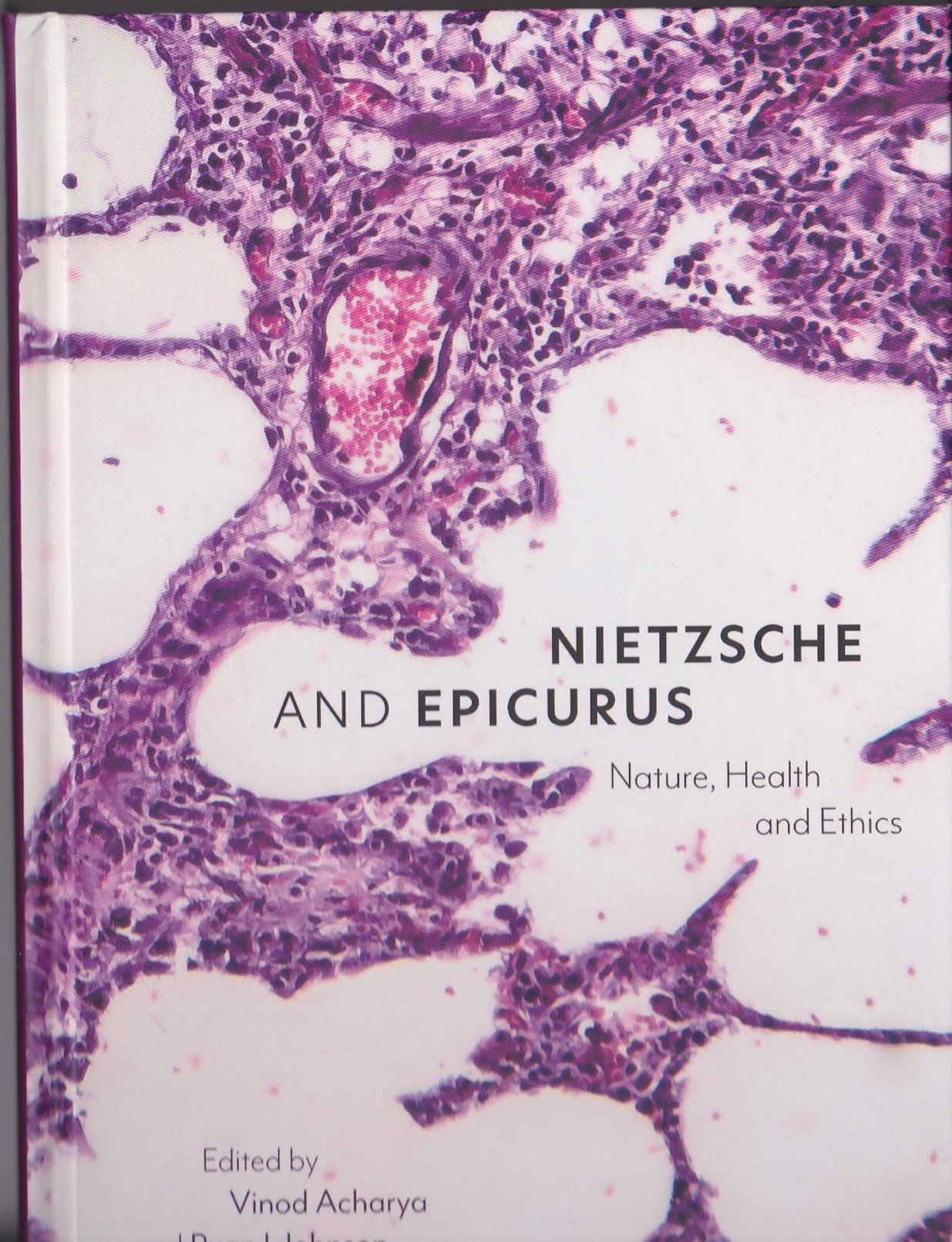
Plato: literary prose and philosophical style

Carlotta Santini



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1

The philosophical literature after Plato: literary prose and philosophical style

The case of Epicurus

Carlotta Santini

Introduction[1]

The question of Nietzsche's relationship with Greek philosophy, or rather with specific figures and personalities of ancient philosophy, constitutes a complex field of study that has yet to be exhausted. Nietzsche engaged directly with many philosophers: Socrates and Plato in particular, Aristotle and the debate on the *Poetics* and even pre-Platonic philosophers such as Heraclitus. Within this panorama, the figure of Epicurus is perhaps not one of the most apparent. In fact, he received much less attention than the aforementioned ancient authors, and Nietzsche's attitude towards the philosopher from Samos can often be said to be ambiguous.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche's treatment of Epicurus can be considered in many ways exemplary. In a brief series of texts and excerpts, Nietzsche's reading of Epicurus reveals the same criticisms levelled towards ancient philosophy in general, which always manifest themselves on different levels: from metaphysical–theoretical to ethical–moral, social–historical to existential, through to stylistic and literary. In this chapter I will adopt this latter approach, focusing in particular on Nietzsche's criticism of Epicurus the 'writer' and his style, and reconstructing his role within the literary landscape of antiquity. I will base my analysis in particular on 1) Nietzsche's *Lessons on the History of Greek Literature*, given in Basel between 1874 and 1876; 2) some letters he exchanged with the musician Heinrich Köselitz (better known as Peter Gast) concerning Epicurus; and 3) on a group of *Posthumous Fragments* from 1874 (group 35), particularly significant for treating the question of style in relation to Epicurus. As we will see, this kind of historical–literary observation has important implications for the philosophical evaluation of the author.

Epicurus polygraphus

Among the few well-circumscribed textual passages concerning the figure of Epicurus, Nietzsche's letters to Heinrich Köselitz offer perhaps the best-known and most coherent context.[2] The first mention of the philosopher from Samos in his correspondence with the musician dates back to 1879, reaching its peak in 1883. In particular, in a letter dating from the end of August 1883 (KSB 6:460), Nietzsche comments with great enthusiasm on the 'news' (not especially up-to-the-minute if truth be told) of an archaeological discovery in the city of Herculaneum, which had brought to light an entire archive once belonging to a patrician of Epicurean sympathies.[3] Nietzsche's enthusiasm stemmed from his hope that the site would provide access, sooner or later, to fragments or even entire scrolls of Epicurean works.

What interested Nietzsche, therefore, was the possibility of having direct access to Epicurus's texts, to the *ipssissima verba*. This interest in the original (or the occasional Roman copy) had a double philological motive. The first and most obvious one was to draw directly from the source of Epicurean thought without having to go through 'Epicureans' or anti-Epicurean detractors (which always implies an interpretation or manipulation). Even today, in fact, our knowledge of Epicurean doctrine mostly passes through the simultaneously 'turbid and refined lens' of Lucretius (D 72) or that of the historical contenders to the Epicurean school, the Stoics – notably, as Nietzsche reminds us, through Seneca (KSB 6:446).[4] It is not only the idea of gaining access to Epicurus's thought that interests Nietzsche, however, but also the availability of his writings tout court; that is, the possibility of being able to read works written 'by the hand' of Epicurus. Nietzsche's primary interest in Epicurus is, in fact, an eminently literary one.

The 'irony of fame' (KSB 6:446) and the inscrutable *fatum libellorum* (KSA 1: 811) made that few testimonies and no complete works by one of the most prolific authors of antiquity have survived, despite the fact that Epicurus was best known for his writings. In his *Lessons on the History of Greek Literature*, Epicurus is mentioned in a list of the most famous 'polygraphs' of history, alongside others including the grammarian and poet Callimachus and the philosophers Chrysippus, Aristotle and Theophrastus. In Raphael's famous fresco *The School of Athens*, Epicurus is depicted surrounded by wine leaves (a Dionysian attribute) with his head bowed over a book, in the act of writing. Tradition recognizes him as the father of 300 books.[5]

In the wake of Diogenes Laertius, whose *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* represents the most important source for the life of Epicurus, Nietzsche reports that the philosopher's followers were particularly proud of their master, who was always original despite writing a lot. The ancient confrontation or even clash between Epicurus and the philosopher Chrysippus also focused on this particular aspect of polygraphy.

> Apollodorus of Athens in his Collection of Doctrines, wishing to show that what Epicurus wrote with force and originality unaided by quotations was far greater in amount than the books of Chrysippus, says, to quote his exact words, 'If one were to strip the books of Chrysippus of all extraneous quotations, his pages would be left bare.' So much for Apollodorus. Of Chrysippus the old woman who sat beside him used to say, according to Diocles, that he wrote 500 lines a day. Hecato says that he came to the study of philosophy, because the property which he had inherited from his father had been confiscated to the king's treasury. (Diogenes Laertius 7.181)

In his text Diogenes Laertius warns us that many of the testimonies concerning Epicurus have been distorted by his detractors.[6] The news reported at the end of the quotation by Diocles and Hecato, for example, conceals two very precise criticisms that were levelled at Epicurus, and which can be summarized as follows: writing too much and writing tout court.

Let us start with the latter. Criticism of the practice of writing in the Greek world is a very complex issue, on which ancient authors expressed themselves on several occasions. Writing has been accused variously of being detrimental to memory, of providing an illusion of knowledge,[7] of weakening reasoning and of prejudicing philosophy,[8] which should only be carried out in the true dialectic. The Socratic Diktat, according to which philosophy is exercised only in free speech, was also one of the traditional elements used to distinguish the true philosophers from the false masters, the Sophists. Hecato's allusion to the economic hardships endured by Epicurus after the confiscation of his patrimony is a clear insinuation that risks placing him on an equal footing with the Sophists and those who, like them, commercialized knowledge through public teaching. The very act of writing can be compromising, according to Nietzsche, who once again quotes Plato in support of this thesis: 'You know yourself that the most influential and important men in our cities are ashamed to write speeches and leave writings behind them, through fear of being called sophists by posterity' (Plato 1913: 257d; KGW II/5, 31).[9]

But Epicurus himself would not have been insensitive to this anathema towards writing. One of the dictates of the 'Epicurean wise man', mentioned by Nietzsche in his *Lessons on the History of Greek Literature*, was, in fact, 'to leave written words behind him, but not to publish them'.[10] For example, a dialogue's transcription was intended to spread and facilitate its reception among the students of the Epicurean School, as well as to hand down to posterity a sort of portrait of the teacher; it could not and should not, however, go beyond its circle of sympathizers to become widespread in the public domain or, even worse, to become a business tool. Now, the extraordinary editorial fortune of Epicurean writing tells a different story. In fact, the unsatisfactory formulation of this ambiguous precept is proof in itself of the conflicting attitude of Epicurus – one of the most famous polygraphs of antiquity – towards writing. In a not dissimilar way, recalls Nietzsche, another famous opponent of writing in philosophy, Plato, 'wrote a lot for someone who considers writing only a beautiful παγΚάλη παlδιά'.[11]

If Hecato insinuates that Epicurus, just like the Sophists, became a writer for venal reasons, even the information reported by Diocles, according to which the philosopher wrote up to 500 lines a day, conceals latent criticism: not only did Epicurus feel the reprehensible need to write but he also wrote a great deal, and wrote quickly. Throughout his lifetime Nietzsche repeatedly accused the contemporary publishing industry of being compulsive and bulimic. He is well known for his reserved attitude

towards journalism, which swamped the world with books of dubious interest, devaluing literature and demeaning style.[12]

In his *Lessons on the History of Greek Literature* Nietzsche provides many examples in favour of parsimony in the art of writing, careful balance in the choice of vocabulary and ongoing honing of style. That prolificity (and prolixity) were rare and unwelcome in antiquity can be proven by an anecdote concerning the tragedian Euripides:

> Euripides once told a tragic poet that he had finished three verses in three days with great effort, to which the poet replied that he had instead composed a hundred verses. In response to these words Euripides replied: 'But here is the difference: your verses will only last three days, mine will last forever.' (KGW II/5, 123)[13]

But even the modern age offers Nietzsche some good examples of economy in writing: Goethe speaks of how, when writing the second part of *Faust*, he transcribed, in one good day, as many lines as his hand could cover (KGW II/5, 317).

Writing a lot and writing rapidly means writing badly, that is, without care, re-reading or leaving time for the language to settle down and the style to develop. The damage is first and foremost aesthetic, but it could easily become ethical since the absence of 'rumination' harms not only the language in question but also the thought processes developed and expressed through it. But Nietzsche's position towards Epicurus seems to suspend the judgement on this point. Epicurus wrote a lot, therefore he wrote badly? His detractors would certainly seem to think so. The grammarian Aristophanes judges Epicurus's way of writing as uncultivated (ἰδιωτικωτάτη) and Cicero, in *Brutus*, defines the Epicurean education as very unsuited to eloquence.[14]

Nietzsche is less strict on this point. This is not just a case of excessive writing or journalistic superficiality. Among the aforementioned duties attributed to the Epicurean sage, enumerated in Nietzsche's *Lessons on the History of Greek literature*, the second one warns against speaking well:

> οὔτε ρητορεύειν καλῶς [Don't speak well]: so states another precept. Of course, the Epicurean sage is accused not only of being pure in expression, but also of being ἀμαθής [uncultivated]. The Epicurean wise man challenged the education of the time precisely in relation to linguistics and polyhistory.[15] Athen, XIII, 588 states: 'Knowing everything does not mean being an initiate.' Epicurus himself in his letter to Pythocles says: 'Raise your sails, my friend, and escape all kinds of culture.'[16]

A specific method lies behind the choice to write a great amount in a short space of time: 'The Stoics did not write well on purpose, the Epicureans did not write well out of principle' (KGW II/5, 31). Put in a slightly different way in the same lesson, we find:

> In this respect, the Stoics and the Epicureans followed the same path, with the Stoics employing a non-artistic style spontaneously and the Epicureans adopting the same style intentionally. Dion. Hal., *comp.*, 30, reports: 'No one has developed dialectics as much as Chrysippus and no one has written in a worse way. Epicurus followed the principle that the speaker should aim for clarity only: when the inconstant artistic judgement is not taken into account it is not difficult to write.' (KGW II/5, 216)

Epicurus therefore chose to deliberately ignore aesthetic needs and to concentrate only on achieving clarity in his writing.

Struggle for prose, struggle for science?

Since Epicurus wrote a lot, does this mean he was a bad writer? Nietzsche was not so sure of the validity of this particular axiom and, for this reason he claims, like in the letter to Köselitz, the possibility of 'reading' Epicurus. Three letters, 'extraordinarily beautiful and rich in content' (KGW II/5, 218), documented by Diogenes Laertius and attributed to Epicurus, invite Nietzsche to be cautious. Additionally, the philologist Valentin Rose recalls among the titles attributed to this author a dialogue tellingly entitled *Symposium*.[17] The clear references of this title to the tradition of Platonic dialogues, and to the genre of symposium dialogue that developed from them, invite us to think of the text as a philosophical one written in a particularly precise manner according to the dictates of rhetorical art and, therefore, with both philosophical and literary intentions in mind.

Epicurus therefore did not write badly; instead, he deliberately wrote poorly using little rhetoric. Nietzsche, following a principle that he established in 1868 and that he applied to his entire analysis of the history of Greek literature, was convinced that the evaluation of a particular style or author must take into account the reasons behind the author's choice of style:

> Style in philosophical writing. The assessment of the stylistic problem depends on what is required of the philosopher i.e. whether the goal is the attainment of pure scientific knowledge or the dissemination of philosophical knowledge; whether the aim is teaching or education. (BAW IV, 213)

This refers clearly to the two great models of ancient philosophy who, for Nietzsche, also represent two kinds of 'writer': Plato and Aristotle. Tradition presents them to us as two opposite examples. Plato is the ideal writer, composing his dialogues as perfect rhetorical machines designed to educate the students of his school and to train them in philosophical discourse. From Aristotle, on the other hand, were only preserved transcriptions of the courses held at his school, documents that were not intended for wider circulation but that more or less directly testified to the type of scientific work that took place there. 'Sometimes – if we judge from what he left behind – one sees too many of the bare bones in Aristotle' (KSA 7:37[4]; trans. Richard T. Grey).

Yet, ancient tradition also tells of dialogues written by Aristotle (Rose 1863), which, as Nietzsche recalls (KGW II/5, 187), equalled for Dionysius of Halicarnassus (Dion. Hal. comp., c. 24) only those of the divine Plato. This shows that when the philosopher's aims shift, and the conditions of his writing change, even the most arid, dry style of a thinker like Aristotle (in whom you can see the bare bones) can metamorphose

into – surpass even – the elevated and elegant style of a writer like Plato. How does the figure of Epicurus fit into this context, and what role does his prolific and deliberately rapid production – freed from any aesthetic pretensions – play in the economy of the history of ancient philosophy? To try to understand this, it is useful to take a step back and retrace, alongside Nietzsche, what we might define as the literary history of ancient philosophy or, rather, the history of ancient philosophical literature.

To speak of the history of philosophy and the history of philosophical literature is not the same thing. For Nietzsche in particular, there are various types of philosophy, only some of which can properly be defined as 'literary'. There was, for instance, a kind of philosophy that was practised and transmitted orally, which survives, for example, in the maxims of the Seven Wise Men and the Orphic testimonies. There was also a tradition of philosophical writing, some of which has survived, which originated with Anaximander. Then we can observe the flourishing season of Platonic literature, with the development of the genre of philosophical dialogue. Finally, beginning with Aristotle and lasting throughout the Hellenistic period, we can note the spread of a veritable scientific philosophical literature in the form of treatises. A summary of this tradition, inevitably trivializing Nietzsche's refined reflections on the early philosophers and Greek wisdom, is beyond the scope of this contribution, as is the much-discussed question of the definition of pre-Platonic philosophers.[18] What is of most interest for the present discussion is one particular aspect of Nietzsche's reconstruction of the history of ancient philosophy: that of the expressive medium.

We have already seen an important distinction, noted by Nietzsche on several occasions, between those philosophers who wrote and those who did not (such as Thales and Socrates), between those who chose the literary medium and those who were faithful to the practice of dialectical discourse and education. This distinction between writing and orality is certainly an important one for Nietzsche, but it is not the decisive one. In fact, he makes another more fundamental, though more sophisticated, distinction, which also constitutes the basis on which the orality/writing distinction is justified: I am referring here to the difference between prose and poetry, between the use of a poetic language subject to the laws of rhythm and metrics and a language closer to everyday common use, stripped of artistic superstructures.

Philosophy originated in Greece at a time when the eminently oral poetic tradition dominated. Contrary to claims regarding orality set out in recent studies,[19] Nietzsche was convinced that the major paradigmatic shift in antiquity – writing supplanting the medium of orality – arose out of the decadence of the poetic medium and the adoption of the prose, which enabled and fostered this transition from orality to writing. If poetry contained sufficient rhythmic and metric structures to communicate ideas without the help of further mnemonic means or material support, it was prose, stripped of such structures, that necessarily made use of the written medium. Nietzsche believed that the Greek philosophical tradition was wholly responsible for the estrangement from poetry and consequently for the eradication of the artistic and artificial aspects (*künstlerisch* and *kunstlich*) of literary production.

Officially, Greek philosophy arose among those wise men active in the area of Miletus, in the Ionian region of Asia. The first 'philosopher', Thales, did not produce books. He was among those who did not write (οἱ μηδὲν γράφουτες).[20] The first true philosophical literary tradition dates back to Anaximander, who was active in the same area. The fact that philosophy, understood as a literary genre, emerged in the Asiatic Ionian region had an impact upon the development of its character and the literary form it would adopt. In this region, the dialect used in the poetic tradition was, in fact, neo-Ionic, derived from the ancient Ionic one employed by Homer, but from which it differed considerably. Many authors composed their work using this dialect: Mimnermus, Archilochus and Herodotus, through to Hippocrates, Democritus and all the first philosophers. This dialect favoured the development of expression in prose and, before Gorgian rhetoric determined the hegemony of the Attic dialect, it was the dialect of the prose par excellence. Even poetry produced in the neo-Ionic dialect – iambic and elegiac – was closer in character to the spoken language and was very similar rhythmically to the prose. An elegy, for example, was not sung per se but recited over a musical accompaniment. The iambic verse, in turn, had rhythmic affinity with the spoken language, hence the reason it became incorporated into the dialogue of tragedy.

This development of a scientific and philosophical prose, which, originating in the Ionian area, then became Panhellenic, contrasts with another written tradition that favoured the metric form as the worthiest expression of the highest truths:

> The context of philosophical prose writing was opposed by several philosophers who made use of the metron i.e. they continued to employ it. In such cases, the prejudice against prose remained; on the other hand, the poet within these philosophers was not completely suppressed. Indeed, some of them, like Empedocles and Parmenides, had something visionary about them. (KGW II/5, 188)

This poetic–philosophical current recognized the Orphic and Dionysian traditions as precursors, and it has been linked as well to Pythagoras. It, nonetheless, remained marginal despite its longevity when compared to the advancement of a philosophical and scientific discourse that was better suited to the precision of prose. The development and affirmation of this literary, scientific and philosophical prose was a constant yet controversial process.

The reasons behind the Greeks' distrust of a phenomenon that was produced in its very own bosom were essentially threefold and related to 1) the extraordinary prestige of the poetic medium, which was held in high esteem in Greece; 2) the consequent distrust of writing; and 3) a general misunderstanding of science. This last point is particularly interesting. Nietzsche observes in *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* (KGW II/4, 233) that, although the tradition concerning the ancient philosophers tended to treat them with the respect they deserved, they were, nonetheless, considered as foreigners – literally rather than merely figuratively. Indeed, they were supposed to be Thracians, Phoenicians, Egyptians or, at the very least, Sicilians; philosophers, in other words, were attributed every possible lineage other than Greek in order to demonstrate that philosophy was not born in Greece but was something imported, barbaric even or, in any case, derived from foreign teaching.[21]

> The aversion of classical Hellenism to the rigors of science (as opposed to the rigors of life) in favour of good deeds is best demonstrated in the Athenian (φιλόλογος)

> Socrates: the philosophers before him (a small number!) have done a tremendous job in mathematics, astronomy and physics. Since now, of course, Thales is a real Phoenician, Pythagoras a disciple of the Egyptians, and Democritus, a real scientific type, is perhaps a Thracian, as was the case for the scientific historian Thucydides. Socrates made fun of these scientific people, saying that astronomy was something for night guards and sailors and one should not want to know what the gods have kept in store for them … Of course, science then became honourable again thanks to a half-Macedonian (like Aristotle) and many half- and pure Egyptians and Semites, so that the Alexandrian heyday of science could finally appear as a product of the Greek spirit. (KGW II/5, 311–12)

As for the second point, that of writing, its use was not unknown in ancient Greece, but it was limited to inscriptions or commercial practices.

> What of the manner in which writing was later held in high esteem, to the extent that education became solely a literary one? Scientific-minded individuals – mathematicians, astronomers, doctors and natural scientists – promoted this widespread respect for writing. Writing allowed them to present their ideas as purely as possible, leaving emotion aside. Now, this is precisely why writing in general can be so difficult to understand: sentiment and emotion are not easy to express using signs. Question marks, exclamation marks and so on are very poor aids in this respect. But if one wants to express thoughts as purely as possible, as, for example, in the fields of mathematics, physics and logic, then writing is sufficient because it seeks to avoid affect. (KGW II/5, 282–3)

Gradually, through dialects like the neo-Ionic one, flat and devoid of the ornaments of poetic language, and through writing that stabilized linguistic processes, the thought that made use of such instruments came to be fixed and specified, caught up in a virtuous circle of mutual determination:

> The greater the desire for the logic and what is scientific, the more writing gains respect, as the instrument for them. Now, this could be called one of the Greeks' greatest achievements: to gradually prepare their language for the task of communicating thoughts and knowledge; all sorts of clever ways of avoiding the difficulties of this task are invented. … The extraordinary pride felt by the Greeks upon rendering their language sober, flexible and logical filtered through to the people; the masses recognized this phenomenon in Euripides and by the philosophers. This in turn increased the value of writing. Euripides was the first great reader among the poets (indeed, he owned a library); Aristotle, the first logician, was given the nickname ἀναγνώστης [reader] by Plato. (KGW II/5, 283)

In the process of rendering the Greek language 'scientific' and a medium for philosophy, writing has only an auxiliary value with respect to prose. Prose is the real medium of philosophical language, which opposes the artifices of poetry and pursues the objective of stripping language of all that is superfluous, enabling reason and that which is essential to speech to emerge. The struggle for prose (KSA 7:37[4]) over poetry is at the same time a struggle for science, for accuracy, for the precision of expression that corresponds to thought. And it is within this 'scientific' current, at a particularly advanced stage, that the figure of Epicurus can be located, and the value of his prose understood.

In his letter to Köselitz of the end of August 1883, cited at the beginning of this discussion, Nietzsche recalls his past philological studies: 'I worked on *Democritea* and *Epicurea* zealously enough' (KSB 6:460). For those of us who have an in-depth knowledge of the scientific production of the philologist Nietzsche, this statement cannot help but be surprising. In fact, if the works that Nietzsche refers to as his *Democritea* are more or less well known,[22] the same cannot be said of *Epicurea*. In the philological notes, Epicurus is always mentioned alongside the theoretician of atomism, appearing as his subordinate. In this game of cross-reference between two authors – about whom we have little information and of whose work only a few traces remain – Epicurus plays the role of the epigone. He is the one who shares the spirit of the great Democritus, adopting and propagating his theories.

At this stage in Nietzsche's reflection, the statement about the identity – of philosophical contents and aspiration – between Democritus and Epicurus is especially important. It allows us, in fact, to recognize a characterization of Epicurus as a 'scientific' spirit, following the more closely delineated description of Democritus by Nietzsche. Democritus is, in fact, defined by Nietzsche as

> a confident rationalist who believes in the redemptive action of his system and considers everything bad and unfinished outside of it. In this way he attains, the first among the Greeks, a scientific character. This consists in the attempt to explain a quantity of phenomena in a unitary way without calling for help at the most critical moments, a *deus ex machina*. This new scientific type made a great impression on the Greeks. … Democritus himself perceived this as a new principle of life; a scientific discovery was more precious to him than the whole Persian kingdom. (BAW III, 348)

The scientific character as a distinctive marker – this time explicit – of the philosopher Epicurus clearly emerges in a fragment from 1878 (KSA 8:33[9]) in which Nietzsche questions the idea of Europe and the spirit of modernity that informs it. This important fragment can only really be understood once we have dealt with the rather ambitious historical–philosophical and literary scenario I have been outlining since the beginning of this contribution. According to the Nietzschean reconstruction contained in this fragment, the Greek culture that generated the philosophical tradition was nurtured from the outset by 'Thracian and Phoenician elements … that constituted its first … scientific cores (*wissenschaftliche keime*)' (KSA 8:33[9]). Once more we find the 'foreign' elements that constituted the first components of ancient scientific thought, of which Nietzsche speaks in the Lessons.

Epicurus plays a central role in the historical–cultural reconstruction of fragment 33[9]. For Nietzsche, he is, in fact, the most evolved interpreter of the scientific spirit and thirst for knowledge, the apex of what we could define as the *esprit géométrique*

of antiquity. The modern age, continues the fragment, could not outdo Epicurus. Thus, for Nietzsche who, at that time, was engaged in writing his most 'Enlightened' book (*Human, All too Human*), Epicurus's genius and scientific spirit have never been surpassed, let alone matched. As an exponent of the 'scientific' current within Greek thought, Epicurus wrote in prose. He produced large quantities of text rather rapidly, that is, without much consideration, since his prose had to be stripped of all artifice in order to achieve its goal without unnecessary hindrance. If Plato wrote during a period that was still greatly influenced by orality, in which the laws of rhetoric supplanted those of metrics in giving rhythm to the philosophical style, Epicurus, belonging to the generation that followed Aristotle, already lived in the age of the reader (ἀναγνωστικοι) and despised the artifices of Platonic language.[23] Epicurus did not write badly, 'but recognized only the stylistic principle of clarity; it is thus not even difficult to write, if one does not care about the inconstant artistic judgment' (KGW II/5, 31).

The war he waged against the beautiful form [*Kampf gegen die schöne Form*] (KGW II/5, 216) was the same one waged against the poetic residues and frills of Isocratic prose, which constituted the rhetorical evolution of the world of poetic orality, up to that point dominant in Greece and never completely overcome. What this battle against beautiful writing sought was the achievement of clarity, the *Deutlichkeit* as Nietzsche defined it, adopting a Leibnizian term, which was indispensable to scientific writing. Following the example of Epicurus, and in order to free himself from the fetters of the modern style, Nietzsche sought the application of an ancient precept: just as it took the adepts five years of silence before they could access the rudiments of initiatory knowledge, so Nietzsche wished his contemporaries well:

> Five-year Pythagorean prohibition on reading … 'Beautiful style' is an invention of the flashy orators. Why should one take such pains with language! Clarity is enough, as Epicurus believed. (KSA 7:37[5]; trans. Richard T. Gray)

Conclusion: A difficult facility

As Epicurus says, why take so much care over language if clarity is enough? This question should be addressed to Nietzsche himself, who devoted some of his most beautiful pages throughout his career – not only in these philological texts but also in the famous 'New Prefaces' to his philosophical writings – to his obsession with style, his search for his own style and his study of the style of other authors. *Epicurus and Style* is the title of an important fragment from the years 1876–77, produced either at the same time as or shortly after the *Lessons on the History of Greek Literature* cited so far: fragment 23[7]. This fragment explains precisely what kind of 'clarity' Epicurus aspired to, and how his quick and careless style actually masked an effective kind of working upon the language:

> Epicurus's position on style is typical in many respects. He believed he could return to nature because he wrote as he liked. In reality, so much concern for expression was inherited and raised in him that he only let himself go a little bit and yet was not completely free and unconstrained. The 'nature' he achieved was the instinct for style which was drawn by habit. This is called naturalism: one stretches the bow a little more slackly, e.g. Wagner in his behaviour towards music and the art of singing. The Stoics and Rousseau are naturalists in the same sense: mythology of nature! (KSA 8:23[7])

In this important fragment many key words from Nietzschean philosophy can be noted. Let us look at some of them. The naturalness (*Naturalisiren*) of the Epicurean style is, for Nietzsche, the very opposite of *laisser aller* (*sich gehen lassen*) or of a style lacking in care. If Epicurus aims to achieve the clarity and immediacy of a style that imitates nature, the result he achieves is something other, indeed. His 'Nature' is a nature in quotations, which is only attainable after a long period of practice (*Gewohnheit*). It is not the uncultivated Rousseauvian nature of man that precedes all forms of education; rather, it is a product of education itself, it is a habit. It is therefore an example of that 'Second Nature' (*Zweite Natur*) of which Nietzsche speaks in the second *Untimely Meditation*[24] that overlaps with the First Nature and which, through effort and care, becomes so well assimilated that it seems (and definitively is) more natural than nature itself. This nature that contradicts nature (GS 80), and thus surpasses it, is the fruit of labour, of rules and of a style that has been acquired. In contrast to the 'Mythology of Nature' of Rousseau or the Stoics (the latter of whom wrote badly spontaneously or on purpose!), the naturalness of Epicurus's sober style is actually the artistic product of elaborate finesse.

In the group of aphorisms 37 of 1874, quoted earlier on several occasions, together with the numerous mentions of Epicurus, Nietzsche lists a series of observations on the style of the ancient philosophers, the practice of writing well and the stylistic strategies to be adopted. Among these notes, one in particular, 'The simple comes last and is most difficult',[25] recalls the famous definition of Great Style from the *Lessons on the History of Greek Rhetoric*:

> The great 'style' is difficult to grasp: it is strange how the liberating and perfection-seeking geniuses of an art, because they remove the constraints and explicit characteristics [*Maniere*] of the genres and take possession of their means, easily give their contemporaries the impression of being naturalists or virtuosos or even amateurs. (KGW II/4, 394)

The simplicity to which Epicurus aspires is the final and most difficult element, achieved only after much work has been performed upon the language. This difficult simplicity is the purest feature of an author's style; it represents the most personal and spontaneous form of expression he can reach, without being the most primitive and crude. Again, in fragment 37[4]: 'When effective, a good text will cause one to forget that it is a literary work; it is effective in the same way as the words and actions of a friend' (KSA, 7, 37[4]; translation Richard T. Gray).

Why, then, should so much effort be put into language? Here we unmask the rhetorical question posed by Nietzsche to Epicurus.[26] *Deutlichkeit* is enough, according to Epicurus, but it is also the hardest thing to achieve. Of all the ancient philosophers,

Epicurus thus became a model for Nietzsche. 'It is time to begin a life-long work on language' (KSA 7: 37[4]; trans. Richard T. Gray). Owing to Nietzsche's constant search for his own style, a style capable of conveying his philosophical message, he is perhaps one of the few authors to have sought so ambitiously to thematize the question of style. For Nietzsche, the question of literary style is an all-embracing one. It concerns primarily literature or writing, which, in modern times, has become an indispensable medium for communicating a philosophical message. Moreover, the writing style speaks to us of the human being in his totality: it reveals to us the character, experience and feelings of a thinker – of a people or nation even – which the style of national literature inevitably discloses.

This is the reason for Nietzsche's enthusiasm and his hope of being able to 'read' Epicurus after the (not new) discovery of the Villa of the Papyri. The 'hand' of the writer Epicurus would allow Nietzsche to 'feel the character of Epicurus' (GS 45) in order to fully understand his thoughts and spirituality.[27] As his correspondence with Köselitz reveals,[28] Nietzsche had repeatedly been compared to Epicurus and this was, for him, a particularly welcome comparison.[29] As other contributions in this collection will certainly highlight, Nietzsche recognizes himself in many aspects of Epicurus's philosophy: his tragic pessimism; his understanding of pain;[30] his heroic attitude, at the same time, titanic and enlightened, towards death (KSA 8:28[15]); and, last but not least, in his Dionysian response to existence, which decreed ostracism on the part of the later philosophical traditions, including the Christian one.[31]

Epicurus can also be considered, in many respects, quasi an alter ego for Nietzsche. Regardless of the validity (or not) of this comparison, there is at least one element that allows us to affirm that Nietzsche somehow recognized himself in Epicurus, an element that is once again closely linked to the kind of literary and stylistic reflection I have been outlining throughout this contribution. 'Einige werden posthum geboren' is the famous motto according to which Nietzsche delivers his work to posterity in *Anti-Christ* and *Ecce Homo*.[32] We find almost no major philosophical work in which Nietzsche does not declare himself a member of that group of posthumous men who were misunderstood or misinterpreted by their contemporaries, only to be understood by future generations. 'Posthumous men are misunderstood, but better heard than the actual men. Or, more strictly: they are never understood: and therefore their authority (comprendre c'est égaler)' (KSA 12:9[76]). Among these posthumous men, Epicurus is one of the few to be explicitly mentioned.

> *The eternal Epicurus*. Epicurus has lived in all ages and still lives on, unknown to those who called and call themselves Epicureans, and without any reputation among the philosophers. He himself forgot his own name, too: it was the heaviest burden that he ever cast off. (WS 227)

Now, being posthumous is a typical characteristic of literary works. The posthumous existence of an author like Epicurus or Nietzsche is determined by his writing as well as by his philosophy. In Nietzsche's case, the adoption of – or search for – a particular style essentially prevented his contemporaries from understanding his work. If an individual cannot read a text, it stands to reason that he cannot understand it. Nietzsche, like Epicurus, wrote with posterity in mind; his writing paved the way for his posterity. In this sense, the work of both Epicurus and Nietzsche can be considered as a formative pathway or philosophical school that educates thought, rendering it capable of autonomously attaining those goals that traditional philosophies claim to be readily available and explained to the intellect.

Notes

1 Note: All quotations from Nietzsche's published works, KGW, BAW, KSB, KSA as well as some posthumous fragments are my translations. The only exceptions are Richard T. Gray's translation of some of the unpublished notes from KSA, which are duly noted, and Gary Handwerk's translation for WS (both translations for Stanford University Press).

2 See in particular the following letters to Köselitz; 22 January 1879 (KSB 5:799), 8 December 1881 (KSB 6:177), 1 July 1883 (KSB 6:428), 3 August 1883 (KSB 6:446) and a letter of the end of August 1883 (KSB 6:460).

3 I am referring to the famous Villa of the Papyri, probably owned by Lucio Calpurnio Pisone Cesonino, patron of the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus of Gadara. The discovery of the villa and its papyrus scrolls was not really 'news'. In fact, it was discovered in the eighteenth century, with the papyrus being found as early as 1752. Attempts to unroll the charred papyrus to read its contents had already begun in the eighteenth century and one of the last attempts during Nietzsche's time was made at the Louvre in Paris in 1877. The enthusiasm and novelty expressed by Nietzsche can perhaps be explained as a kind of concession vis-à-vis the recipient of his letter, Heinrich Köselitz, who had little or no knowledge of the 'state of the art' regarding Epicurean papyrology.

4 'It is one of the ironies of fate, that we have to believe a Seneca in favour of Epicurean manliness and loftiness of soul – Seneca, a man to whom one should, on the whole, always lend an ear, but never give one's faith and trust. In Corsica people say: Seneca è un birbone [Seneca is a rascal]' (Translation by Anthony M. Ludovici). The source for this motto is Ferdinand Gregorovius, *Corsica* (Stuttgart: Cotta 1869), 252.

5 The term 'book' (*biblos*) here does not correspond to today's meaning, which identifies a single independent work, but to a unit measuring the material on which it was written (the papyrus scroll). Each work in the modern sense, therefore, was made up of several 'books'. Nietzsche confuses the number of 'books' to be attributed to Epicurus. He speaks in his *Lessons* of 600 books (KGW II/5, 187), while Diogenes Laertius mentions 300 books. Three hundred books are correctly mentioned in BGE 7.

6 In his writings on Diogenes Laertius's sources (KGW II/1, 75–167,191–245), Nietzsche offers a convincing reason for the biographer's sympathy towards Epicurus. One of the main sources for the *Lives* was, in fact, Diocles of Magnesia, author of a *Life of the Philosophers* and a *Compendium of Philosophers*. His work was substantially copied by Diogenes, who admits to being an ardent defender of Epicurean thought.

7 See the famous Myth of Theuth in Plato's *Phaedrus*: 'The story goes that Thamus said many things to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts, which it would take too long to repeat; but when they came to the letters, "This invention, O king," said Theuth, "will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for

it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered." But Thamus replied, "Most ingenious Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only appear wise' (Plato 1913: 274e–5b).

8 See the letter to Pherecydes that Diogenes Laertius reports as being attributed to the 'non-writer' Thales, and which Nietzsche recalls several times: 'I hear that you intend to be the first Ionian to expound theology to the Greeks. And perhaps it was a wise decision to make the book common property without taking advice, instead of entrusting it to any particular persons whatsoever, a course which has no advantages. However, if it would give you any pleasure, I am quite willing to discuss the subject of your book with you; and if you bid me come to Syros I will do so. For surely Solon of Athens and I would scarcely be sane if, after having sailed to Crete to pursue our inquiries there, and to Egypt to confer with the priests and astronomers, we hesitated to come to you. For Solon too will come, with your permission. You, however, are so fond of home that you seldom visit Ionia and have no longing to see strangers, but, as I hope, apply yourself to one thing, namely writing, while we, who never write anything, travel all over Hellas and Asia' (Diogenes Laertius I, 43–4). The irony of this letter – written by someone who criticizes a man who spends all his time writing and doing little else – is that it contains a summary of all the ancient controversies surrounding the use of writing in the philosophical sphere.

9 The reference is to Plato's *Phaedrus* (Harold North Flower translation).

10 KGW II/5, 217. In reality Diogenes Laertius X.120 says, 'He will leave written words behind him, but will not compose panegyric.'

11 KGW II/5, 321. The reference is to Plato's *Phaedrus* (1913: 276e).

12 A criticism of journalism can also be found in a fragment from 1874 (KSA 7:37[5]), which I will return to shortly in a context that once again references Epicurus.

13 The source is Val. Max., III, 7.

14 'perfectus Epicureus evaserat, minime aptum ad dicendum genus' (Cicero, 131).

15 In Hellenistic times, polyhistory or polymatia meant the encyclopaedic knowledge that men of letters, polygraphs in particular, demonstrated. 'Writing a lot' and 'knowing a lot' are two different phenomena that, even today, rightly or wrongly, are considered to be closely linked.

16 KGW II/5, 218. The last quotation is Diogenes Laertius X.6.

17 Rose (1863: 121). Nietzsche was very familiar with this work and its author, as evidenced by the numerous mentions in the Nachlass 1867–8. He reviewed, indeed, another work by the same author, Rose (1868).

18 I would instead encourage you to refer to the many studies, including recent ones, that have tackled this issue. To quote some main references: Laks (2018) and Ghedini (1999).

19 Havelock (1981), Havelock (1986), Ong (1982) and Lord (1960).

20 See note 8.

21 Herodotus, who probably travelled to Egypt, claimed that the Greeks had learned science from the Egyptians and that he himself had discovered how even sacred elements had been imported from Egypt to Greece.

22 A series of unpublished notes on the tradition of the constitution of the *corpus democriteum*: BAW III, 245–79, 332–5, 344–50, 362–8; BAW IV, 36–106. This project of Nietzsche was set aside once the thesis that fuelled its conception collapsed. According to Nietzsche's hypothesis, the *corpus democriteum* – of which only a few fragments and mentions of some titles remain – was the result of an erudite falsification made in Roman times by the publisher Thrasil of Mende, a grammarian active in Emperor Tiberius's circle.

23 See Epicurus's famous criticism of the Platonists as being *Dionysokolax* (BGE 7), which was a term used to describe actors (Diognes Laertius X.8). This was because of the particular mise en scène of their philosophy, language and all practices within the academy. Plato himself was called a great Cagliostro by Nietzsche (KSA 13:14[116]), precisely in relation to Epicurus's aforementioned critique. Nietzsche deployed this term when describing another great 'magician' and 'necromancer', the musician Wagner, who used artistic reform as a weapon of seduction.

24 HL 3. Also see KSA 1: 684.

25 KSA 7:37[3]; translation Richard T. Gray.

26 See KSA 7:37[5].

27 See the letter to Köselitz, 1 July 1883 (KSB 6:428) on the bust of Epicurus and its expressiveness that betrays will power and spirituality, both conceived as intellectual gifts.

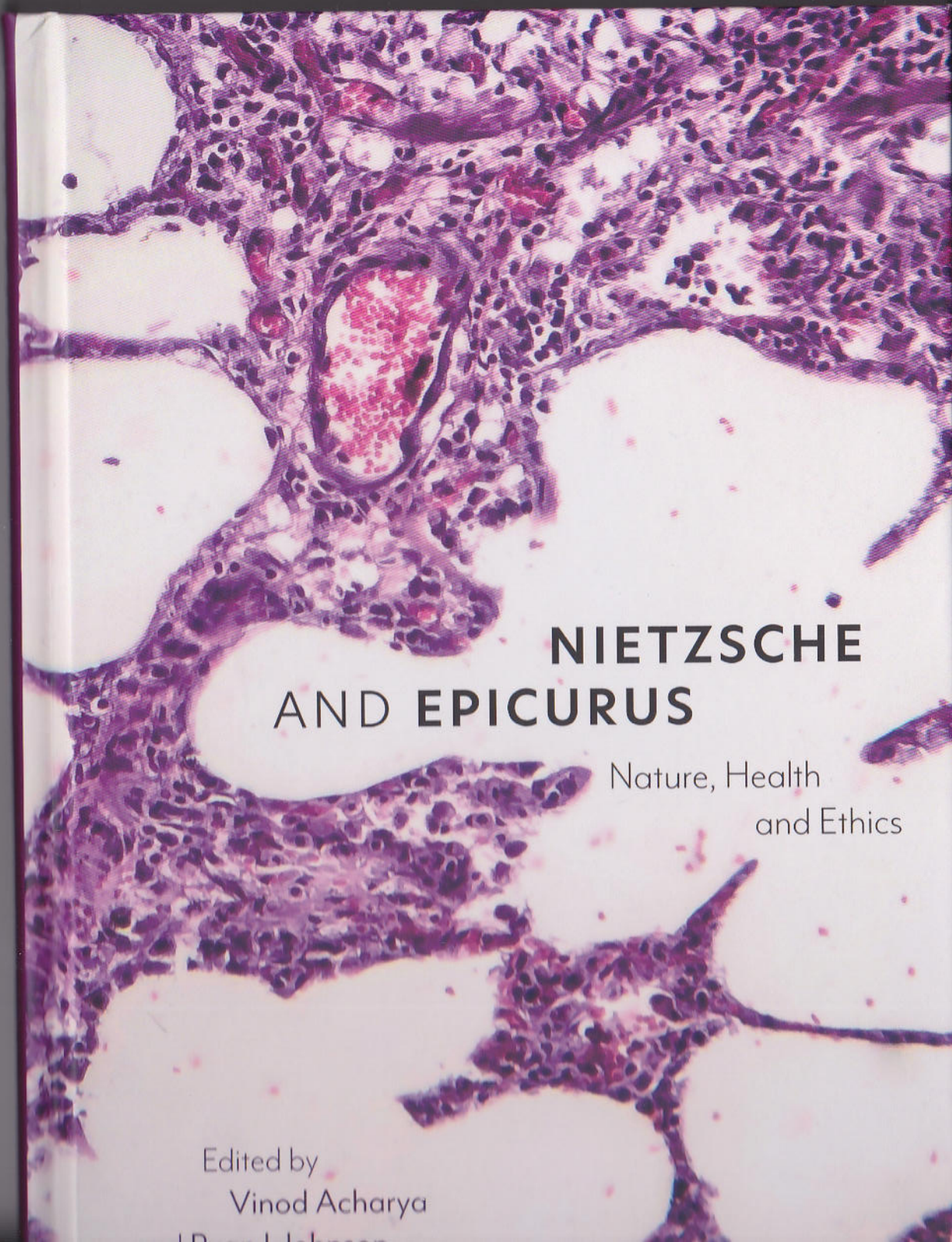
28 See note 1.

29 To Köselitz, 8 December 1881, KSB 6:177.

30 To Köselitz, 22 January 1879, KSB 5:799.

31 'Dionysian' and 'Epicurean' are commonly (and wrongly) considered as synonyms in the everyday use of these terms.

32 A 'Foreword'; EH 'Books' 1.



NIETZSCHE AND EPICURUS

Nature, Health and Ethics

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