

Shooting with Arrows: Archery Symbolism in Nietzsche's Agonism

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The bow's name is life, but its job is death!

(Heraclitus, Fragment 48)

Nietzsche frequently uses archery symbolism throughout his writings. Archery may be the most used sport metaphor in Nietzsche's texts, whether he uses it in a sport context¹ or not. The bow is one of the oldest and deadliest weapons in human history;² it was used in military warfare for millennia until firearms were invented in the modern age. Bow was also used as a weapon or a tool of contest in ancient times. It is known that Egyptian pharaohs and Chinese kings entertained archery tournaments at their courts. Ancient Greeks used archery in their warfare, but did not compete in this field at their Panhellenic sites. This is especially odd—or maybe due to the marginal role given to archery in Greek warfare—given the prominence of the use of bow in ancient Greek history and mythology. From Homer we have at least two stories; the first one is Odysseus' shooting of Penelope's

1 Nietzsche was exposed to archery at a young age: "...The school curriculum included archery..." Hayman's *Nietzsche: A Critical Life*, New York: Penguin, 1980, p. 21.

2 For the history of archery, see Theodore R. Whitman's *The History of Archery*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2017.

suitors after he returns to Ithaca; Penelope incites all the suitors to compete with Odysseus' bow and when it is Odysseus' turn he shoots all the suitors with his own bow. The second one is the story of Philoctetes, who is stranded on Lemnos due to a snake bite, but who is needed with his Herculean bow for the capture of Troy.

Archery symbolism³ appears in many different world myths. In Ramayana, one of the oldest Hindu myths, Rama must pick up the giant bow of Shiva and shoot with it in order to gain the hand of Sita. In *Mahabharata*, there is an archery contest. Nietzsche may have been aware of the presence of archery in different world myths in addition to those of ancient Greece and medieval Germany; notwithstanding this awareness, for Nietzsche archery becomes yet another symbol of struggle and a symbol in Zarathustra's cosmic symbolism. Nietzsche also refers to the myth of Philoctetes in his writings; in one of his notes, he responds to Philoctetes by saying: "Without my arrow the Troy of knowledge will not be conquered." Prior to this, he writes: "With higher types of beings, knowledge too will have new forms, which are not yet needed."⁴ Here the emphasis revolves around 'knowledge,' while Philoctetes' bow and arrow stand for the key or the passage to that knowledge that conquers. In another passage, it is simply a symbol of conquest: "Every Philoctetes knows that without his bow and arrow Troy will not be conquered."⁵ Finally,

3 As for the etymology of related words, 'bow' is a Germanic word connected to the German *bogen*, which derives from *biegen* (to bend or bow). 'Arrow' is also Germanic, possibly from Old Norse. And 'archery' is a Latin based Anglo-French word, which means maker of arrow or someone who shoots with arrows. The 'bow' both in German and English *knows* how to revere and yet how to destroy, summed up mythically in the idea of godly destruction, as in Shiva or Poseidon. Whatever bends must also *unbend* itself, hence the functions of tension and release.

4 KSA 11, p.211 (translation is mine).

5 KSA 12, p.89 (translation is mine).

archery symbolism appears in Stoic writings.⁶ Epictetus, for example, uses archery within the context of correct judgment; a good Stoic should be concerned, not with wealth, health or office, but rather with the care of one's mind and the improvement of judgment, and, with correct judgment, ought to hit the mark better than the archer (*Enchiridion*, Chapter VI).

What is striking about contest in archery in relation to other forms of contest is how it best exemplifies Nietzsche's idea of transfiguration of war into contest; a weapon of annihilation turns into a weapon of competition. We may also list sports like shooting and fencing in this respect. All three sports are now fields of competition in the Olympic games.⁷ In this essay, I will study Nietzsche's use of archery within the context of his agonistic philosophy⁸ and highlight three areas for this investigation: 1) truth-telling and shooting with an arrow, 2) tension and release of tension (or *Gelassenheit*), and 3) the rational and the non-rational, thoughts and maxims.

I. Truth-Telling and Arrow Shooting

How the Persians are raised: to shoot with a bow and to tell the truth. (KSA 7, p. 795)

How the Persians were educated: to shoot with a bow and to tell the truth.

(CWN 11, p.350)

⁶ For this reference, I am indebted to Joshua Hall who brought it to my attention in a recent meeting in May 2020; he also mentioned Pierre Hadot's writings on the Stoics in this context.

⁷ For information, one may visit the official site of the Olympic Movement at <http://www.olympic.org/archery-equipment-and-history?tab=History>.

⁸ For an extensive study of Nietzsche's agonistic philosophy, readers may consult with my book, *Agon in Nietzsche*, Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2013. For a shorter study, a prolegomena to this book, my essay "Agon Symbolism in Nietzsche," published in *Nikephoros* would be more appropriate.

In many different texts Nietzsche associates truth-telling⁹ with arrow shooting. This association may reveal some aspects of Nietzsche's conception of truth. The arrow pierces, penetrates into depths, and shatters. It is painful for the human body and can injure or kill. Nietzsche often reserves this metaphor from archery for poetic or aphoristic truths:

Rhymes are deadly little arrows.
See the tremor, see the quiver
When they pierce the vital marrows
Of the lizard, or his liver! (GS, "The Poet's Call," 353)

This is consistent with Nietzsche's notion that truth at bottom is a metaphor, which we have forgotten is a metaphor, not in poetic language, but in conceptual language. Metaphor is fluid and fleeting like an arrow, which can reach depths and heights. Furthermore, the overhuman must be an arrow and a longing for one's friend (TSZ I, "On the Friend"): the context here is enemy-friend; in a friend one should honor the enemy and have one's best enemy. In agonism, the enemy is the measuring stick through whom one strives for higher goals; through the enemy one learns one's weakness and strength. The enemy is the mirror for the agonist. Nietzsche here brings the two ideas together, bridging the gap through the metaphor of *Bogen*; one bows before the enemy/friend and yet one also fights against that enemy/friend as the arrow creates an intimate link¹⁰ between the two.

⁹ This essay is not about truth in Nietzsche. For a discussion of this topic, I refer readers to Jean Granier's *Le problème de la vérité dans la philosophie de Nietzsche* and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's *Metaphysics without Truth*.

¹⁰ I will not enter into a discussion of phallic symbolism of the arrow and the eroticism implicit in this passage from TSZ, "On the Friend;" I will leave it to psychoanalysts. Let it suffice here to say that in Greek the friend could also be the lover; therefore, there can be an erotic bond among enemy/friends, an association that often eludes the modern reader.

The association between archery and overhumanly goals is repeated in different parts of *Zarathustra*. Right at the outset, Zarathustra warns the people at the market place against the *last man* and the complacency of his not whirring bow: “Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer shoot the arrow of his longing beyond man, and the string of his bow will have forgotten how to whir!” (TSZ I, 129). The bow here is a symbol for struggle and creation, fitting with the goals of the overhuman, but one must beware of the last man who becomes an impediment to struggle! While this passage emphasizes the struggle and its pitfalls, like the last man, the passage in “On Old and New Tablets” underlies the goals in a cosmic symbolism: “—That I may one day be ready and ripe in the Great Midday:—ready for myself and for my most hidden Will: a bow lusting for its arrow, an arrow lusting for its star:—a star ready and ripe in its midday, glowing, penetrated, blissful with annihilating sun-arrows:—...” (TSZ III, 187) Here the bow and the arrow have to do with distant and higher goals that would take the overhuman to victory, to midday or the high noon, the point of high transformation under the bright sun. The arrow then stands for that strife for those heights. Finally, Nietzsche explains the main character of his book, Zarathustra, by way of archery symbolism and what was precious to Persians: truth-telling and shooting well with arrows (EH, “Why I am a Destiny,” § 3, 328). Here Nietzsche turns Zarathustra upside down: He now has to re-learn how to use the bow and how to shoot well so as to undo his initial metaphysical/moral lie, which he paradoxically presents as truthfulness, and this time shoot for *truthfulness*.

In another passage, Nietzsche relates archery to silence. “One can remain silent only when one has the bow and the arrow: otherwise, one chatters —and squabbles.” (KSA 10, 117, translation is mine). This note is from the time period when he was writing *Zarathustra* and many passages around this one passage have to do with overhumans, creators and gods. One must speak truthfully, for which one needs the bow and the arrow; otherwise, one must remain silent even if that silence entails suffering (when necessary, one must suffer in silence, a sign of noble character, lest

the expression of suffering of one’s own or others turn into pity). Silence is a theme that appears in different parts of *Zarathustra* and plays a significant role in Zarathustra’s journey. Zarathustra too suffers in silence in his cave, usually surrounded by his animals who cannot chatter. It is not a coincidence that the declaration of pity as a form of illness also appears in this passage: “I presuppose pity [in this context it is better to translate *Mitleid* as pity] to be a brain- and nerve-illness.” (KSA 10, 117, translation is mine). Finally, silence relates to steadiness which is discussed below.

In the following passages I will emphasize six points to illustrate how the use of archery symbolism in Nietzsche’s works squares with his agonistic philosophy.

Directness. Arrow shooting is transparent and direct, as it happens in an open field. This is similar to agonistic struggle between approximate equals. Unlike other forms of contest, in an archery contest opponents do not target each other, but rather compete for distance and precision (the former in ancient archery contests). Nonetheless, one faces one’s enemy openly and under the agreed upon norms of contest.

Stillness. One must concentrate on the shooting and maintain stillness to be able to hit the target. This is one of the crucial things archers learn in their training, and it is cultivated in meditative silence. However, this is not a silence that is devoid of agonism—this is where Nietzsche departs from many religions and their conception of non-agonistic meditation or peacefulness¹¹—but rather a silence that leads to victory, a silence with victory: “Let your work be a struggle. Let your peace be a victory! One can be silent and sit still only when one has bow and arrow: else one chatters and quarrels. Let your peace be a victory!” (TSZ I, “On War and Warriors.” p. 159). This is a stillness of strength for overhumanly victories!

11 See TI, “Anti-Nature Morality.”

Strength. The bow stands for strength; one can shoot arrows in all directions and from long distance. In ancient warfare armies that had an archery division had tremendous advantage. The Persian army was deadly because of its superior division of archers.¹² One can even use the bow against gods, as Nietzsche writes in his notes shortly before he started writing *Zarathustra*: “I have a bow, gods! What a bow — a good bow against gods themselves!” (KSA 10,184, translation is mine). As much as the bow is a sign of strength, it is also a sign of danger; it is dangerous for the archer and his enemy/friend.

Danger. To have a bow or to hold a bow is dangerous; it is already a sign of height from where one can inflict pain and destruction. In his poem “From High Mountains, Aftersong,” Nietzsche the poet sends deadly threats to his enemy/friends:

A wicked archer I've become.—The ends
Of my bow kiss:
Only the strongest bends his bow like this.
No arrow strikes like that which my bow
sends:
Away from here—for your own good, my
friends!— (BGE, 243)

Distance. With an arrow one can reach remote goals and targets. Distance also connotes yearning; the overhuman yearns for higher goals. ‘Arrow’ and ‘yearning’ (*Pfeil* and *Sehnsucht*) appear together in three passages in *Zarathustra*: Part I, Preface, §5; “On Friends;” and “On Child and Marriage.”

¹² Miltiades had close knowledge of this fact because he had once worked for the Persian army. According to Herodotus, at the battle of Marathon he came up with a stratagem that undid this superiority of the Persians. Centuries later archers mounted on horses became deadly weapons in Mongolian and Turkic armies.

This is a specific type of yearning, as one yearns for a higher goal than one can achieve; in terms of the archery metaphor, one can yearn for a goal insofar as one can reach it with an arrow, or else one may meet one’s untimely death or the death of one’s youthful visions. One must *know* one’s distance. Arrows can kill, they can kill visions. “Indeed, after you, my dearest friends, malice has ever shot its arrows—to hit my heart. And it hit!” (*Zarathustra* II, “The Tomb Song”)

Precision. Precision is an essential aspect of archery; one must shoot as close to the target as possible. Not only a sharp eye and alignment between the eye and the target, but also stillness is necessary to achieve this goal. To this end, the archer must know his bow and its range very well. Ancient archers were positioned strategically to achieve the greatest impact on their enemies. In archery contests the winner is determined by the proximity of the hit to the target. For Nietzsche, his target was his epochal enemies and his readers.

Target. Again the theme of overhumanly goals comes up with archery symbolism, this time in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*. Here Nietzsche raises the flag of rebellion against the epochal values of Occidental Civilization since Plato, as he speaks of tension, the tension of the bow, which stands for epochal conflicts. He calls this tension a “magnificent tension of the spirit.” These conflicts have their ups and downs like the Renaissance and Reformation, but Nietzsche mentions the Counter-Reformation and Enlightenment which come after them: “To be sure, European man experiences this tension as need and distress; twice already attempts have been made in the grand style to unbend the bow—once by means of Jesuitism, the second time by means of the democratic enlightenment..” But these were not sufficient to deal with the tension or to overcome the highest values; what are needed are the overhumans and free spirits who know their goal and who know how to aim at the target: “But ...we *good Europeans* and free, *very* free spirits—we still feel it, the whole need of the spirit and the whole tension of its bow. And perhaps also the arrow, the task, and—who knows?—the goal—. (BGE, Preface, 3-4).

Now we have completed a circle, the circle of overhumanly qualities and tasks from directness to target. Every one of them can be treated more at length than we have done here, but this was a survey of these qualities borrowed from archery.

II. Tension and Release: the Art of Bending

They do not understand how, while differing from, it is in agreement with itself. There is a back-turning connection like that of a bow or lyre.
Heraclitus, Fragment 51

Agonism can be considered as, on the one hand, a reflection of tension and conflict in human life, and, on the other hand, release and resolution of that conflict. One can see sport, play, sex and many other functions in the same way. The bow then is a symbol of this transfiguration of built-up tension into externalization of that tension. As I discuss in my work, *Agon in Nietzsche*, Nietzsche considers this *transfiguration* (*Verklärung*) a genius of agonistic wisdom and expresses it in different ways. It is necessary to have cultural formations in and through which our destructive energies, or what Freud calls the “death drive,” can externalize themselves; or else, we will destroy each other and our planet, which seems to be the dominant trend despite this agonistic wisdom and its revival in our age. Nietzsche’s dictum “Art exists so *that the bow shall not break*”¹³ succinctly exposes this eternal problem. Of course, art can be replaced with a variety of cultural formations, but the context here is Wagner and his project. Like agonism, art too lies in the pathway of transfiguration, and to go even further, we shall not uphold an opposition between art and agonism. The tension that Nietzsche emphasizes in this discussion of Wagner lies in the conflict between the general and the

13 UM IV, sec.4, 213 (emphasis is not mine).

singular, specifically “the tension between the general knowledge of things and the spirited-ethical power of the singular.” (213) Clearly, there are many sources for tension in human life; but this tension between the general and the singular remains a major one.¹⁴ Nietzsche then proceeds to relate this tension to the *tragic*:

The individual must be consecrated to something higher than himself – that is the meaning of tragedy; he must be free of the terrible anxiety which death and time evoke in the individual: for at any moment, in the briefest atom of his life’s course, he may encounter something holy that endlessly outweighs all his struggle and all his distress – this is what it means to have a *sense for the tragic*; all the ennoblement of mankind is enclosed in this supreme task...(213)

Consecration to a higher goal, despite suffering, is what redeems the individual; here the tension between the singular and the general is sustained (the bow is strung) but pushed higher (the bow is released) for the singular who justifies the whole of existence through his/her struggle for the higher goal. Tragedy in this sense forms an uncanny form of transfiguration and scholars are still puzzled at the question of its origin. Along with the individual, the whole community and the spectatorship, are also transfigured, as was the case with Wagner and his spectacle at Bayreuth, according to the young Nietzsche:

14 Time and again we see the subjugation, subsumption, reduction, suppression, and eradication of the singular by the general. This is an endemic problem of the *comédie humaine*.

Und so, wie Wagner sich den Musikern mittheilt, wird sich der Geist und Rhythmus seines Bayreuther Werkes den Schauern und Hörern mittheilen müssen, so daß ihre Seele ausgeweitet, ihre Bogen schon ausgespannt sind, wie nie zuvor: nur dann erst wird das Ungeheure ganz gethan sein, wenn es auch in's Ungeheure wirkt und eine Furche hinter sich aufreißt, welche nicht wieder zugefüllt werden kann. (KSA 8, 227)

This is the tension in the creative deed, which implicates both the artist (in this case, Wagner) and his audience. But the tension must be released so that the bow does not break; hence the cycle of tension and release emblematic of rejuvenated energy: "Allmählich entsteht aus dem solchermassen angeregten – ächten, weil nicht erzwungenen – Nachdenken eine gewisse allgemeine Gefühl der geistigen Erholung, als ob der Bogen wieder mit neuer Sehne bespannt und stärker als je angezogen sei. Man hat mit Nutzen gereist." (KSA 8, 474)

Nietzsche also uses the idea of tension when he explains types and changes from one age to the next along with new types that are bred. Tension must be released so that a new type emerges; this is how out of a warlike aristocratic age a new type of individualism emerges. "Eventually, however, a day arrives when conditions become more fortunate and the tremendous tension decreases; perhaps there are no longer any enemies among one's neighbors, and the means of life, even for the enjoyment of life, are superabundant." (BGE, Aphorism 262) At these turning points of history the initial tension dissolves, yielding a new type of human being, hence a new form of *individualism*. Nietzsche concludes this aphorism by stating what may also come out of the release of such tension: moralizing trends, mediocrities, etc. "Again danger is there, the mother of morals, great danger, this time transposed into the individual.." (BGE, Aphorism 262). The *danger* always presents itself at such turning points of history.

The aphorism quoted above was Nietzsche's *suprahistorical* reflection on history; it was not specific to one historical period, as he gives examples from the Greek *polis* and Venice. In a passage from the *Genealogy*, however, Nietzsche's reflection on tension and danger is specific to the death of God and the *danger* that it poses: "For this is how things are: the diminution and leveling of European man constitutes *our* greatest danger, for the sight of him makes us weary.—" (GM I, §12, 44). Nietzsche presents his metaphor of danger with the image of a bow that oscillates between being strung and released:

How much one is able to endure: distress, want, bad weather, sickness, toil, solitude. Fundamentally one can cope with everything else, born as one is to a subterranean life of struggle; one emerges again and again into the light, one experiences again and again one's golden hour of victory—and then one stands forth as one was born, unbreakable, tensed, ready for new, even harder, remoter things, *like a bow that distress only serves to draw tauter*. (GM I, §12, 44, emphasis is mine).

Now the danger lies in a historical turning point; the arrow that comes out of the released bow can go in many different directions. Only the thinker, the visionary, knows the target, because he has mastered the bow. He knows the pain and the joy which the shooting of an arrow can create: the joy of shooting as an expression of the will to power and the pain from a wound inflicted by an arrow. The anxiety of such a pain is invoked by Nietzsche in many passages (KSA 11, 302, 305, 335, 475, and 480); it is the fear of a strung bow the arrow from which can pierce the good and the virtuous. Despotism operates with the strung bow while using fear and tension as the dominant form of ruling. "The pressure of the Church has created a

magnificent tension of the bow, similarly the monarchy...” (KSA 11, 475). But such a strung bow is bound to fall apart. “The meaning of longer despotic morals: they draw the bow if they do not break it.” (KSA 11, 480). Great human beings, on the other hand, recognize the necessity of tension and release, and their concomitant feelings, including those of pain and pleasure.

Finally, it should be added that tension and release are two significant aspects of competition and sports. One must build tension to be able to compete, hence the heightened emotional state of anxiety when one is before and in the heat of contest, and one must release the tension during the game. Neither tension nor release is linear; therefore, they may be interwoven into each other.

III Maxims and Aphorisms as Arrows

And thunderbolt steers the totality of things.
(Heraclitus, Fragment 64)

Nietzsche often refers to maxims as arrows, as the title of the first section of *The Twilight of Idols* indicates. Thinking and writing as an agonistic platform is pervasive to Nietzsche’s works, but Nietzsche considers the pithy style of aphorisms even more incisive and profoundly painful. In a note from 1885, he writes: “Arrows. Thoughts on and against the European soul” (KSA 11, 474). The title of the collection of poems that Nietzsche appended to *The Gay Science* is indicated as “Songs and Arrows of Prince Vogelfrei” in his notes (KSA 12, 83), but the word ‘arrows’ is deleted from the published version. Nonetheless, the association between the poetic and the aphoristic style of expression and the practice of arrow shooting persists. What does this association mean for Nietzsche?

In Aphorism 617 of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche views Rousseau’s activity as a thinker under this association. Rousseau shoots his poisoned arrows because he is an embittered thinker. There is an analogy here: while the thinker shooting criticisms at his society reflects his character; the archer shows his talent in marksmanship. The metaphor can be extended to other instruments, but Nietzsche often chooses arrow-shooting as his metaphor. In the Nachlass from 1888 (KSA 12, 219), the association between maxims and arrows is made, which is also used in *Twilight of the Idols*. Why does Nietzsche see maxims as arrows? Maxims are poignant, as they are precise and must hit the target. They are insightful and profound and may go deep into the reader’s heart.

Finally, aphorisms and maxims can sink the readers down just like arrows. Although the context in which it appears applies to archaic times when magic and religious cults ruled, the “irrational hand” of the arrow and its capability to sink still apply. “When someone shoots with the bow, there is still an irrational hand and force at work in it...it must be the arrow of a god through whose invisible action a man suddenly sinks down.” (HAH Aphorism 111, 63). I do not suggest that the aphorist engages in sorcery, but rather shoots deadly arrows at the reader the effect of which can be analogous to those of magic and sorcery. Therefore, one must be properly armored to dodge those deadly arrows and not be enamored by the spell of their magic. Nonetheless, their affect may still be felt deeply.

Epilogue

Archery symbolism in Nietzsche is yet another area in which his agonistic rhetoric shows itself. As I argued in my other writings, *Agon in Nietzsche* and “Nietzsche’s Agonistic Rhetoric and its Agonistic Affects,” there is a plethora of agonistic gestures in Nietzsche’s works. Despite my comprehensive treatment of this subject in my book, archery symbolism had not crossed my mind at the time. What makes archery, like fencing and javelin, stand

out in a reading of Nietzsche on agon is the fact that it highlights the power of transfiguration (*Verklärungsmacht*); in all three cases, you can kill your opponents with your weapon if you are in a war, or if you transfigure this drive to kill into sports, you can compete with them, and, if you win or lose, you can still keep competing in the next rounds. When it comes to the bow, there is a backward turning, as Heraclitus says, which most mortals do not understand: “They do not understand how, while differing from (or: being at variance), <it> is in agreement with itself. <There is> a back-turning connection, like <that> of a bow or a lyre.” (Fragment 51) This problem of transfiguration is also addressed by Nietzsche when he discusses the “good Eris” versus “bad Eris” in his “Homer’s Contest,” a theme many scholars, including myself, have addressed. Such transfiguration remains one of the challenges in human life, whether it is in sports or elsewhere; archery as a symbol stands in the midst of it, whether they are gods or athletes or warriors who shoot arrows. Nietzsche captured this human dilemma with his insights and with the arrows he shot as aphorisms, and there is still much uncharted territory for such transfiguration.

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