

JAMES W. HILLESHEIM

University of Kansas

The Scholar as Educator? A Nietzschean View

Today's educators are witness to a paradox: in the midst of scientific successes, technical wonders and scholarly advances the very institution that has made all this possible — the modern research-oriented university — is increasingly the object of criticism and even of outright physical attack. The health of the university is being questioned by an ever widening audience. However, for those who were perceptive enough to read them, the signs of malignancy have long been present. Substitute "modern" for "German" and the following lines by Nietzsche might well be thought to flow from the pen of any one of a number of contemporary critics of higher learning in America:

Here and there I come into contact with German universities: what an atmosphere prevails among their scholars, what desolate spirituality — and how contented and lukewarm it has become! It would be a profound misunderstanding if one wanted to adduce German science against me. . . . For seventeen years I have never tired of calling attention to the *despiritualizing* influence of our current science-industry. The hard helotism to which the tremendous range of the sciences condemns every scholar today is a main reason why those with a fuller, richer, *profounder* disposition no longer find a congenial education and congenial *educators*. There is nothing of which our culture suffers more than of the superabundance of pretentious jobbers and fragments of humanity; our universities are, against their will, the real hothouses of this kind of withering of the instincts of the spirit.¹

If one agrees, as this writer does, with Nietzsche's general diagnosis, there is still the task of establishing the specific etiology and then, hopefully, of providing a remedy. The illness which cripples our universities is of unknown magnitude. We do know that its manifestations are numerous and its causes manifold, that nothing less than a complete medical history is necessary to fully comprehend the malady. But preliminary to such a full-scale undertaking, a thorough analysis of each of the diverse components which constitute the body academic would seem to be in order. An especially fruitful point of focus is the faculty — the scholarly community upon which the life-force of the university so dearly depends.

¹*Twilight of the Idols*, "What the Germans Lack," 3. *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated and selected with an Introduction, Preface and Notes by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), pp. 507-508. In this and the forthcoming footnotes the numbers immediately following the titles of Nietzsche's works refer to chapter and/or section divisions.

In the following pages we shall first trace Nietzsche's careful but merciless dissection of the scholar, then indicate the direction in which the scholar must turn if he is to cure himself, and in conclusion, illustrate the harmful effect of the scholarly ideal by showing how it corrupts teachers and students of philosophy.

THE DISSECTION OF THE SCHOLAR

In the name of objectivity and scientific rigor university scholars consider it their duty to view the world as a series of intellectual problems, carefully divorced from their own passions and instincts. The result being that "scholarship [*Wissenschaft*] has the same relationship to wisdom as righteousness has to holiness: it is cold and dry, it is loveless and knows no deep feelings of inadequacy or longing."²

The danger, as Nietzsche sees it, is that the conditions which promote scholarship hinder self-surpassing [*Selbstüberwindung*] and the cultivation of superior men.³ A promising young man who embarks on a scholarly career, who lives and works with reputable scholars, will soon ossify into a bloodless specimen of academic respectability. "If one accustoms oneself to translating every experience into a dialectic play of question and answer and into a purely intellectual matter, it is astonishing in how short a time man can wither up at such activity and become a bunch of rattling bones."⁴ But why, then, would anyone want to join the ranks of scholarship? To answer this question Nietzsche suggests that we adopt the scholar's technique of bloodless dissection — only in this case the scalpel will be applied to the scholar himself, to discover what motives, values and desires lure and chain him to the academic life. As we proceed with the dissection it will become clear that the scholar "consists of a confused tangle of very different motives and stimuli,"⁵ that he possesses certain valuable traits and skills but that these are usually wasted or misemployed because of a distorted hierarchy of values.

Three General Traits

There are three general traits that are regularly to be seen among scholars: first, "a strong and ever-increasing inquisitiveness, the search of intellectual adventure."⁶ In the scholar this impulse leads him to

²*Schopenhauer as Educator*, A Gateway Edition, translated with Notes by James W. Hillesheim and Malcolm R. Simpson, Introduction by Eliseo Vivas (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1965), 6, p. 71. Cf. Zarathustra's proclamation that "if you seize them [the scholars] with your hands they raise a cloud of dust like flour bags, involuntarily; but who could guess that their dust comes from grain and from the yellow delight of summer fields?" *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, "On Scholars." *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 237.

³The terms "superior man," "genius" and "philosopher" are used by Nietzsche to indicate the creative, self-surpassing individual. In his later words Nietzsche employs the term *Übermensch* or "superman."

⁴*Schopenhauer as Educator*, 6, p. 71.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁶*Ibid.*

whatever is "new and rare in contrast to the old and boring."⁷ A second trait is "a certain inclination to dialectical sleuthing, the huntsman's joy in cunning, foxy ways of thought, so that it is not actually truth which is sought but rather the seeking itself, and the chief pleasure is found in a cunning encircling and an artful kill."⁸ A third general trait is "the compulsion to contradict; the scholar's personality will assert itself in opposition to all others; battle becomes a joy, and personal victory is the goal, whereas the fight for truth is only the pretext."⁹

One might well remark that inquisitiveness, dialectical sleuthing and contest are necessary qualities in Nietzsche's image of the educated man. True. But in the scholar these impulses lack proper direction: they are not being guided by the supreme goals of self-surpassing and truth-seeking. Instead of pursuing the truth wherever it may lead, the scholar pursues only those particular truths that he feels will bring him recognition, income, security, promotion and other personal benefits. The scholar inquires not out of a passion for truth, but "out of servility to particular ruling people, castes, opinions, churches and governments, because he feels that he is advancing himself by bringing 'truth' to their side."¹⁰

Twelve Additional Traits

In addition to the three general traits just described there are several other qualities to be found in the scholar. These qualities occur "less regularly, but often enough."¹¹ First, there is respectability and a reverence for old or accepted opinions. However, "this respectability is of little worth and seldom fruitful even for scholarship, since it is a slave to convention and is in the habit of telling the truth only in simple matters or in *adiaphoris*; for in these cases it is easier to tell the truth than to keep it quiet."¹² The scholar tends to resist anything that is really new, anything that "necessitates a re-learning."¹³ Nietzsche argues that "every generation of scholars has an involuntary standard for *permissible* sagacity."¹⁴ If any scholar should be imprudent enough to suggest an hypothesis which challenges the current standard, the hypothesis is not only doubted but "used as a basis for an attack on the scholar's reputation."¹⁵ A good example of this is the Copernican hypothesis, which "was opposed by a respectability which had common sense and custom on its side."¹⁶

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Schopenhauer as Educator*, p. 73. Speaking through the mouth of Zarathustra Nietzsche comments on his experience among scholars: "I have moved from the house of the scholars and I even banged the door behind me. My soul sat hungry at their table too long; I am not, like them, trained to pursue knowledge

Second, the scholar has a highly developed "sharpsightedness for near objects . . ." ¹⁷ This trait, which is almost universal among academic and scientific laborers, is unfortunately "linked with a severe myopia for distant and general objects." ¹⁸ If we look carefully we find that

the scholar's field of vision is usually very small, and his eyes must be held close to the object. If he wants to move from one point which he has just investigated to another, he must move his whole seeing apparatus. He analyzes a picture into sections, like someone who uses opera glasses to see the stage, and sees now a hand, now a piece of clothing, but nothing complete. He never sees those single sections connectedly, he only infers their interrelationship; therefore, he has no strong impression of anything general. For example, he judges a piece of writing by single passages, sentences or errors because he is incapable of seeing it as a whole; he would be tempted to maintain that an oil painting is a confused heap of blotches. ¹⁹

Third, the scholar is generally of a "sober and conventional" ²⁰ disposition. This trait will often express itself as an interest in historical studies, whereby the scholar receives special delight in discovering his own commonplace motives in the events of the past. "A mole is happiest in a mole-hill." ²¹ Because his own motives and preferences are shamelessly commonplace he is "incapable of understanding and valuing what is rare, great and uncommon, that is, what is important and essential." ²²

Fourth, the scholar has a detached, cold, hard, even cruel quality which allows him "to perform vivisections." ²³ Thus he is able to venture into "realms where other's hearts quake." ²⁴ This may appear to be a sign of courage, but in reality it is simply an indication of the scholar's "poverty and dryness of feeling." ²⁵ The emotions having been allowed to wither away, the scholar "has no idea of the suffering which accompanies many kinds of knowledge." ²⁶ People may think that he "is audacious, but he is not — not any more than the mule which does not know dizziness." ²⁷

Another characteristic is that by and large scholars are humble and modest. They show "little self-esteem" ²⁸ or pride. "Even though they are condemned to obscurity, they have no sense of sacrifice or wasted effort." ²⁹ There is no sense of sacrifice because they "seem to know that deep down in them they are creatures that crawl, not fly." ³⁰

as if it were nutcracking. I love freedom and the air over the fresh earth; rather would I sleep on ox hides than on their decorums and respectabilities." *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, "On Scholars." *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 236-237.

¹⁷*Schopenhauer as Educator*, 6, p. 73.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 74.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

Sixth, scholars are followers, faithful imitators of "their teachers and leaders."³¹ Scholars are thankful for guidance and desirous to help their academic superiors, for they realize that "it is only through them that they gained entrance into the worthy halls of scholarship, into which they would never have come had they followed their own way."³² A curious consequence is that with so many young graduates pressing to be let into the academic ranks, "whoever opens up a new field, where even lesser minds can work with some success, becomes famous in a short time."³³ However, this is a mixed blessing for the graduate's teacher, for in the process of imitation "his faults appear immoderately large and exaggerated. The master's virtues are thus correspondingly diminished because they occur in such petty individuals."³⁴

William James remarked that habit is the great flywheel of society. Nowhere is this more evident than in the society of scholars who, lacking ideas, routinely progress in their career out of sheer "force of habit."³⁵

Such persons are collectors, explainers and compilers of *indices* and herbaria; they study and do research in the field for the simple reason that it does not occur to them that there are other fields. Their industry has something of the huge stupidity of the forces of gravity.³⁶

Eighth, the scholar pursues his work out of a fear of boredom. While the true educator desires nothing so much as leisure, "the common scholar avoids it because he does not know what to do with it."³⁷ The scholar's primary means of escape is the printed page.

Ninth, the scholar is faced, as are most laborers, with the problem of earning a living, "that is, the famous 'borborygmus of an empty stomach.'"³⁸ However, it is difficult to set limits to one's material needs, and soon the scholar knows no higher goal than that of his own economic advantage. His life and studies are then controlled by his desire to earn as much money as possible:

Truth is served when it is able to promote one quickly to good salaries and higher positions, or at least to win the favor of those who have bread and honors to confer. But only *this* truth is served. Therefore, a line can be drawn between the profitable truths, which are served by many, and the unprofitable truths, to which very few are devoted.³⁹

A "rarer but higher motive than the last, yet not uncommon,"⁴⁰ is the scholar's respect for his colleagues and his willingness to abide by the rules of the academic game:

³¹*Ibid.*

³²*Ibid.*, p. 74.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75. Could this possibly include the field labeled "Foundations of Education?"

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 76.

All the members of the guild most jealously watch over each other so that the truth, on which so much hangs — bread, office and honor — might be baptized in the name of its discoverer. One pays strict tribute to the other man for the truth that he has found in order to demand the tribute back in case one should discover a truth himself. Mistakes and errors are noisily exploded so that the number of competitors does not become too large; yet sometimes even the real truth is exploded, so for a short time at least the way is cleared for stubborn and brazen errors.⁴¹

Somewhat less frequent is vanity. The vain scholar “wants, if possible, to have a field all to himself, and for this reason he chooses curiosities, especially when they involve unusual expenditures, travels, excavations and numerous connections in various countries.”⁴² His satisfaction comes not from financial remuneration but from the honor and recognition given him as an expert and specialist.

A twelfth characteristic to be found in the scholar is the play-instinct. “He finds delight in looking for and solving knotty problems in the sciences, taking care not to exert himself too much lest he lose the spirit of the game.”⁴³ It is true that the scholar’s “playfulness” is a device for avoiding depth, but it does have the saving virtue of allowing him to perceive things that the overly somber, “professional scholar, with his laboriously creeping eyes, never sees.”⁴⁴

WHAT THE SCHOLAR LACKS

Considering this motley collection of desirable as well as all-too-human traits that characterize the scholar, what judgment are we to make as to his worth? Nietzsche’s conclusion is that at his best the scholar is a harmless drudge, and at his worst a corrupter of youth. The reason for the unfruitful nature of the scholar is not that he possesses all-too-human traits and animalistic impulses (for the genius-superman also possess these) but that he lacks the axiological orientation which would lead him on to more creative endeavors. The scholar’s life is not being guided by the ultimate aim of self-surpassing. He has given up or never joined in the struggle to produce conditions of challenge favorable to the genesis of genius. If the scholar heeds the call, “Become who you are!” he will cease to be a scholar and become a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, a true educator. As it stands the scholar is simply “too ignorant of the goal of culture.”⁴⁵

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 76. Scholars may stick closely together, but it is not without suspicion and malice. In the words of Zarathustra: “They watch each other closely and mistrustfully. Inventive in petty cleverness, they wait for those whose knowledge walks on lame feet: like spiders they wait. I have always seen them carefully preparing poison; and they always put on gloves of glass to do it. They also know how to play with loaded dice; and I have seen them play so eagerly that they sweated.” *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, II, “On Scholars.” *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp. 237-238.

⁴³*Schopenhauer as Educator*, 6, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 78.

Pedagogically the scholar lacks the one trait most necessary to learning — i.e. passion. To be effective as a teacher or as a learner one must be on fire with the passion to know and the desire to create a just culture (i.e. a culture which values individual great men). Nietzsche asserts that “a spark from the fire of justice, when it falls into the soul of a scholar, is enough to enflame his whole life and aspirations, to consume and at the same time to purify them, so that he has no more rest and is driven out for good from the luke-warm or frosty mood in which most scholars do their daily work.”⁴⁶

Nietzsche believes that it is of utmost importance not to confuse the scholar with the self-surpassing man. If we fail to keep the two types of men distinct we are in danger of elevating the scholar to the position of serving as our educational ideal. Nietzsche argues that we should not make the error of thinking that one can be *both* a scholar and a creative person: “Geniuses and scholars have at all times been at war.”⁴⁷ Indeed, history teaches us that “very fortunate times neither needed nor knew the scholar; sick and decadent times valued him as the highest and most worthy man and ranked him highly.”⁴⁸

The reaction of the productive thinker to the passionless scholar is expressed in the metaphors of Zarathustra:

I am too hot and burned by my own thoughts; often it nearly takes my breath away. Then I must go out into the open and away from all dusty rooms. But they [the scholars] sit cool in the cool shade: in everything they want to be mere spectators, and they beware of sitting where the sun burns on the steps. Like those who stand in the street and gape at the people who pass by, they too wait and gape at thoughts that others have thought.⁴⁹

THE SCHOLAR AND THE TEACHING OF PHILOSOPHY

Perhaps the best illustration of the corrupting effect of the scholarly ideal can be seen in the teaching of philosophy. Both professor and student suffer when philosophy makes concessions to scholarship. Let us conclude our analysis with a brief account of these harmful effects.

When the ideal of the scholar rules, the philosophy professor is not expected “to be a thinker but at the most an intellectualizer and cerebrater, and above all a learned connoisseur of all early thinkers; he will always be able to tell something about them which his students did not know.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹Thus *Spoke Zarathustra*, II, “On Scholars.” *The Portable Nietzsche*, p. 237.

⁵⁰*Schopenhauer as Educator*, 8, p. 97.

In the hands of the scholar, with his narrow historical interests, his lack of passion and his withered imagination, philosophy prostitutes itself to the *history* of philosophy. Erudition is substituted for insight.⁵¹

Nietzsche counters this scholarly ideal by arguing that "the learned history of the past was never the business of a true philosopher, either in India or in Greece; and a philosophy professor, if he concerns himself with such things, must be content with people saying of him at best: 'He is a n excellent philologist, antiquary, linguist, historian' — but never: 'He is a philosopher.'" ⁵² By this criterion much that passes for philosophy in our institutions of higher learning and in our scholarly journals is not philosophy at all, but merely a display of the academician's delight in "wallowing in strange and twisted opinions."⁵³

If our doubts the extent of the inroads made by the pedants Nietzsche suggests that one look at modern scholarly works dealing with Greek philosophy. Nietzsche cites several reputable nineteenth-century German scholars — Ritters, Brandis and Zeller — as examples of university professors who have nothing better to do than write "horribly boring" texts which spread a "soporific haze" over the genius of the Greeks.⁵⁴ Nietzsche goes so far as to say that "I at least prefer reading Diogenes Laertius to Zeller, because in the former at least the spirit of the ancient philosophers lives, in the latter, however, neither that nor any other spirit lives."⁵⁵ A professor who is more concerned with accurate historical information than with re-creating a living, passionate image of a great thinker has no right to be called an educator.

When we turn to the plight of the philosophy student we see to what extent the scholarly ideal has *prevaded* the colleges and universities. Nietzsche exclaims:

⁵¹That Nietzsche is speaking from personal experience can be seen in the following reflections made late in life on his past academic career: "I saw that it was high time for a little introspection. At once it became appallingly clear to me how much time I had already wasted — how useless, how willful my whole existence as a philologist appeared by the side of my life-task. I was ashamed of this false modesty. . . . Ten years were behind me, during which I had received absolutely no spiritual nourishment, during which I had acquired no useful knowledge, but had forgotten countless things in the pursuit of a hotch-potch of dry-as-dust scholarship. To plow through old Greek metricians, meticulously, half-blind — that was what I had come to!" *Ecce Homo*, "Human, All-too-Human," 3. *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, trans. by Thomas Common, *et al.*, with an Introduction by W. H. Wright (New York: Modern Library, 1954), p. 881.

⁵²*Schopenhauer as Educator*, 8, p. 98.

⁵³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴*Ibid.* Of the three historians cited only Eduard Zeller (1814-1908) is still widely read. Zeller's major writings on the Greeks are currently in print — some even in paperback editions. His *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy* is "recommended reading" in many philosophy classes in this country today.

⁵⁵*Ibid.* Diogenes Laertius, who probably lived in the early third-century A.D., is the author of an extant work titled *Lives of the Philosophers*. This work contains much fascinating information about the private lives of the ancient Greek philosophers. The full thrust of Nietzsche's comparison can only be understood in light of the fact that Diogenes' *Lives* is considered to be unreliable, uncritical, perhaps largely fictional, and of no real philosophical value in itself (as Nietzsche was well aware!).

For heaven's sake, what business have our youths with the history of philosophy? Shall the confusion of opinions discourage them from having opinions of their own? Shall they be trained to join in the jubilation of our wonderful progress? Shall they even learn to hate and despise philosophy? One would almost think the latter was the case if one knew how students have to torture themselves for their philosophy examinations in order to cram into their brains the craziest and sharpest ideas of the human mind together with the greatest and most difficult. The only criticism of a philosophy which is possible, and which also proves something — that of seeing if one can live by it — has never been taught at the universities: but always criticism of words by words. And now let one imagine a youthful and inexperienced mind, in which forty verbal systems and fifty criticisms of the same are stored next to each other in confusion — what wilderness, what chaos, what mockery of the philosophical education! In fact, one is not educated for philosophy, as is admitted, but for a philosophy examination: the usual result being, as is well known, that the person taking the test — an all too severe test! — says to himself with a heavy sigh: "Thank God that I am no philosopher, but a Christian and a citizen of my State!"⁵⁶

In brief, the most harmful consequence of scholars masquerading as philosophers is that "*they make philosophy something ridiculous*"⁵⁷ and thereby insure that students will look with scorn on the highest goal of culture: "the production of philosophical genius."⁵⁸ If the university is to regain its health, if it is to fulfill its function as a promoter of free inquiry, if it is to stimulate youth to plumb the depths of human existence, the ideal of the self-surpassing educator must replace that of the scholar.

⁵⁶*Schopenhauer as Educator*, pp. 98-99.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 99.