

CHAPTER ONE



Nietzsche Today

This past summer I attended a conference in Cerisy-la-Salle, France, on the topic of Nietzsche Today? (Nietzsche aujourd'hui?). The title of the conference was formulated as a question and it remained, at least for me, a question throughout the meeting. I have seldom witnessed such a disparity of points of view from which to approach a thinker. This disparity left me at the end of the conference with a somewhat puzzled question mark instead of some kind of focus on the kind of interest in Nietzsche predominant in France and Germany today.

I should like to deal very briefly with a few of the French speakers, then touch upon the German speakers, and conclude with some remarks of my own on the subject of Nietzsche today. These remarks will take the form of questioning his impact on the possible direction of *philosophy* today.

The topics the French speakers chose centered around such questions as Nietzsche's relation to art, teleology, culture and philology. I found some of these papers rather foreign to my own way of thinking, particularly when such Nietzschean concepts as eternal recurrence were interpreted in a pseudo-Freudian manner. Perhaps

one of the most interesting and thought-provoking papers was on dissimulation, by Lacoue-Labarthe, who linked Nietzsche, particularly in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, to the late Schelling in his attempt to escape the confines of simple logic by telling tales or sagas in areas where nothing could be proved or demonstrated. In the late Schelling, myth or *mythos* replaces *logos* in realms that defy rational proof or explanation; as in, for instance, *The Ages of the World*, where Schelling makes the bold attempt to *tell* of the origination of the world.

To turn to the German tradition, with which I am far more familiar, a day was scheduled to discuss Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, but such discussion, insofar as it took place at all, cropped up more informally and sporadically throughout the conference without ever becoming a main topic. Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche as the last figure of metaphysics, whereby the Will to Power is the *essence* of all things and eternal recurrence is the *existence* of all things, was treated with a sort of respectful and cautious distance.

Karl Löwith spoke of Nietzsche's completion of atheism, showing that with Nietzsche the concept "world" ceased to have any connection with God or any possible kind of transcendence. The philosophical relation to be thought had become that of man and world.

Finally, Eugen Fink, who has his own philosophical concept of "world" quite independent of Nietzsche, made the distinction between what is *within* the world (*das Binnenweltliche*) and the world itself. By abolishing the distinction between Being and the world, between Being and becoming, Nietzsche had abandoned ontol-

ogy and attempted to think pure becoming devoid of a substrate of Being.

Instead of trying to develop further what went on in that conference—a conference set in a beautiful Chateau in Normandy a few miles away from a beach where, when the tide was in, the swimming was magnificent; and, when the tide was out, one stared glumly and disconsolately at miles of wet, oozing mud—I should like to present a few thoughts of my own on the topic of Nietzsche Today?

What I should like to talk about briefly is the effect that Nietzsche's thought has had and could have on philosophy. I shall select two of his most controversial and influential ideas: (1) the absolute loss of transcendence (God is dead); and (2) the dethroning of reason as man's most characteristic and cherished faculty. It would seem that these are both "negative" ideas with no positive content—ideas denying nearly a whole historical tradition of Western thinking. That tradition goes back to Plato's correlation of reason (*nous*) with the highest transcendence, the Idea of Good, to which reason alone had access. In their various historical transformations, reason, the highest transcendence, and the correlation between the two have remained decisive throughout the development of philosophy. After a discussion of just what about these ideas Nietzsche is specifically negating, I should like to ask about a new, affirmative direction for philosophy arising out of this negation, not just in spite of it.

Nietzsche's proclamation that God is dead is really more of a philosophical statement than a specifically antireligious, atheistic one. What he is denying most of

all is a transcendent world ("backworld," as he calls it) or realm. Christianity is "Platonism for the people"; and it is, thus, Platonism in his understanding of that term which Nietzsche is primarily denying.

Why should an attack on Platonism have any particular impact for thinkers today? Platonism has undergone many radical transformations and was a target of attack long before Nietzsche. The Platonic forms, for instance, became Ideas in the mind of God with the advent of Christianity. Their existence was denied altogether by the nominalists of the Medieval period who stated that universals were a mere breath of air (i.e., they had only a verbal status, hardly an ontological one.)

Nietzsche's denial of transcendence is more radical than any previous polemic against Platonism. Under the name of Platonism, Nietzsche is attacking *anything at all that transcends man*: God, ground of the world, first cause, highest being, suprasensible being, all being in general in the sense of that which is changeless. He is attacking the *philosophical* concept of God as it has appeared in Western thought. There is nothing beyond man.

This means that there is nothing beyond man in the sense that there is no God of substance or world beyond him. Accordingly, for Nietzsche, the word *transcendence* cannot have its traditional meaning of naming some kind of being but, rather, acquires the meaning of *what man does*; or, rather, has never yet done but *could do*. Nietzsche states repeatedly in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: "Man is something that has to be surpassed." I believe Nietzsche is striving for a new meaning of transcendence. This new meaning is the shift from thinking

transcendence as something beyond man to thinking it as man's activity in transcending his human, all too human condition.

Of course, Nietzsche is hardly the first thinker who wanted to "improve" man. But he saw ominous possibilities in man to a perhaps unprecedented degree—possibilities epitomized in the figure of the last man in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* who hops around like the inextinguishable ground flea, blinking and exulting in the fact that he has found happiness. The small man exemplifies an intolerable aspect of human existence just as it is, lacking any possible dimension of self-overcoming or transcendence. The two attitudes that are Zarathustra's greatest danger, pity (*Mitleid*), and nausea or disgust (*Ekel*), arise in the face of the almost overwhelming pervasiveness of man's smallness, arise from the fact that "never yet has there been a overman."

We seek, if not *something* beyond existence, a *way* leading above existence just as it is. Nietzsche is saying that we have not yet found that way because we have been looking for something *outside ourselves*, even outside our "world." We have not even found out yet what or who *we* are, what man is. "Man is the still undetermined animal."

This leads back to Nietzsche's other major thought to be discussed here—his attack on the supremacy of reason. We must ask what is to be the nature and center of man, if not reason; and, in this connection, we must first ask what in man has to be surpassed.

Man is something that has to be surpassed. Because he is no longer to be surpassed by someone or something

already above and superior to him, he must surpass himself. He must, so to speak, bring about his own self-transcendence. How is this possible?

Most of Nietzsche's writings speak of the many facets of man that are to be overcome. They abound with polemic against mediocrity, hypocrisy, herd morality, passivity, and so on. These are qualities that are sheerly negative, ultimately stemming from some form of weakness or powerlessness. Nietzsche's critique of reason, on the other hand, is by no means simply a *rejection* of reason but, rather, a *caution* against the vast overestimation of reason that has occurred in Western philosophy. Some of Nietzsche's criticism of the renowned faculty of reason lands in a swampy glorification of the instincts and the senses, enticing us to believe that the animal is better off without the rational. But I do not believe that this represents the most interesting and the most provocative level of his thinking, aside from the fact that Nietzsche himself counterbalances and corrects himself on this issue.

I should, rather, like to focus on Nietzsche's analysis of man's *use* of reason. In other words, Nietzsche might not quarrel with Aristotle's definition of man as the animal who has *logos*, the animal rationale, but he would probably not accept it as truly definitive in any ultimate sense. The issue is not so much the fact that man is the animal who has reason but, rather, the question of what he has done and what he will do with that reason. In many of his writings, Nietzsche considers reason more of a tool than a guide. The question then becomes, What guides reason?

What Nietzsche has shown rather brilliantly is what has guided reason up to now, while parading reason as its

supposed champion and leader. Apart from his statements, sometimes extremely general and sometimes specific to the point of turning into a brand of home-style, do-it-yourself physiology, about the dominance of the senses and the instincts, Nietzsche's philosophically most interesting and fruitful analysis of this hidden guide lies in his statements about *ressentiment* and the spirit of revenge. These statements are not of merely "psychological" significance, but have a truly "ontological" status. In fact, I should like to suggest at the end of this chapter that one of Nietzsche's greatest legacies to philosophy today is having made this distinction of the ontological and the psychological—or however else one wants to formulate it—questionable without, however, deriving one exclusively from the other or reducing one to the other.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche states that man's best thinking (*Nachdenken*) up to now has been the spirit of revenge. A major instance of this statement would be man's revenge upon the witness, the killing of God because God watched everything man did. Nietzsche may well be saying that the spirit of revenge created a backworld of transcendence out of dissatisfaction with this world (Nietzsche's understanding of Platonism) and now that this backworld of transcendence has become, so to speak, autonomous and paralyzing in its effect upon man by its constant surveillance, man must kill what he once created. The second act of revenge destroys what the first one produced.

The gist of Nietzsche's analyses of the spirit of revenge seems to be that the essence of revenge is to "create" out of a lack of power. The spirit of revenge

stems from *wishing* that things were otherwise (*Wünschbarkeiten*), which is diametrically opposed to *willing* that they *become* otherwise.

If our reason has hitherto been guided by the spirit of revenge, the question now becomes, What is to guide our reason, if reason is essential to us but, by itself, inadequate to be decisive? Instead of wishing things were otherwise, which is characteristic of the spirit of revenge, Nietzsche proposes willing that they become otherwise, something that can stem only from a prior affirmation of things as they are. Any willing that does not stem from affirmation falls back into the spirit of revenge that is unable to enact anything. But the will stemming from an affirmation of life as it is leads to the possibility of willing things to become otherwise. I believe this is a connection between Nietzsche's two fundamental ideas of eternal recurrence and the Will to Power. Briefly stated, an affirmation of life as it is (I am able to affirm my life exactly as it is by my willingness, far rather by my wanting nothing more with my whole being than to live it again) is the condition of the possibility of willing an increase in the fullness and power of things, willing them to become *More*.

The Will to Power offers a dimension of transcendence in Nietzsche's philosophy that is otherwise strictly a philosophy of "immanence." Nietzsche rejects transcendence in its traditional sense as being a powerless wishing for the Other in every form, whether for a God as the epitome of otherness (different from the finite world and the human condition in every respect) or for a being otherwise of life itself. Instead, Nietzsche thinks the possibility of transcendence as man's activity of self-overcoming.

His self-overcoming or self-transcendence is possible only on the powerful basis of affirmation.

I believe that Nietzsche implicitly places the affirmation of life at the center of man's being. The affirmation of life offers to man the possibility of becoming truly human.

Instead of defining man in terms of his most unique faculty, reason, Nietzsche is groping for a new concept of the "still undetermined animal" in terms of his attitude toward life. We must ask the question, What is an attitude? *Attitude* is not a technical term in philosophy nor is it coined as one by Nietzsche. But the question of one's stance with regard to life is one of Nietzsche's fundamental concerns going back to *The Birth of Tragedy* and even before that. Nietzsche's whole innovative conception of tragedy arose out of his question, How did the Greeks bear the terror and horror of existence? His answer was a lifelong, impassioned rejection of pessimism, also of optimism, and later on of nihilism, all through tragic affirmation. His final root question is, Can I affirm eternal recurrence, can I affirm living my life over and over again just as it is for all "eternity?"

Again we ask, What is an attitude? An attitude is something truly and specifically human that encompasses and includes the whole of human being. An animal does not have an attitude. It simply is the way it is. Man, however, insofar as he is a thinking being, takes on a predominant attitude with regard to the question of life. If he prefers "not to think about it," this is also an attitude, the choice to try to ignore the question of life, a choice that can never quite succeed. An attitude is a kind of "existential choice," to put it in more familiar terms,

which has its roots in man's thinking and feeling and even in the inscrutable condition of his body. It, thus, encompasses what has traditionally been called *mind* and *body* and allows room for other factors scarcely thought by our Western tradition.

Nietzsche's groping for a new concept of man, self-surpassing man, the overman, leads him to the monumental and the suprahistorical man in "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," to various types of the higher man in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and finally in the *Genealogy of Morals* to the ascetic, the priest, and above all, the artist.

It is a sign that one has turned out well when, like Goethe, one clings with ever-greater pleasure and warmth to the "things of this world": For in this way one holds firmly to the greater conception of man, that man becomes the *transfigurer of existence* when he learns to transfigure himself.

What is essential in art remains its *perfection* of existence, its production of perfection and plenitude; art is essentially *affirmation, blessing, deification of existence!*¹

It would seem that the artist is as close as Nietzsche ever came to expressing what he meant by the overman. And because Nietzsche does not mean art in the museum sense of that word, but rather regards life itself as "art," the artist is the man who shapes and transfigures not only his "material," but above all, himself; and thus, ultimately, life itself. Nietzsche is pointing to a type of human being who *experiences* differently from most of us. The artist is the man *able* to experience and shape a higher dimension of reality.

With the word *able*, the intimate connection between

art and power becomes evident. The German word for art (*Kunst*) is related to the verb *to be able* (*können*), and it is the artist for Nietzsche who has the highest possible “ability” or power. The artist could have been the prototype for the third metamorphosis in the three metamorphoses of the spirit in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The spirit changes from the load-bearing camel whose motto is “You shall,” to the lion whose motto is “I will,” to the child who alone is able to create and say “I can.”

When Nietzsche speaks of art as a “deification of existence,” he is pointing to the artist as the man who can “deify” existence itself instead of looking beyond it for a meaning. With the death of God (Platonism), man becomes free to *be* transcendence, to be transcending, self-surpassing being. With the death of God, reason ceases to be the supreme truth about man. Nietzsche is close to Kierkegaard here, the Christian thinker who realized that the important thing is not *what* God is, because the paradox that eternity entered time cannot be grasped by our reason. What is supremely and uniquely important is the entire *manner* of the God relationship, the “how,” not the “what.”

To stop rather than to conclude, I should like to touch upon the remark made earlier about Nietzsche’s role with regard to the distinction between the ontological and the psychological. Nietzsche is concerned primarily with the distinction between the “real” and the “apparent” world, which he believes has become untenable with the loss of Platonism. If one equates Nietzsche’s “real” world with what has been fundamentally understood as the realm of ontology, of what causes or is responsible for or is the condition of the possibility of

our “apparent” world, and if Nietzsche’s “apparent” world can be assimilated to what is commonly called the *psychological*, then we are right at the core of Nietzsche’s ambiguity and the possible resultant “crisis” of that ambiguity (crisis in the Kantian sense of critique in the *Critique of Pure Reason* of *krinein*, to de-cide something, to *separate* what can be known from what cannot be known). This ambiguity of the ontological and the psychological, terms admittedly foreign to Nietzsche but very much present as real problems in his thinking, is surely the basis for many of the ambiguities and contradictions, for example, in his attempt to explicate his thought of eternal return. His explications defy the attempt to bifurcate that thought neatly into the subject-object split with its divergent connotations for something like an ethics and a physics, and yet they are not wholly free of it. But thinking through the implications of his rejection of the “real” world, the apparent world would cease to be the merely psychological one.

If there is no real world apart from this world of appearance, then no criterion is left on the basis of which one could judge this world to be apparent, illusory, or less real. We have just—this world. The old metaphysical framework of God-world-man is simply abolished. But, instead of saying that we are left with the merely psychological, we are forced to stop and ponder again the question of what or who man is, man no longer defined as the animal rational nor as the *imago dei*, but questioned in his very being as the still undetermined animal.

I do not challenge what is alive now, I challenge several thousands of years. I contradict, and yet I am the oppo-

site of a negative spirit. Starting now there is hope again, I know tasks of such heights that there was no name for them up to now. I am the *joyous messenger* par excellence even though I also always have to be a man of doom. (*Verhängnis*)²