illustrating Benjamin through Benjamin into a discipline of its own, which must disturb us all the more as Benjamin had a manic sensitivity about the borrowing of his thoughts.

With respect to Ernst Bloch's book, *Traces*, Benjamin claimed that the traces were those which his own thinking had left behind on Bloch. According to a report by Soma Morgenstern, he remarked of Adorno (known at the time as Theodor Wiesengrund), "He follows me into my very dreams," and "Did I ever tell you that Teddy Wiesengrund used a chapter from one of my books to acquire his postdoctoral teaching qualifications—from a professor here in Frankfurt who had failed *me*?"

Calling his friendships and disappointments to witness, Gerhard Scholem bears up as a figure of integrity, a person who was loyal to Benjamin through all the ups and downs, even when he disagreed with him. In my generation of Benjamin admirers, Scholem's sober voice has found only the faintest resonance, for he didn't mince words when it came to Benjamin's mistakes and blunders, such as his move toward Communism or his submissive attitude toward Brecht. Scholem

thereby violated the consensus of those who wanted only one thing: to agree with Benjamin in every area. For this, they paid the price of incomprehensibility.

Benjamin's reception is an example of the way reception penetrates the inner world of the receiver, reshapes it, and ultimately buries the origin of that which has been received. While the veneration of Benjamin strives to make reparation for that which went amiss in German-Jewish relations, it serves as the very confirmation that the relationship—and not merely the so-called German-Jewish symbiosis—had failed long before the National Socialists came to power.

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Montesquieu warned about the moralization of politics: "It is pointless to accuse statecraft of standing in contradiction to morality, reason, and justice. At best, such sermonizing elicits a general nodding of heads, but it changes no one." What makes morality unsuitable for politics is its ability to create general agreement. It anticipates a unity to which politics can only aspire.

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According to Carl Schmitt, no human thought is safe from reinterpretation. This holds true for one's own thoughts as well. They are infinitely adaptable, and one must therefore protect them from one's own reinterpretations.

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A preview of the Federal Republic of Germany: Since Germans are neither ruled by their own lord nor wish to "live democratically," they should aspire to the "ideal of a well-ordered federal republic that strives forward in undemanding freedom"—as remarked by Johannes von Müller in the year 1787.

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The notion of missing out on westernization was formulated by Ernst Troeltsch in 1922. He argued on behalf of making up for having missed Western Enlightenment and its concepts of natural law and humanity. Contemporaneously, in an essay on *The Brothers Karamazov* and the downfall of Europe, Hermann Hesse was advocating a return to Asia, to the origins and the Faustian mothers—as a rebirth.

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From the beginning, the question that has accompanied the Federal Republic of Germany like no other is that of its ability to withstand stress. As long as it remained a provisional entity, the answer appeared simple: burdensome questions were either to be held at bay or did not fall under its purview. Ever since German reunification, the nation, with its considerable economic power, can no longer be excluded from extraordinary strains and political decisions. As a result, when the Federal Republic avoided making a political decision in the Gulf War—as if it were still the former provisional entity—and sought refuge by providing compensatory services and by expressing a general desire for world peace, it was viewed as a political failure. It had neglected the existential dimension of politics.

This shows that the German national character has undergone a fundamental change. Whereas in earlier times the idea of a commercial society filled Germans with dread, today such a society lies at the root of their identity. After the catastrophes that ensued following the demonization of commercial society, people are now loath to leave its protective shell. It may be classified as an irony of inversion that the Israelis are now reproaching Germans for the commercial mentality that makes them recoil from further commitments, with the result that erstwhile warmongers are now practicing a pacifism which, as some Israelis believe, is no less threatening. Whereas the Israelis are surrounded on all sides by enemies, whom they also identify as such, Germans are inclined to see nothing but friends wherever they look.

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Nietzsche discovered that the concept of decadence can be applied not only to late periods but also to early ones. The Fall of Man presents an example. Decadence lies in wait directly adjacent to the origin. All origins can be interpreted in terms of decline, and can be seen as derived from some other origin. Life itself is indifferent toward rise and decline, it permeates them both.

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On September 19, 1950, Alexandre Kojève wrote to Leo Strauss, "In reality, people only act so that they can talk about it, or hear that their actions are being discussed." The way people see it, this is what accounts for the superiority of their world vis-à-vis nature. Today, the ultimate is to communicate with one another, and to talk about *that*.

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Novelty has long ceased to be what it was at the beginning of the twentieth century—a shock that promised an increase in knowledge. The idea that newness is authentic per se has lost some of its sheen. What once amounted to productive provocation of a customary way of viewing things, has turned into the custom of looking away whenever the promise of something new is held out. Novelty became repetitious the moment it turned into an artistic convention.

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A brochure published by tour boat operator *Weißer Flotte* (White Fleet) in Potsdam extols a trip across Lake Schwielowsee by pointing out that [writer] Theodor Fontane described [the village of] Caputh as "the Chicago of Lake Schwielowsee." Whatever this analogy may have meant at the time, it is hardly illuminating today. Yet there are other trans-Atlantic relationships, even if the brochure's claim that "Albert Schweitzer lived in Caputh until he emigrated" grotesquely confuses Schweitzer with the other, more renowned Albert, namely, Einstein, whose house in

the village can still be visited today. The coordinates of Caputh extend from Chicago to Lambarene, and then back again to Princeton.

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On August 18, 1919, *Red Sword*, the organ of the *Cheka*<sup>2</sup>, reported, "We have the right to do anything." Robespierre and Saint-Just said the same thing as they persecuted the people's hidden enemies who were posing as revolutionaries. Robespierre declared, "Anything that serves the revolution is lawful," and Saint-Just said that "those who act in the spirit of the revolution must have permission to do anything." The formula "we have the right to do anything" can be traced to St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 6:12, "Everything is permissible for me, but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." St. Paul is speaking about one's relationship to dietary laws, which also serve as a prime example that the freedom to do anything can be restricted, first when it involves behaviors that are detrimental, and second when it involuntarily shackles the will.

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During a six-month stay in Poland in 1917, Alexandre Kojève had an epiphany while gazing at a bust of Descartes in the Warsaw library. Descartes and Buddha appeared to him in the form of a single personage. From then on, he searched for the common ground between their two philosophies, discovering it in "auto-compréhension de la pensée," which is to say, the self-perception of the mind. The fact that it was possible to think about thinking proved that it was necessary to conceive of thinking as non-existence. Another reason why Buddhism gained importance for Kojève's efforts regarding the mind's ability to perceive itself, was

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<sup>2</sup> *Trans.:* Abbreviation for *Chrezvychaynaya Komissiya* (Extraordinary All-Russian Commission for Combating Counterrevolution, Speculation, and Sabotage) an early secret police organization in Soviet Russia.

that a European's difficulty understanding Hindu thought was similar to the difficulty one encounters in finding concepts with which to express one's own thinking. This explains the exotic quality of Kojève's philosophical language, which would differentiate his "system" from all other known systems.

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Carl Schmitt's thoughts on the opposition between East and West must be thoroughly reconsidered now that it has come to an end. One of the questions is whether the global antipodes of East and West have disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union, or whether they will translate into a new dialectical tension of comparable magnitude; whether the West can be recognized as the victor at all, or whether its global importance will decline once it ceases to function as one pole of a global antinomy. Opposites pervade a homogenous medium much more deeply than a unilateral force could.

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Georg Brandes, of whom Friedrich Sieburg remarked, "It was because of him that Denmark was called Europe at that time," was the pioneer of comparative literature. In his book entitled *Main Currents in European Literature*, he very aptly characterized comparative literature through its "dual property of bringing foreignness closer to us in such a way that we are able to adopt it, while allowing us to distance ourselves from that which is our own in such a way that we are able to survey it." The comparative approach made entirely novel observations possible, for example, that a country like Denmark was affected by the European revolutionary movement, although not by its consequences; it participated in the reaction without having experienced the action. This perspective creates entirely new literary relationships to reality. In the case of France, Brandes observed that the nation toppled all external forces without ever violating its own literary authorities, and that it used literature to turn tradition on its head, but not literary tradition.

Numbering among his remarkable insights are his comments on the role of emigrant literature as well. Once nationalities began to enter "an uninterrupted exchange of ideas" with one another, around 1800, an emigrant literature arose which stood under the influence of Rousseau. The typical novels of emigrant literature, such as *Adolphe*, *René*, or *Oberman*, followed in Rousseau's tracks and opposed the regime in Paris in the most strident terms. Whereas there, "numbers and sabers," the style of the classical ode in literature, and exact science held sway, here everything revolved around "emotions, dreams, reveries, and reflections." Through Rousseau, emigrant literature retained its connection with the eighteenth century. In post-revolutionary literature overall, the influence of Rousseau alternated with that of Voltaire, with one gaining the upper hand and then the other until the two ultimately merged in terms of their impact.

All of this demonstrates what enormous power literary tradition wielded; it alone survived the revolution unscathed. For Brandes, the characteristic question is: what is new in . . . ? And the answer usually consists of his showing how something old is brought to an end in the example at hand. Literature is gradually divesting itself of the power of tradition, which it once guarded.

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One doesn't know which is more distressing, the letters of the insane Nietzsche, or the lack of responses to them—as if it had simply been a case of passing malaise and of biding one's time. Nonetheless, we do have Strindberg's reply to Nietzsche's letter of December 31, 1888, which he had signed as "Nietzsche Caesar." Nietzsche wanted to say something about Strindberg's novella—"it sounds like a gunshot"—but then continued, "I have summoned a council of princes to Rome, I want to execute the young Emperor by firing squad. *Auf Wiedersehen!* (until we meet again) For we will meet again . . . *Une seule condition: Divorçons* (under one condition: let us get divorced) . . ." Strindberg's reply is grandiose. From the date to the signature, he responds entirely in Latin—"Litteras tuas non sine *perturbatione accepi et tibi gratias ago*" (It was not without agitation that I received your letter, and I thank you for it.)—and in Greek (using Greek letters), "*Thelo,*

*thelo manenai!*" (I want, I want to be mad!) But the way he signed his name is not to be outdone: "Strindberg (*Deus optimus maximus*)" (The best, the highest God). How close to insanity must one feel to send a greeting like that to a madman?

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Benjamin Constant's novel *Adolphe* represents the interment of Romanticism by Romanticism itself. The Romantic disposition founders on society; the emotions are not able to cope with it. "Society is too powerful, it manifests in too many forms. The indifferent display a bustle of admirable activity so that they can function as troublemakers in the name of morality and cause damage as avid defenders of virtue." The fervor, the erotic passion that was able to rend the fabric of convention and indifference in the eighteenth century, lays down its arms before the new society.

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Günther Anders reports that he read *Mein Kampf* in 1928 and was teased for it by his friends, who "idiotically referred to [Hitler] merely as 'the painter.'" He was the only person in his circles to acknowledge this "base, malicious, hateful, not even semi-educated, ceremonious, rhetorically rousing, and unquestionably highly intelligent book." Of his impressions upon reading it, he later wrote: "So I was aware that this man said what he meant and meant what he said. And he expressed himself with such vulgarity that the vulgar would find him irresistible; he would even make the non-vulgar turn vulgar and sweep them off their feet."

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The core concept of [Oswald] Spengler's cultural morphology is the concept of pseudomorphosis, to which he devotes the section entitled *Historical Pseudomorphoses* in volume two. According to this idea, everything that wells up from the older levels of the soul is cast "into molds which are not their own; young feelings stiffen into elderly practices," and their inability to mold themselves makes

their "hatred of the distant power grow to monstrous proportions." Everything that exists in this fashion is therefore artificial and concealed behind a mask when we encounter it. As a consequence, the object is to venture a guess about its "inner form" which has been "falsified through the external." One of Spengler's examples pertains to Alexandria and Beirut, and the immigration of everything that was Magian in origin and spirit into the forms of Greek philosophy and Roman jurisprudence: "It is written down in the classical languages, pressed into literary forms which are alien and long ossified, and falsified by the senile thinking of a civilization founded on an entirely different structure."

The critical word is "falsified." If one views things in terms of their origins, one can consider all tradition to be falsification because it is based on misunderstandings and reinterpretations. Spengler saw Petrine Russia in its then current form as having been "forced into a false and artificial history that the ancient Russian spirit was simply incapable of understanding." Literature, with all of its intellectualized problems and conflicts about above and below, the "uprooted peasantry, with all the metaphysical sorrow, anxiety and misery that Dostoyevsky experienced along with it," Tolstoy with his hatred of a Europe, "from which he could not free himself, hating it in himself, hating himself, and thereby becoming the father of Bolshevism."

For Spengler, the difference between Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy became the key to the pseudomorphosis of the Russia, which Peter the Great had forced onto a European trajectory. The fact that he saw the Bolsheviks as part of Tolstoy's line and not Dostoyevsky's was critical to Spengler's prognosis for the Russian Revolution. In his eyes, the Bolsheviks belonged to the upper level of society, a society that did not recognize them as such. In consequence, they were imbued with hatred for the lowly. Yet they were intellectually incapable of recognizing Dostoyevsky as "their actual enemy." Nor did the revolution acquire its explosive force through its impotent hatred of the intelligentsia, but rather through "the townless citizenry, its yearning for a life form of its own, a religion of its own, and its own prospective future."

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Spengler claimed to have realized in 1911 that "a political problem cannot be understood in terms of politics itself." This prompted his idea of viewing one particular area of life from the perspective of another. For example, one might relate the forms of the visual arts to the art of war or public administration, and thereby determine "the profound relationship between the political and mathematical structures of the same culture, between its religious and technical views, and between the forms of its economic activity and those of its intellectual knowledge." But then this vision invalidates itself when Spengler undertakes to demonstrate the "dependence of the most modern theories of physics and chemistry upon the mythological ideas of our Germanic forebears." Whoops!

His morphological idea is related to the disintegration of a unified style within the arts, which from that point on could only be grasped in terms of a more fundamental, underlying structural unity. This finding was applied to history, even though history is a heterogeneous continuum and devoid of structure. As a result, history is examined with respect to its style, and the primary phenomenon of history is the shaping and reshaping of foreign elements through civilization. That which is foreign becomes the ur-phenomenon. Spengler's cultural morphology is gnosis.

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The inclination toward prognostication is linked to a deficiency in terms of one's perception of reality. The person needs the simplification that prediction of the future provides in order to see anything at all. Even Spengler acquired a prognosticative manner as a way of giving contour to the present. To achieve that, he had to distance himself significantly and view the present "as something infinitely remote and foreign."

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Mistaking art and politics, viewing art in terms of politics and politics in terms of art, is one of the characteristics of German cultural pessimism during the last decade of the nineteenth century. During that period, the *Blätter für die Kunst* (Journal for Art) and the so-called "Rembrandt German"<sup>3</sup> marked the emergence of a movement that perceived itself as a counter-movement to realpolitik and did not differentiate between intellectual facts and historical-political ones. It entailed a kind of shadow politics that wanted to render politics superfluous using the vehicle of art. They were the politics of men who saw themselves drawn into the political arena suddenly and almost against their will. Spengler, too, reacted in this manner during his moment of panic over the Agadir Crisis, as he vaulted from the philosophy of art directly into political prognosticism and the critique of political style.

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Nietzsche was assigned a position halfway between an original and a cheap copy because of the philologists. They attempted, with philological rectitude, to extricate him from his association with fascism by constructing a textual fabric containing no message that referenced anything beyond its own immanent linkages. As an unintended by-product of this philological procedure, Nietzsche's originality was transformed into something highly mediated. And yet there can be no doubt that Nietzsche sought nothing more intently than an opportunity to break out of this game and find a message that was genuinely his own. If one does not wish to write this off as a monstrous self-misunderstanding, one must search for his originality in his philosophical intentions, his Socratic ambition. Thus, the philology of Nietzsche forces us to pose anew the question that it strove to eliminate.

Nietzsche himself was abundantly clear on the matter: "One becomes more and more cautious in expressing priority claims. Formulating an entirely new world view is certainly a great accomplishment, but it is an even greater one to hammer it

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<sup>3</sup> *Trans.*: soubriquet for art historian (August) Julius Langbehn (1851 – 1907) who became known through his book *Rembrandt As an Educator*.

in such a way that sparks fly in all directions. The wisdom of silent reflection that remains cloistered in the study, has little claim to appreciation within the science of history." It seems that he himself does not yet know what he will choose. In the end, he attempted to do both at the same time: to proclaim a *weltanschauung* as the blow of a hammer—his so-called theory of the will to power. Nietzsche believed that a *weltanschauung* lay hidden under the blows of the hammer. The *Will to Power* amounts to the rumor of a philosophy and has therefore proven more effective than any *weltanschauung*.

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As early as 1941, Karl Reinhardt announced in his lecture *Die Klassische Philologie und das Klassische* (Classical Philology and Classicism) that, "there is no place for Nietzsche in the history of philology." His justification is that in Nietzsche's case there is too great a lack of positive achievement. Even the Dionysian—"to the extent it exists for the field of philology"—was no discovery of Nietzsche's. Experts, primarily archaeologists, had "long known more about the subject than Nietzsche himself." Even [Erwin] Rohde's *Psyche* could have been written without him. Instead, according to Reinhardt, Nietzsche deserved to be accorded "even higher standing within German humanism, should the history of that field ever be written." His familiarity with antiquity was akin to Goethe's, Montaigne's, or Winckelmann's, and included a "genius's capacity to misunderstand," which is the surest indication that one truly leads one's life in communication with ancient times. For Reinhardt, the fact that Nietzsche remained untouched by the scholarship of his day was the greatest achievement of his humanism and the precondition for "the unhampered nature of his observations." As an example of this, Reinhardt cited the "easy-living Gods." In his view, that was "the highest embellishment ever bestowed upon the world—while feeling how difficult it actually is to lead one's life."

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Nietzsche translated the opposition between Christian and Heathen into the opposition between optimistic and pessimistic. On the differentiation between Christian and Heathen he remarked, "it does not actually separate them." Rather, the "primal question" was one of "pessimism or optimism toward existence." In Nietzsche's work, this primal question contains a lingering echo of the differentiation which he himself termed *uneigentlich* (unactual). Thus, in his opposition of the Dionysian and the Apollonian we discern the scandal of Christianity's negation of existence.

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The grand step taken by Nietzsche lay in viewing the Greeks as problematical. The Greeks no longer represented life's deepest justification; instead, they themselves were in need of justification.

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Even before neurosis was identified as an illness, Nietzsche was already asking whether there might perhaps be something like "neuroses of health," through which Modernity, with its striving for freedom from pain, distinguishes itself from the Greeks.

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Nietzsche's *Attempt at Self Criticism* is important because it defines how Nietzsche is to be written about after Nietzsche. This text became a model that we can still perceive long thereafter, for example, in Thomas Mann or Gottfried Benn, who remained loyal to Nietzsche's authorship, as it were, and attempted to speak of Nietzsche in Nietzschean terms. Here, Nietzsche employed Rousseau's strategy of taking personal control of posterity and the way it read him, by offering a self-interpretation that undermined the way he was usually read.

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Nietzsche's preliminary research for *The Birth of Tragedy* contains outstanding observations on knowledge and action. Knowledge kills: "Complete knowledge kills action; indeed, if knowledge references itself, then it will also kill itself." This proves that it is not life-promoting. Knowledge is infinite: "Knowledge is an unending spiral. At every moment it is applied, an eternity begins. As a result, action can never arise." Science misleads us about its purpose: "The purpose of science is the destruction of the world. As the process unfolds, however, the initial effect is that of small doses of opium, which is to say, increased affirmation of the world. In politics, for example, we now find ourselves at this stage." What art inflicts on the state, science inflicts on art: "The task of art is to destroy the state. This, too, happened in Greece. Afterwards, science eliminates art as well."

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