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Towards a Manifesto for Middle Iranian Philology

ARASH ZEINI

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»Es gibt so viele Morgenröten, die noch nicht gelehrtet haben.« Rigveda.

(Nietzsche 1983:8)

The purpose of this manifesto is to raise broad questions about philological inquiry as a background to the purpose of this occasional journal. It reflects both on general questions of philology (Section 2) and delves into an example from the Middle Persian translations (*Zand*) of the *Avesta* in which can be seen a clash between the traditional approach in that field and the type of inquiry that I advocate here (Section 3).¹

1 Introduction

The availability of personal computers in combination with widespread and nondiscriminatory access to the Internet enabled a new era: the Information Age. *Information Technology* became a magical word, digital networks started to form, and there was a general sense of euphoria about building digital connections. In academia, many spoke of transfer and, most importantly, democratisation of knowledge. While some of that pioneer excitement might still hold true, we have long left the age of information behind us and live in an era of disinformation. The lines dividing information and disinformation, facts and fiction, and perhaps even truth and untruth are disappearing under the weight of a new dark force that utilises the same technologies. It seems to me that this dark force has more successfully used the new tools to their advantage, something that had been forecast by some in the late 1990s. Whether you call the cause of this new era capitalism, corporate greed or populism, many of us will agree on its progress and presence. To borrow the title of Susan Cooper's brilliant novel: 'The dark is rising'.

In this climate of confusion, I have often asked myself where scientific or scholarly rigour stand? How do scholars position themselves in times of social and political crises, when social media and populism form fundamental parts of our work? Does a shift of academic discourse to social media platforms increase outreach and public engagement, or is it rather an engagement with the dark side, a Faustian pact as it

¹I am grateful to my friend Adam Benkato for his insightful comments and feedback on an earlier draft of this paper, and for his legendary patience. His interest in philology was the impetus for this exploration.

were? Is the narcissism of the populist politician confined to politics or is it an affliction already knocking at the door of academia? Are disinformation and greed problems of politics or have they already reached our universities? I have been asking myself more broadly, where we scholars stand when we examine the past? What are the tools at the disposal of the historian who investigates complex questions of cultural transmission, especially in the public sphere? Is the scientific, historical method itself in crisis? Are the historical-critical methods so often endorsed in Iranian Studies obsolete? These and similar questions were the impetus for what I want to present today. I admit that when I set out, my approach was guided by personal disappointment in an academic environment, where critical thinking was less and less encouraged. Uniformity and adherence to an official line, hidden behind names such as ‘school of thought’, pushed me to question the core of my academic interest. But as they say, there is nothing new under the sun, we just need to search wide enough to find the answers we seek.



The patchy transmission of the Old Iranian texts presents a serious challenge in the study of pre-Islamic Iranian languages, religions and cultures. Scholars of historical-comparative or Indo-European linguistics, as this particular branch of linguistics is more commonly known, were among the first to recognise and engage with the numerous linguistic problems that Old Iranian languages present and thus became a major force in shaping the study of Old Iranian cultures. As a result of this, Iranian Studies is often defined as a philological discipline, while it is often the linguistic approach that dominates the discipline. For instance, the Institute of Iranian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, on a webpage entitled *Iranian Studies as an Academic Field*,² defines the discipline in these terms:

The study of sources written in Iranian languages remains the foundation of Iranian Studies. Although religious and social history as well as literary issues have gained importance in the past few decades and are also central to the discipline’s promoted public image, it is the philological and linguistic analysis as well as the interpretation of primary sources that continue to provide the most important clues even to these relatively new fields.

The tight grip of the linguistically oriented approach is still felt across the field, particularly in the study of Zoroastrianism. It is unclear to me how the transition to other approaches, such as religious or cultural studies, can work in a discipline that remains indebted to linguistics and dominated by linguists. How is Iranian Studies (in the sense of *Alt-Iranistik*) to transition from historical-comparative linguistics (Indogermanistik) to, for instance, study of religious culture, history or rituals? Trivial as this question might sound, it seems to reflect the reality on the ground.

²Last accessed on 30 January 2023.

Philology in Nietzsche's sense might offer an antidote, encouraging close attention to the larger contexts in which texts exist, to meaning, cultures, and history.³ The intention, however, is not to exclude linguistics, which is admittedly one of the main tools in the hands of a philologist.⁴

A quick look at volumes dedicated to philology as a discipline, shows how multifarious philology can be and how it evades a closer definition.⁵ While Turner (2015) goes so far as to trace the origins of modern humanities to philology, it is noteworthy that philology's acceptance as a discipline has had a difficult history from antiquity through to modern times.⁶ It is, however, not my aim to write an analytical or prescriptive treatise on philology, rather this manifesto is an attempt to declare an appreciation for philology in the hope to provoke further discussions. But I owe the audience a miniature explanation of what philology can mean in the context of Iranian Studies.

2 Nietzsche's philology

It was in Nietzsche's 1881 and oft cited publication, *Morgenröte* (*The dawn of day*) (Nietzsche 1983), where I found a positive approach to my questions about philology.⁷ I will discuss this in greater detail shortly. But reading *The dawn of day* I encountered another problem: Why is it that Nietzsche's philosophy reads like a literary excursion and not the typical philosophical treatise? Why does Nietzsche make use of the small form of aphorism offering his thoughts in the most elusive manner? I believe to have found an answer in: *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* or *The birth of tragedy out of the spirit of music*, a publication from 1872, and to be more precise, in *Versuch einer Selbstkritik* (*An attempt at self-criticism*) serving as a foreword to a later edition of the aforementioned book (Nietzsche 2000).

In short, Nietzsche (2000:11) believed in hindsight that his book *The birth of tragedy* was in reality about the problem of science itself, and in his later foreword, *Attempt at self-criticism*, he deals with this problem in greater detail. I suppose Nietzsche's reflections on his earlier work, *The birth of tragedy*, are inspired by the progress he had made between the publication of the first edition of the *The birth of tragedy* in 1871 and *The*

³Much has been written about Nietzsche and his views of philology. See, for instance, Hamilton (2018:121–158) or Sloterdijk (2000). The present article, however, traces my own encounter with Nietzsche the philologist. In the following, I cite his works where possible in the accessible publications of the Insel Verlag.

⁴On this notion and the relationship between philology and linguistics, see Watkins (1990:21) quoting Crane Brinton: 'It seems to come down to the question of which is the handmaiden of which?'

⁵Literature on philology and its relationship to linguistics abound. For some recent publications, see Ziolkowski (1990), Olender (2008), Schwindt (2009), and Bremer & Wirth (2010).

⁶Turner (2015) gives an in-depth analysis of philology's trajectory, which Nietzsche alludes to in his *Encyclopädie der klassischen Philologie* (1871): 'Martianus Capella hat die VII freien Künste zusammen als Philologia bezeichnet. Im Alterthum ist philologia keineswegs eine Wissenschaft, sondern nur eine allgemeine Lust zu allerhand Wissen, eine Eigenschaft. Im Mittelalter verschwindet der Name, man nennt sich lieber scholasticus oder scholasticissimus' (see Bornmann & Carpitella 1993:343). Turner (2015) and Celenza (2019) discuss the terms philology and philosophy and the vast range of meanings attached to them across time.

⁷For ease of access, I quote Nietzsche's works, where possible, according to the *insel taschenbuch* series.

dawn of day in 1881.⁸ The improved Nietzsche finds the solution to the problem of science in philology. It will be instructive to trace his thoughts.

Nietzsche (2000:11) starts by asking what being scientific (Wissenschaftlichkeit ‘scientificness / scientificity’) could mean:

Ist Wissenschaftlichkeit vielleicht nur eine Furcht und Ausflucht vor dem Pessimismus? Eine feine Notwehr gegen die Wahrheit? Und, moralisch geredet, etwas wie Feig- und Falschheit? Unmoralisch geredet, eine Schlaueheit?

‘Is scientificness perhaps only a fear and escape from pessimism? A fine defence against the truth? And, morally speaking, something akin to cowardice and falsehood? Immorally speaking, a cunningness?’.

He continues to claim that it was this exact question about the nature of being scientific that he grasped in his *The birth of tragedy*, but was not mature enough to discuss properly:

2. Was ich damals zu fassen bekam, etwas Furchtbares und Gefährliches, ein Problem mit Hörnern, nicht notwendig gerade ein Stier, jedenfalls ein *neues* Problem: heute würde ich sagen, daß es das *Problem der Wissenschaft* selbst war – Wissenschaft zum ersten Male als problematisch, als fragwürdig gefaßt. Aber das Buch, in dem mein jugendlicher Mut und Argwohn sich damals ausließ – was für ein unmögliches Buch mußte aus einer so jugendwidrigen Aufgabe erwachsen!

‘2. What I got hold of at the time, something terrible and dangerous, a problem with horns, not necessarily a bull, in any case a *new* problem: today I would say that it was the *problem of science* itself – science conceived for the first time as problematic, as questionable. But the book in which my youthful courage and suspicion vented itself at that time – what an impossible book had to grow out of a task so adverse to youthfulness!’.

At the end of section two, Nietzsche (2000:12) acknowledges that the problem would have required a quieter approach. But he also admits that an older Nietzsche, revisiting his book 16 years after it was first published, would still ask the same questions. And the answer he would have given then, solves the mystery of his literary approach:

Daraufhin sollte es schon mit einiger Rücksicht und Schweigsamkeit behandelt werden; trotzdem will ich nicht gänzlich unterdrücken, wie unangenehm es mir jetzt erscheint, wie fremd es jetzt nach sechzehn Jahren vor mir steht, vor einem älteren, hundertmal verwöhnteren, aber keineswegs kälter gewordenen Auge, das auch jener Aufgabe selbst nicht fremder wurde, an welche sich jenes verwegene Buch zum ersten Male herangewagt hat, – die Wissenschaft unter der Optik des Künstlers zu sehn, die Kunst aber unter der des Lebens ...

⁸The first edition of *The birth of tragedy* attracted an angry response by the German philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff. The response, entitled *Zukunftsphilologie!* ‘Future Philology!’, might have influenced Nietzsche’s later assessment of *The birth of tragedy*. For more on this, see Groth (1950), Pollock (2009) and Porter (2011).

‘Thereupon it should already be treated with some consideration and silence; nevertheless I do not want to completely suppress how unpleasant it now seems to me, how strange it now stands before me after sixteen years, before an older eye that has become a hundred times more spoiled, but by no means colder, and that has not become any stranger to the task itself, which that audacious book dared to approach for the first time – to see science under the artist’s lens, but art under that of life ...’

He then puts the final nail into the coffin of the first edition of the *Tragedy*, before he moves to the question that is at the core of his treatise: the potential of Greek tragedy as an answer to the existential pessimism of the human condition. Nietzsche (2000:13) closes what I perceive as the first part of his *Attempt at self-criticism* with some final thoughts on philology:

Wie schade, daß ich, was ich damals zu sagen hatte, es nicht als Dichter zu sagen wagte: ich hätte es vielleicht gekonnt! Oder mindestens als Philologe: – bleibt doch auch heute noch für den Philologen auf diesem Gebiete beinahe Alles zu entdecken und auszugraben! Vor allem das Problem, daß hier ein Problem vorliegt, – und daß die Griechen, solange wir keine Antwort auf die Frage »was ist dionysisch?« haben, nach wie vor gänzlich unerkannt und unvorstellbar sind ...

‘What a pity that I did not dare to say what I had to say then as a poet: I might have been able to do it! Or at least as a philologist: – even today, almost everything remains for the philologist to discover and unearth in this field! Above all, the problem that there is a problem here, – and that as long as we have no answer to the question “what is Dionysian?”, the Greeks are still completely unrecognised and unimaginable ...’

Nietzsche thoughts of himself as a philologist, and his examination of philology runs like a thread through almost all of his works. I don’t claim to have understood or done justice to Nietzsche’s complex approach, but I have taken away something for myself. My initial question thus turned into: What is the role of philology in the study of ancient Iranian cultures? And if it has a role, is it just ours or did philology guide the Zoroastrian priests of late antiquity as well?⁹



In *The dawn of day*, a treatise on morality originally published in 1881, Nietzsche offers an attractive view of philology as a discipline, methodology or scientific approach, defining a philologist as a teacher of slow reading and writing (‘... Philologe ... ein Lehrer des langsamen Lesens: – endlich schreibt man auch langsam.’), and ascribes an almost meditative introspection to philology (‘beiseite gehn, sich Zeit lassen, still werden, langsam werden’), finally comparing it to a goldsmith’s craft and connoisseurship of the word (‘Goldschmiedekunst und -kennerschaft des Wortes’), emphasising that philology can only work at *lento*. The highly readable Section 5 of the prologue to *The dawn of day* is dedicated to philology.¹⁰ And in Section 84, entitled *Philology of Chris-*

⁹I will answer this question in another publication.

¹⁰For ease of access, I cite from Nietzsche (1983:14–15), but the interested reader is referred to Colli & Montinari (1971).

tianity, Nietzsche (1983:72) seems to go one step further by contrasting true philology, as it were, with religious or Christian philology, which in his view is destined for failure as it lacks probity and tends to dogmatic readings. Nietzsche (1983:15) invites his audience to approach his book as philologists who will read it slowly, patiently, with thoughtfulness and open doors and delicate fingers and eyes.

However, Nietzsche's approach to philology is most pertinent in his inaugural lecture for the University of Basel, entitled *Homer and the classical philology*.¹¹ In this lecture, Nietzsche (1869) reverses Seneca's *itaque quæ philosophia fuit, facta philologia est* 'And thus what was once philosophy has now become philology' and declares *philosophia facta est quæ philologia fuit* 'What was once philology has now become philosophy', explaining the reversal as meaning that 'each and every philological activity should be surrounded and enclosed by a philosophical world view in which everything singular and isolated evaporates as something reprehensible and only that what is whole and unitary persists'.¹²

Damit soll ausgesprochen sein, dass alle und jede philologische Thätigkeit umschlossen und eingehegt sein soll von einer philosophischen Weltanschauung, in der alles Einzelne und Vereinzelte als etwas Verwerfliches verdampft und nur das Ganze und Einheitliche bestehen bleibt. (See Nietzsche 1869 in Bornmann & Carpitella 1982:268.)

Seneca, in agreement with his era's views, humiliates philology. Nietzsche, clearly in awe of philology, seeks to raise its reputation by a marriage between philology and philosophy, positioning the latter in the role of a guardian or guarantor of quality.

In my reading of the above text, Nietzsche advocates for theoretical frameworks as tools of oversight to give philological research a broader context beyond discussions of isolated details. In his view, this oversight is the task of philosophy. Applied to our situation at hand, Nietzsche suggests a return from detailed discussions of linguistic matters to a more meaningful framework that encompasses a broader context for textual and historical analysis. And this must be what Nietzsche (1869) means when he views philology as the combination of the disciplines of history, sciences and aesthetics:

Sie ist ebenso wohl ein Stück Geschichte als ein Stück Naturwissenschaft als ein Stück Aesthetik: Geschichte, insofern sie die Kundgebungen bestimmter Volksindividualitäten in immer neuen Bildern, das waltende Gesetz in der Flucht der Erscheinungen begreifen will: Naturwissenschaft, so weit sie den tiefsten Instinkt des Menschen, den Sprachinstinkt zu ergründen trachtet: Aesthetik endlich, weil sie aus der Reihe von Alterthümern heraus das sogenannte „klassische“ Alterthum aufstellt, mit dem Ansprüche und der Absicht, eine verschüttete ideale Welt heraus zu graben und der Gegenwart den Spiegel des Klassischen und Ewigmuster gültigen entgegen zu halten. (Bornmann & Carpitella 1982:249–250)

In his playful way, Nietzsche (1984:47) formulates his view in another work:

¹¹Nietzsche's interest in Homer has long been noted, on which see Zhavoronkov (2021).

¹²On Seneca and his views on philology, see Celenza (2019) and tangentially Wagoner (2014).

Is es denn nicht erlaubt, gegen Subjekt, wie gegen Prädikat und Objekt, nachgerade ein wenig ironisch zu sein? Dürfte sich der Philosoph nicht über die Gläubigkeit an die Grammatik erheben?

‘Is it not permitted to be a little ironic against the subject, as against the predicate and the object? Is the philosopher not allowed to rise above the devotion to grammar?’

It is precisely the attention to the larger contexts, the *longue durée* of history, religions or cultures, that philology of Middle Iranian languages, particularly Zoroastrianism, needs — and that we wish to promote and advocate by means of this journal.

3 The inheritance of good deeds

In the *Zand* of the first stanza of the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti* (Y 35.1), which is dedicated to the well-known Zoroastrian triad ‘good thoughts, good words, good deeds’, we find a particularly difficult passage.¹³ I reproduce the text as it appears in the manuscript Pt4, highlighting the terms in question in bold:

*Yasna 35.1*¹⁴ (a) *humatanəm. hūxtanəm. buuarəštanəm. iiadacā. anii-adacā* (b) *vərəziāmananəmčā. vāuuarəzananəmčā. mahi* (c) *aibijarətārō. naēnēstārō. yaθinā. vōhunəm. mahi*

(a) Of good thoughts, good words, good deeds both here and elsewhere (b) being done and having been done, we are (c) **welcomers, not revilers** of such good (things) are we.

Pahlavi Yasna 35.1 (a) *humatān hūxtān huwarštān ka ēdar dabišn u-š pad-iz ī ān ī any dabišn kū-š ēdar ud ānōb-iz nēkīb aziš* (b) *ān ī warzīd tā nūn ud ān-iz ī warzībēd az nūn frāz* (c) *hom abar griftār kū ō xwēš kunom ān ī mard ō mard be abespārdār kirbag pad dād rāb čiyōn web hom kū čiyōn pablom ō xwēš kunom*

(a) Of good thoughts, good words (and) good deeds, when (in) this creation, and also in that which is the other creation, that is, goodness comes from it here and also there, (b) (of) those which have been performed till now, and also (of) those which will be performed from now on, (c) I am an appropriator, that is, **I make my own that which a man consigns to a man**, (namely) the justly (performed) good deeds, as I am good, that is, I make (it) my own, as it is best.

In the above stanza, the *Zand* offers an interpretation that radically departs from the scholarly reading of Y 35.1c. It does so by translating the Avestan *naēnāstārō* ‘not revilers’, a *hapax legomenon*, as *mard ō mard* ‘a man to a man’. At first, there seems to be a discrepancy between our understanding of the Avestan word and its Middle Persian

¹³For a complete discussion of this passage, which also appeared in a slightly modified version on the Edinburgh University Press [blog](#), see Zeini (2020:190ff).

¹⁴The translation of the Avestan passage is by Hintze (2007:29). The numbering of the stanza follows Zeini (2020:13ff).

translation. But despite the *Zand*'s obscure translation of *naēnaēstārō*, the phrase *ān ī mard ō mard be abespārdār* 'that which a man consigns to a man' is grounded in a well established, but hitherto unrecognised priestly tradition. A Middle Persian text, entitled *Pursišnīhā*, takes up a similar issue in Question 18:¹⁵

Pur 18¹⁶ *mard-ēw hāwišt-ēw ast ān hāwišt kirbag ī pad dād rāh ī-š az weh-dēnān abar šawēd ān-iz ī hāwištān ōy hāwišt kunēd ān hērbed ī naxwistīn ān kirbagīhā abar šawēd ayāb nē*

A man has a disciple. That disciple receives the (merits) of the justly (performed) good deeds from the adherents of the good religion. Does that first teacher receive the (merits) of the good deeds performed by the disciples of that disciple, or not?

In my view, *Pursišnīhā* 18 asks whether religious merit transfers from a receiving disciple to his teaching priest. Would the first teacher receive the merits of the good deeds performed by his disciples' followers? Previous editors of the *Pursišnīhā* did not recognise the significance of Question 18 for the interpretation of Y 35.1. Humbach & Jamaspasa (1971:31) translate *mard-ēw hāwišt-ēw ast* '(There is) a man who is a disciple'. This translation is grammatically difficult and ignores the essence of the question, which is about the transfer of merits between two men: a disciple and his teacher. In my interpretation, 'the first teacher' (*hērbed ī naxwistīn*), mentioned at the end of the question, is the first man who has a disciple. Moreover, references to (Pahlavi) Yasna 35.5 in the answer to *Pursišnīhā* 18 establish a link to the exegesis of the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti*, further strengthening the possibility of an intertextual reading in *Pursišnīhā*.

I argue that *mard ō mard* 'a man to a man' in Y 35.1c refers to the question about a teacher and his disciple (*mard-ēw hāwišt-ēw ast* 'a man has a disciple') as discussed in Question 18 of the *Pursišnīhā*. If this is accepted, then 'that which a man consigns to a man' in Y 35.1c (*ān ī mard ō mard be abespārdār*), is a reference to the merits resulting out of a commitment to good thoughts, good words and good deeds that are transferred from a disciple to his priestly teacher, and not the result of a misunderstanding of Avestan *naēnaēstārō* 'not revilers' as has previously been suggested. The *Zand* of the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti* refers to the relationship between teacher priests and their disciples a number of times.

The *Zand* or the Middle Persian translations of the Avestan texts have rarely been analysed within the context of the wider Middle Persian texts. Such passages emphasise the authority and relevance ascribed to the *Zand* for discussions of priestly functions. They also show that even an ostensibly wrong translation can be the result of a meaningful analysis which is correct within its own religious setting. In this case, the somewhat poetically expressed commitment to good thoughts, good words and good

¹⁵I only reproduce the question here.

¹⁶Text transliterated after TD2, reproduced by Humbach & Jamaspasa (1971:II 12–13).

deeds in the Avestan section becomes part of a different discourse, where the appropriation of the merits of good thoughts, good words and good deeds and their transfer between religious authorities are the focus. Ultimately, however, both versions agree in their positive outlook towards *humatān būxtān huwarštān* ‘good thoughts, good words (and) good deeds’, a religious prescription central to the Zoroastrian world view.

4 Conclusions

In this manifesto I have attempted to engage with philology and its position within Iranian Studies, leaning on work done by Friedrich Nietzsche. I do not claim to have understood Nietzsche, and I cannot claim to have completed my investigation of his methods and thoughts.¹⁷ But I have borrowed his method, as I have understood it, to argue in a slightly different manner and will borrow it again in a forthcoming publication.

In Nietzsche’s sense, philology does not exclusively attempt a reconstruction of history, ritual or cultures, but is an engagement with texts within a broader context reflecting our own understanding of the past rather than establishing an authoritative and objective view of an actual past, whatever it may be. In my view, this is what Nietzsche attempts in *The birth of tragedy*. His is not the claim that he has restored a historically accurate Greek understanding of tragedy. It is the philosopher Nietzsche who seeks a solution to a contemporary problem by revisiting the past. In this case, Greek tragedy as a response to his era’s nihilism and pessimism. Admittedly, I am not advocating a solution to a contemporary problem. Or maybe I am. Perhaps revisiting our tools and methodologies can help us move past our stale paradigms and nationalistic efforts to create, for instance, the notion of a fictitious *ērānšahr* in an attempt to ‘rescue a nation’. Perhaps, I do argue that we can come together in a much quieter and softer way without utilising models that have failed in history again and again. But it will be up to the reader of this article to see whether the pessimist in me has been able to find a positive solution.

Allow me to conclude with Nietzsche’s (2000:22) own conclusion to his ‘Attempt at self-criticism’, as it might be apt to close this excursion with his Zarathustra:

»Erhebt eure Herzen, meine Brüder, hoch, höher! Und vergeßt mir auch die Beine nicht! Erhebt auch eure Beine, ihr guten Tänzer, und besser noch: ihr steht auch auf dem Kopf!

Diese Krone des Lachenden, diese Rosenkranz-Krone: ich selber setzte mir diese Krone auf, ich selber sprach heilig mein Gelächter. Keinen anderen fand ich heute stark genug dazu.

Zarathustra der Tänzer, Zarathustra der Leichte, der mit den Flügeln winkt, ein Flugbereiter, allen Vögeln zuwinkend, bereit und fertig, ein Selig-Leichtfertiger:–

¹⁷Much remains to be done. Most significantly, I have omitted an examination of Kuhn (2012) whose insights into the structures of paradigm shifts within the history of sciences deserve a closer look.

Zarathustra der Wahrsager, Zarathustra der Wahrlacher, kein Ungeduldiger, kein Unbedingter, einer, der Sprünge und Seitensprünge liebt: ich selber setzte mir diese Krone auf!

Diese Krone des Lachenden, diese Rosenkranz-Krone: euch, meinen Brüdern, werfe ich diese Krone zu! Das Lachen sprach ich heilig: ihr höheren Menschen, *lernt* mir – lachen!«

Also sprach Zarathustra; VI, 428. 430.

Dr. Arash Zeini
Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
University of Oxford

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