

Friedrich Nietzsche on Germany's Victory over France and the "Cultural Philistine" (1873–76)

Abstract

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) had a tremendous impact on German philosophy in the nineteenth century and was one of its most original, provocative thinkers. After studying theology and philology, he was offered a professorship in Basel in 1869, at the mere age of 24. He briefly participated in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 as a military medic. In 1879, he was forced to give up his professorship in Basel because of health problems (he suffered from poor eyesight and frequent migraines). In 1889, he had a mental breakdown (brought on by syphilis) from which he never fully recovered. The excerpt below is from *Untimely Meditations* [*Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*], a series of essays that Nietzsche wrote shortly after German unification. This 1873 essay is entitled "David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer" ["David Strauss. Der Bekenner und Schriftsteller"]. Strauss (1808–1874) was a Protestant theologian and philosopher; in 1872, he had published the book *The Old Faith and the New* [*Der alte und der neue Glaube*]. Nietzsche mocked Strauss, grouping him with the many cultural Philistines [*Bildungsphilister*] who celebrated the recent war for what they perceived as its positive impact on German art and morals. What irked Nietzsche most of all was Strauss's smugness. In this essay, Nietzsche combines irony and outrage, arguing that Germany's military victory had nothing to do with culture and that a unified German culture simply did not exist, despite protestations to the contrary by writers of German prose, verse, and song. German culture, he declares below, was nothing more than a "riotous jumble of all styles." Nietzsche also strives, from the very first line of this essay, to identify the "evil and dangerous" consequences of the war, particularly as they were understood—or, rather, not understood—by philistine Germans.

Source

"David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer"

I.

Public opinion in Germany seems strictly to forbid any allusion to the evil and dangerous consequences of a war, more particularly when the war in question has been a victorious one. Those writers, therefore, command a more ready attention who, regarding this public opinion as final, proceed to vie with each other in their jubilant praise of the war, and of the powerful influences it has brought to bear upon morality, culture, and art. Yet it must be confessed that a great victory is a great danger. Human nature bears a triumph less easily than a defeat; indeed, it might even be urged that it is simpler to gain a victory of this sort than to turn it to such account that it may not ultimately prove a serious rout.

But of all evil results due to the last contest with France, the most deplorable, perhaps, is that widespread and even universal error of public opinion and of all who think publicly, that German culture was also victorious in the struggle, and that it should now, therefore, be decked with garlands, as a fit recognition of such extraordinary events and successes. This error is in the highest degree pernicious: not because it is an error,—for there are illusions which are both salutary and blessed,—but because it threatens to convert our victory into a signal defeat. A defeat? —I should say rather, into the uprooting of the "German Mind" for the benefit of the "German Empire."

Even supposing that the fight had been between the two cultures, the standard for the value of the victor

would still be a very relative one, and, in any case, would certainly not justify such exaggerated triumph or self-glorification. For, in the first place, it would be necessary to ascertain the worth of the conquered culture. This might be very little; in which case, even if the victory had involved the most glorious display of arms, it would still offer no warrant for inordinate rapture.

Even so, however, there can be no question, in our case, of the victory of German culture; and for the simple reason, that French culture remains as heretofore, and that we depend upon it as heretofore. It did not even help towards the success of our arms. Severe military discipline, natural bravery and sustaining power, the superior generalship, unity and obedience in the rank and file—in short, factors which have nothing to do with culture, were instrumental in making us conquer an opponent in whom the most essential of these factors were absent. The only wonder is, that precisely what is now called “culture” in Germany did not prove an obstacle to the military operations which seemed vitally necessary to a great victory. Perhaps, though, this was only owing to the fact that this “thing” which dubs itself “culture” saw its advantage, for once, in keeping in the background.

If however, it be permitted to grow and to spread, if it be spoilt by the flattering and nonsensical assurance that it has been victorious,—then, as I have said, it will have the power to extirpate German mind, and, when that is done, who knows whether there will still be anything to be made out of the surviving German body!

Provided it were possible to direct that calm and tenacious bravery which the German opposed to the pathetic and spontaneous fury of the Frenchman, against the inward enemy, against the highly suspicious and, at all events, unnative “cultivation” which, owing to a dangerous misunderstanding, is called “culture” in Germany, then all hope of a really genuine German “culture”—the reverse of that “cultivation”—would not be entirely lost. For the Germans have never known any lack of clear-sighted and heroic leaders, though these, often enough, probably, have lacked Germans. But whether it be possible to turn German bravery into a new direction seems to me to become ever more and more doubtful; for I realise how fully convinced every one is that such a struggle and such bravery are no longer requisite; on the contrary, that most things are regulated as satisfactorily as they possibly can be—or, at all events, that everything of moment has long ago been discovered and accomplished: in a word, that the seed of culture is already sown everywhere, and is now either shooting up its fresh green blades, or, here and there, even bursting forth into luxuriant blossom. In this sphere, not only happiness but ecstasy reigns supreme. I am conscious of this ecstasy and happiness, in the ineffable, truculent assurance of German journalists and manufacturers of novels, tragedies, poems, and histories (for it must be clear that these people belong to one category), who seem to have conspired to improve the leisure and ruminative hours—that is to say, “the intellectual lapses”—of the modern man, by bewildering him with their printed paper. Since the war, all is gladness, dignity, and self-consciousness in this merry throng. After the startling successes of German culture, it regards itself, not only as approved and sanctioned, but almost as sanctified. It therefore speaks with gravity, affects to apostrophise the German People, and issues complete works, after the manner of the classics; nor does it shrink from proclaiming in those journals which are open to it some few of its adherents as new German classical writers and model authors. It might be supposed that the dangers of such an abuse of success would be recognised by the more thoughtful and enlightened among cultivated Germans; or, at least, that these would feel how painful is the comedy that is being enacted around them: for what in truth could more readily inspire pity than the sight of a cripple strutting like a cock before a mirror, and exchanging complacent glances with his reflection! But the “scholar” caste willingly allow things to remain as they are, and are too much concerned with their own affairs to busy themselves with the care of the German mind. Moreover, the units of this caste are too thoroughly convinced that their own scholarship is the ripest and most perfect fruit of the age—in fact, of all ages—to see any necessity for a care of German culture in general; since, in so far as they and the legion of their brethren are concerned, preoccupations of this order have everywhere been, so to speak, surpassed. The more conscientious observer, more

particularly if he be a foreigner, cannot help noticing withal that no great disparity exists between that which the German scholar regards as his culture and that other triumphant culture of the new German classics, save in respect of the quantum of knowledge. Everywhere, where knowledge and not ability, where information and not art, hold the first rank,—everywhere, therefore, where life bears testimony to the kind of culture extant, there is now only one specific German culture—and this is the culture that is supposed to have conquered France?

The contention appears to be altogether too preposterous. It was solely to the more extensive knowledge of German officers, to the superior training of their soldiers, and to their more scientific military strategy, that all impartial Judges, and even the French nation, in the end, ascribed the victory. Hence, if it be intended to regard German erudition as a thing apart, in what sense can German culture be said to have conquered? In none whatsoever; for the moral qualities of severe discipline, of more placid obedience, have nothing in common with culture: these were characteristic of the Macedonian army, for instance, despite the fact that the Greek soldiers were infinitely more cultivated. To speak of German scholarship and culture as having conquered, therefore, can only be the outcome of a misapprehension, probably resulting from the circumstance that every precise notion of culture has now vanished from Germany.

Culture is, before all things, the unity of artistic style, in every expression of the life of a people. Abundant knowledge and learning, however, are not essential to it, nor are they a sign of its existence; and, at a pinch, they might coexist much more harmoniously with the very opposite of culture—with barbarity: that is to say, with a complete lack of style, or with a riotous jumble of all styles. But it is precisely amid this riotous jumble that the German of to-day subsists; and the serious problem to be solved is: how, with all his learning, he can possibly avoid noticing it; how, into the bargain, he can rejoice with all his heart in his present “culture”? For everything conduces to open his eyes for him—every glance he casts at his clothes, his room, his house; every walk he takes through the streets of his town; every visit he pays to his art-dealers and to his trader in the articles of fashion. In his social intercourse he ought to realise the origin of his manners and movements; in the heart of our art-institutions, the pleasures of our concerts, theatres, and museums, he ought to become apprised of the super- and juxtaposition of all imaginable styles. The German heaps up around him the forms, colours, products, and curiosities of all ages and zones, and thereby succeeds in producing that garish newness, as of a country fair, which his scholars then proceed to contemplate and to define as “Modernism per se”; and there he remains, squatting peacefully, in the midst of this conflict of styles. But with this kind of culture, which is, at bottom, nothing more nor less than a phlegmatic insensibility to real culture, men cannot vanquish an enemy, least of all an enemy like the French, who, whatever their worth may be, do actually possess a genuine and productive culture, and whom, up to the present, we have systematically copied, though in the majority of cases without skill.

Even supposing we had really ceased copying them, it would still not mean that we had overcome them, but merely that we had lifted their yoke from our necks. Not before we have succeeded in forcing an original German culture upon them can there be any question of the triumph of German culture. Meanwhile, let us not forget that in all matters of form we are, and must be, just as dependent upon Paris now as we were before the war; for up to the present there has been no such thing as an original German culture.

We all ought to have become aware of this, of our own accord. Besides, one of the few who had the right to speak to Germans in terms of reproach publicly drew attention to the fact. “We Germans are of yesterday,” Goethe once said to Eckermann. “True, for the last hundred years we have diligently cultivated ourselves, but a few centuries may yet have to run their course before our fellow countrymen become permeated with sufficient intellectuality and higher culture to have it said of them, *it is a long time since they were barbarians.*”

Source of English translation: *Thoughts out of Season. Part One. David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer. Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, by Friedrich Nietzsche. Translated by Anthony M. Ludovici. *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*. The first complete and authorised English translation. Edited by Dr Oscar Levy. Volume Four. T.N. Foulis 13 & 15 Frederick Street. Edinburgh and London, 1910, pp. 3–10. Available online at Project Gutenberg at:
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/51710/51710-h/51710-h.htm>

Source of original German text: Friedrich Nietzsche, “David Strauss. Der Bekenner und Schriftsteller,” in Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (1873–76). Available online at: <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb11164045?page=,1>. Original German text also reprinted in *Nietzsches Schriften oder der furor philosophicus*, edited and introduced by Ralf Krause, CD-ROM. Berlin: heptagon, 2001, pp. 155–60.

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