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*From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth Century Thought*

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Originally published in 1941 in German under the title, *Von Hegel bis Nietzsche*, this is a reissue of the 1964 translation of what is probably Löwith's greatest work. Added to this reissue is a foreword by "an old friend and colleague of Karl Löwith" (1989-1973), Hans-Georg Gadamer. What is missing in this reprint — and for whatever reason, it is struck out of the 1964 issue as well — is the author's own dedication of his book to the memory of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). That omission is regrettable, not least because Löwith's dedication calls to mind that both he and Husserl had been effectively excluded from any meaningful participation in German affairs, academic and otherwise (both of them were Jewish). Such was the political landscape in which this book was written, and for which it was in part written to explain. The (missing) dedication also has a way of calling to mind the Heidegger connection: I mean Heidegger's betrayal of Husserl; his historicist phenomenology over against Husserl's decidedly ahistoricist approach (even in the late *Crisis of European Sciences* 1935); the profound influence that
Heidegger exercised on the young Karl Löwith; Löwith’s gradual but final abandonment of historicism, Heideggerian or otherwise; and, finally, some of the harsh things that Löwith later had to say about the “eschatology” of his one-time mentor and associate. In view of the controversy that has surrounded Heidegger’s connection with Nazism, and about what significance this connection, however brief, should have for the interpretation of his philosophy as a whole, the writings of Löwith (especially this one) warrant that much more attention. Anyway, these were the unhappy events, political and philosophical, which must have surely influenced Löwith’s reading of the intellectual history of the nineteenth century. In fact, he goes out of his way to say as much in the 1939 “Preface”: “[T]he tree may be known only by its fruits, the father by his son. The twentieth century has clarified and made explicable the actual events of the nineteenth” (xvi).

What is this tree? Who is this father? Which events were those? What is this book, which touches on many topics, basically about? It is held together by this one question. What relation obtains between being and time? Or roughly, when will the “fully real,” i.e., what is of utmost significance, appear? Today or tomorrow? Löwith marshals the profoundly different answers to this one question, starting with Hegel’s and ending with Nietzsche’s. Today, according to Hegel, for whom history has come to an end. Tomorrow, according to the “Young Hegelians.” Today, according to Kierkegaard (hence his notion of the “moment”). And today, according to Nietzsche (with his notion of the “eternal return”). There is yet another way to answer this question. This is Goethe’s answer, and it is the answer that Löwith appropriates as his own. The answer is neither “today” nor “tomorrow,” but “always.” The question of “what is,” so far as it is asked with the expectation that the answer is to be found somewhere in the workings of history itself, is for Goethe simply the wrong question to ask.

The “parousia,” according to Goethe (and Löwith) has always been with us. Goethe’s poetic and scientific reverence for the here-and-now, for the concreteness of things, down to the last detail, predisposed him to see at work in history not the “cunning of reason” but, rather, an intricate web of so many natural forces and accidents. In a letter to Schiller (1802), in reference to the supposedly great deeds of Napoleon, he writes: “What one can observe on the whole is a tremendous view of streams and rivers which, with natural necessity, rush together from many heights and valleys; at last they cause the overflowing of a great river and an inundation in which both perish, those who foresaw it and those who had no inkling of it. In this tremendous empirical process you see nothing but nature and nothing of that which we philosophers would so much like to call freedom.” Goethe was not taken up with the question of “world history,” because precisely in the root sense of that word, he was a “historian.” “In the Greek,” Löwith notes, “historein means ‘to inquire after something’, or ‘to investigate something’, and by
report and description to give information about what has been inquired after and investigated.” “Ever since Hegel,” he goes on to say, “world history, in contrast to historia, seems to be precisely what one has not seen and experienced, inquired after and investigated for himself” (213).

What, then, about Goethe’s contemporary, Hegel? And why do they differ so profoundly over the question of “what is”? As Löwith explains, the answer goes something like this: “What is,” according to Hegel, is revealed not as an emanation of visible reality but, rather, as the history of the world and as spirit. Accordingly, the classical notions of chance and fate, and the importance of the role of the everyday details of human affairs, are all but marginalized. As Hegel understands history, the early deaths of Alexander and Caesar, or the length of Cleopatra’s nose are merely fortuitous things that have exercised no decisive influence upon the final outcome of history. This marginalization, if not dismissal, of the role that the concrete and the contingent incontestably play in the course of history is in fact, says Löwith, a symptom of a “pseudotheological schematization of history . . . it does not correspond at all to visible reality” (219). Herein lay the superiority of Goethe’s insight into “what is,” according to Löwith. The question of the whence and the whereto of history did not trouble him. Unlike Hegel, he was a “genuine pagan.” His way of seeing the world around him was not bound to an eschatology and hence, according to Löwith, to a Christian horizon. That he stood outside this horizon, and that he did so without having to try to, made Goethe an exception among thinkers in the nineteenth century (and maybe this century, too). As Gadamer puts it in the “Foreword,” Löwith’s own “plea for nature allowed him to share in Goethe’s dissatisfaction with history — and that concerned particularly the history of salvation, as his famous book, Meaning in History [1949], makes clear” (xii).

It is Goethe, then, who comes across as the hero of the book (in the first of the two parts at any rate). But in the end, things are not so clear. In the end, he plays a more ambivalent role. In fact, in the second part (entitled “The History of the Bourgeois-Christian World”) he almost drops out of the story. This is a key problem for the reader who would like to know just where the author takes his final stand, in this work as well as in the later work, Meaning in History. This change of his status in the text may be the result of a structural flaw, but it is more likely a reflection of Löwith’s own indecision as to which road he would have us travel. The one road, of course, is Goethe’s. The other, apparently, is the road of Christianity, or something like it. In the second part, and especially in the closing pages, the author does write from a theological perspective. The last line of the book could have been written by one of the early “inventors” of history, Augustine himself: “For how should the Christian pilgrimage in hoc saeculo ever become homeless in the land where it has never been at home?”
Which road, then, does Löwith wish to travel? Of classicism or Christianity? Of fate or providence? Of scepticism or faith? It might be suggested that these two heritages can be brought together to forge an alliance, albeit an uneasy one. But philosophically, at least according to Löwith, the prospect of such an alliance is highly doubtful. The fact that Hegel's system held together for so brief a time testifies to how doubtful just such a project really is. And culturally the desirable thing to do would be to leave every last trace of Christianity behind. At least that appears to be the position that Löwith takes in his comparison of Goethe's *amor fati* to Nietzsche's.

"True to the earth" that he so wanted to be, Nietzsche still required a superhuman effort to love and will his fate. And how very un-pagan of him. His *amor fati* — an affirmation of the *nunc stans* — was for him still the "hardest to bear." In other words, he remained unsettled by his own conclusion, namely, that the only lesson which history teaches is to "be hard." Try as he did, then, Nietzsche still fell short of transcending a concept of time on which historicism, and nihilism, is founded. "Of course" history manifests no meaning. But the fact that the very thought of this should have even troubled Nietzsche, according to Löwith, reveals that, in spite of his own *contra Christianos*, he was still marked by a Christian conscience. In spite of himself, Nietzsche still philosophized within the framework of eschatological thinking, if only because he philosophized against it.

Not so with Goethe, who, says Löwith, had neither the wish to reconcile classicism with Christianity, as did Hegel, nor even the need to oppose it against Christianity, as did Nietzsche. Goethe was the "more genuine pagan;" his "god," unlike Nietzsche's, "had no need to oppose the other, because by his positive nature he was disinclined to any such denial" (179). It is for this reason that Löwith ranks Goethe's *amor fati* above Nietzsche's. Fair enough — but given this, should not Löwith himself, in spite of his own occasional lapses into theology, look forward to a post-Christian world? After all, in such a world, in a "genuinely pagan world," would not the misguided question about the "ground of history," about measuring "what is" in reference to history, cease to be of cultural significance?

Can a culture's *idée fixe*, in this case of historicism, be deconstructed merely by tracing its origin and genealogy? Might not the application of the method of discrediting an idea, in this case the idea of historicism, by way of a study of the "history of ideas" — a method that Löwith himself applies — be itself fundamentally historicist in spirit? At any rate, is it possible to "un-reinvent" the invention of the idea of historicism? Is it possible to do this even if its theological source — the "tree" or the "father," as Löwith might say — has since become a thing of the past? Moreover, what would crowd out this deepest prejudice of all: the idea that history is the measure of all
things, the standard of worth, or the lack of it, of every speech, decision, revelation, deed, headline, footnote, book, and review?

Löwith would have us return to nature. But what is that? Nature as manifested to us (and certainly to Nietzsche) as that which no longer culturally reveals itself as a mysterious and recurring order, or as the "primary phenomena," as it revealed itself to Goethe, and perhaps, for that matter, to the Greeks? What we see, self-consciously, is rather "nature" in inverted commas, a product of our own "pressing upon becoming the character of being." Nature is "nature" according to the "world-view" of a given society or individual (e.g., according to Aristotle, Newton, Goethe, the industrialists, Darwin, the Druids, and latter day tree-huggers). That is how we seem to look at the way we look at "nature." Perhaps there is good reason to renounce history as the measure of all things, and to opt instead for nature. But then in what spirit should we speak about the possibility of such a cultural change of heart? As a change of our "commitment," say, to a more "greener" world-view? Any well-intentioned call for a change of a "world-view," or "paradigm," or belief structure," or what have you, surely runs the risk of philosophical insincerity. To talk about the need to foster an ahistoricist and naturalist world-view is hardly to outflank historicism. On the contrary, the very use of the vocabulary of "world-views" simply reintroduces historicism by the back door.

One final question: Should Löwith, rather than lament the rise of bourgeois existence (as he does in the second part of his book), not welcome such a way of life instead? Should he not, on his own grounds, endorse a political existence according to which the individual is not called upon to be a "unified whole?" This is not an unreasonable question to put to Löwith. After all, what has historically often been at the heart of eschatological thinking, and has propelled it to commit heroic but questionable deeds, is the immoderate hope for the elimination of the "inauthentic," "selfish," and "fragmented" existence of the individual, and for the reconciliation of the individual and the citizen.

To fine-tune the point, let me say (1993) something about the most recent and much derided eschatologist, Francis Fukuyama (The End of History and the Last Man [1992]). Fukuyama has come up with a best seller's claim that history with a big H has come to an end. (The claim is especially remarkable for those of us who were not told beforehand that it even began.) Now that history has been consummated, he goes on to say (and this is the part for those who like their sermons dark) there has emerged, alas, the "last man." Of course, this is in obvious reference to Nietzsche's "last man" who is, among other things, that flabby, complacent, and liberal creature. That is Fukuyama's story. But perhaps his story should be told the other way around, and like this: To the extent that a culture is willing to make allowances for bourgeois existence, it is the very idea of history with a big H that comes to an end. It
is the "triumph" of bourgeois existence, and the belief that everyone has a right to be "inauthentic," that help disarm the view that history has some particular place to go. Whether bourgeois existence is something to be desired, this, one hopes, is something we can decide for ourselves, individually. But as for Löwith, perhaps he should desire it.

Notes


2 The "Preface" is dated 1939. Löwith was at that time teaching in Japan, and then, with Japan's entry into the war, he taught in the United States. The book was originally published in Zurich (Europa Verlag, 1941), but was not, I suspect, issued in Germany at that time, let alone "originally published in Germany," as the title-page of the 1991 reprint indicates.


4 There seems to be some similarity between Goethe's ahistoricist view of history and Tolstoy's "naturalistic-fatalistic" view of history. See Isaiah Berlin's analysis of Tolstoy's understanding of history in his *The Hedgehog and the Fox, an Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, New York, Mentor Books, 1957.


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