

Nietzsche
and the
Drama of
Historiobiography

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INTRODUCTION

“Wrecked against Infinity”

In 1888, Friedrich Nietzsche sensed that a calamity was closing in on him day by day. Nietzsche, the philosopher, was declining. Throughout the decade he had criticized the dominant morality of the West and chipped away at its most celebrated values and conclusions. Now, his inner strength and desire to fight were on the wane. His character Zarathustra, at least, had an eagle and serpent as his friends and companions, not to mention a monkey. Nietzsche was in solitude. He abandoned his projected book on the transvaluation of all values. One may well wonder whether, at this point in his life, he possessed the philosophical resources to embark on or to finish such an endeavor. “I have been thinking very clearly although not to my advantage over my general position,” he wrote his friend Franz Overbeck. “Not only is health lacking, but also the predisposition to get healthy—the life force is no longer intact. The losses of at least ten years can no longer be made good; during that time I have lived entirely off ‘capital’ and added nothing to it, nothing at all.”¹

In the feeling that he was no longer alive, philosophically, he settled his final scores with Richard Wagner in *Nietzsche contra Wagner* and *The Case of Wagner*; summarized his philosophy in *Twilight of the Idols* and *The Antichrist*; and offered a self-portrait for posterity in *Ecce Homo*. It was as though he were preparing his own funeral—a mock funeral, to be sure. If his claim that he was born posthumously is open to question, the claim that he had died *prehumously* is more plausible.

I interpret Nietzsche's preparations as part of an "epic spirituality," defined by his quest for meaning through philosophical reflections, genealogical investigations, and the many stories he had been telling to himself and his readers for a long time. His stories were complex, and his philosophy burst out in many directions. But I will argue that, appearances to the contrary, the web he spun was very consistent; he was correct in declaring that all the threads of his thought fit together.² The idea of the whole, which he depicted in *Schopenhauer as Educator* and mentioned almost in passing in *Human, All Too Human*, returned with a sense of urgency in *Twilight of the Idols*. His philosophy was not a system, but it was certainly a whole. Moreover, I believe that it is incorrect to argue that his writings in 1888, by which I mean the ones he prepared for publication, bore the imprint of a man already descending into insanity. On the contrary, Nietzsche was as lucid as ever. Even if his philosophy presaged a gloomy future of nihilism, Nietzsche was also cheerfully reconciling himself with all the categories and events he had battled so fiercely.

Who was this Nietzsche who introduced his persona with "Ecce Homo"—the same phrase that Pontius Pilate used to present Christ to a hostile crowd? Apart from the obvious irony, is it symbolic that Nietzsche titled his self-portrait *Ecce Homo*, after writing a book titled *The Anti-Christ*? These are relevant questions, but any possible answers will probably fail to convey the depth of his philosophical travails. Can we trace the consistent patterns, as well as important shifts, in the evolution of his thought? The answer, I propose, lies in identifying the different layers of his philosophy, which is made up of a complex array of stories. In this book, I look at different stories of Nietzsche; place these stories within a tradition of genealogical theorizing, in which the philosopher discovers something that, according to him, lies underneath the surface and is the key to knowing what we are and how we ought to live; and interpret both the stories and the genealogy in terms of one of Nietzsche's unique features, namely, his use of historiobiography. Historiobiography blends the idea of an attunement with all history *and* one's awareness of this attunement. As a mode of philosophizing, historiobiog-

raphy allows Nietzsche to view all human history as if it runs through his own life and thoughts. He thus can look at modernity from the eyes of a remote age (GS; 337), or so he claims. He prefers to live apart, “in past or future centuries” (GS; 377). He writes that Julius Caesar could have been his father. Of two master storytellers in Western philosophy—Plato and Nietzsche—Nietzsche has no parallel in his claim that he can examine unexplored depths of the past and ascertain the future as well. As in Plato’s philosophy, Nietzsche’s genealogies are myths that he creates to make sense of his world. But, in contrast to Plato, only Nietzsche is both the narrator and the actor; he is the scribe of his own drama. To him, his philosophy is much more than personal memoir or confession; it is historiobiography, a mode of awareness that seems to be a trademark of philosophical paradigms that flourished in the nineteenth century.

IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, WHEN MANY WERE ATTACKING the dominant class structures of European society, Nietzsche was harking back to a past in which the power and morality of an imagined nobility went unchallenged. While social and political revolts took place in the streets, and the boundaries of pleasure were being redefined, Nietzsche was arguing that an insufferable guilt choked the European soul. While science and new technologies were transforming urban spaces, Nietzsche delighted in writing about forests, mountains, and the splendid words of a solitary monk, Zarathustra. It was the age of newspapers, electricity, locomotives, and horrifying wars, but Nietzsche was thinking about Greek antiquity and the Roman Empire. He was, in an important sense, an antiquarian. Yet his foothold in the past gave him a perspicacity and a vantage point from which to interpret the momentous changes of the modern age. He was not only a modern thinker, but one ahead of his time. He initiated a concept of language and a critique of morality that tore apart received values and charted new territory. Like Socrates, who, Nietzsche claims, sensed that Athens was sick and coming to an end, Nietzsche sensed that the concept of universal reason of the

Kantian self was an illness, and the Kantian self was an undiagnosed patient. Nietzsche anticipated a moral climate that was bereft of certainties, and he tried, against all odds, to warn his readers about a culture that was both complacent and complicit with the dangers of moral emptiness.

In Book 5 of *The Gay Science* (1886), he prophesied terrible wars that would bring havoc to the world. In 1887 he saw a tired humanity, asphyxiated with guilt and ruining its health with pale visions of a supernatural world. Yet in the final year of his productive life—1888—he proclaimed a philosophy of reconciliation, which ameliorates the anguish that runs, either as a subterranean or open current, through his texts. I refer here to the anguish of *apprehension*, in the varied meanings this word carries in the English language—of grasping, arresting, understanding, and perceiving. It also implies a foreboding, a barely discernible fear. In most cases, philosophy is the apprehension of a lack. I seek to show that Nietzsche apprehends the problem of life, its lack of meaning, as anguish, and this anguish leads to an epic spirituality, in which his philosophical reflections recount his explorations and discoveries in the realm of human history, the inner world of people, and his own soul. It is not for nothing that Nietzsche describes himself as a subterranean creature, and also as a circumnavigator of the inner world (D; P; 1; H; P; 7).

In 1872, Nietzsche thought that there was no danger that human beings would ever come to know themselves completely. But he believed that he knew humankind and himself all too well to treat the question of the meaning of life as a disturbing problem that called for an aesthetic justification of life.³

I myself have attempted an aesthetic justification: how is the world's ugliness possible?—I took the will to beauty, to remaining fixed in *the same* forms, as being a temporary remedy and means of preservation. . . . Ugliness is the way of regarding things that comes from the will to insert a meaning, a *new* meaning, into what has become meaningless: the accumulated force which compels the creating man to feel that what has gone before is untenable, awry, deserving of negation—is ugly?⁴

His reflections do not aim exclusively at the acquisition of knowledge in order to create new meanings, but rather are part of a poem of self-creation.⁵ Just as Homer invents his own divinities, Nietzsche strives to recreate his own life and the life of everything and everyone of importance who preceded him. His spirituality thrives on discipline and self-control, and takes the avoidance of self-deception as its moral compass.

This self-creation, however, is compromised—as I will argue here—when it is filtered through Nietzsche’s natural determinism. What you are, according to him, has been decreed in advance. His fight against self-deception thus seems to be lost in advance, too. The dominant morality of the West, he argues, is an expression of sickness, yet a deterministic naturalism destroys whatever grounds he may have for his physiological analyses. He seems forced to accept that such “sickness” is a natural event, a necessity, and that nature bears no responsibility for it.

For reasons such as these, Nietzsche’s spirituality is agonistic, not only in the Greek sense of trying, testing, and facing competing demands, but also in the sense of inner torture. The meaninglessness and goallessness of life, as well as its intrinsic sufferings, are recurring themes in his philosophy. So is Nietzsche’s belief that individuals’ souls are revealed in their creations. Artists are deceivers, because they throw a veil of beauty over the ugliness of life. Modern musicians do not realize that their music discloses “their own history, the history of the soul made ugly” (D; 239). Every philosophy is a biographical portrait, a personal confession (BGE; 6). A good biography must possess dramatic events, which Nietzsche finds clearly lacking in the philosophies of Kant and Schopenhauer: “their thoughts do not constitute a passionate history of a soul; there is nothing here that would make a novel, no crises, catastrophes or death-scenes” (D; 481).

Nietzsche’s thought, in contrast, is full of crises and catastrophes, and, in writings of the late 1880s, images of death-scenes. He claimed to provide a detailed confession of the inner regions of the Greek, the Christian, the modern, the slave, and the noble soul, not to mention his own soul. But the project of taking every philosophy as a personal memoir, and of reading every person’s soul through

his creations, gestures, or language, is predicated on the reader's affinity with the "text." Just as Plato did his best to control the passions because he knew his kind—that is, he knew the nature of his fellow aristocrats—similarly, Nietzsche claims to know a person's secrets because he, too, has secrets (GS; 31). I "know you," he says to the practitioners of sacrificial morality, "better than you know yourselves" (D; 215). This affinity that he claims to possess ends up encompassing all the animal and human past. "Man is *not* just an individual but what lives on, all that is organic in one particular line."⁶

Nietzsche's spirituality is also epic in a figurative sense. He compares his philosophizing to a journey, to charting a road in a treacherous landscape, knowing the dangers but not their magnitude, and harboring doubts about where safety lies or even if there is any safe place. His texts abound in images of caves, tunnels, mountains, forests, and jungles, and he sees himself as an explorer. The open sea is, perhaps, the best trope of his epic journey. The sea possesses a powerful allure to Nietzsche, for its openness, vastness, and eternal becoming. The open sea is a portent of riches but also of the all too real possibility that, in attempting to cross it, one may be shipwrecked: "wrecked against infinity," or, in a literal rendering, "to fail because of infinity" (D; 575).⁷

A heroic spirit, according to Nietzsche, discovers that every type of knowledge amounts to self-knowledge. "Do you not fear to re-encounter in the cave of every kind of knowledge your own ghost—the ghost which is the veil behind which truth has hidden itself from you? Is it not a horrible comedy in which you so thoughtlessly want to play a role?" (D; 539). It may be a comedy, but the philosopher is fated to play it because knowledge is a drive in which the "sense for truth" is also the "sense for security." One "does not want to let oneself be deceived, does not want to mislead oneself"; like all animals, one wants to apprehend what is real in order to avoid dangers (D; 26). Still, the possibility of self-deception is always hovering over one. "Have you never been plagued by the fear that you might be completely incapable of knowing the truth?" (D; 539). This question, for Nietzsche, is anything but comical. Like Socrates, Nietzsche

seeks to know the individual's soul, but his goal is not to tell whether it is a virtuous soul but to expand his knowledge of its depths.

I seek to show how the anguish that underpins Nietzsche's spirituality, an anguish which I will define as his "metaphysics of meaning," colored all of his reflections. I argue, moreover, that he deployed three strategies to find relief from his sense of the meaninglessness of life: his magnified concept of what he himself represented in human history; his doctrine of the eternal recurrence; and his philosophy of reconciliation. Although the doctrine of eternal recurrence seemed the solution to his quest for meaning, his idea of reconciliation provided the firmest ground for withstanding the anguish of life. He could withstand it because he understood that the futility, that is, the "in vain," which he abhorred in 1888, was a chimaera. Nothing was in vain, nothing was dispensable, and the doctrines of eternal recurrence and reconciliation went together.

NIETZSCHE POSES QUESTIONS OF THE FOLLOWING SORT: What is the utility of history, art, myth, truth, and morality for life? How does one find the best possibilities for life?⁸ In endeavoring to answer these questions, Nietzsche, since the early 1870s, equated the search for knowledge with the journeys of "the globe's greatest circumnavigators. In fact, the career of the thinker is of a somewhat similar sort: they too are circumnavigators of life's most remote and dangerous regions."⁹ These "dangerous regions" evoke the idea of "life" as both an epistemological and moral problem. It is an epistemological problem in the sense that there are many gaps in our knowledge of human beings. It is a moral problem in the sense that the role of our individuality within the totality of life and history remains to be discovered. It is in the realm of morality that the individual can measure his or her inner strength to be responsible, that is (for Nietzsche), to be honest with oneself. To be sure, Nietzsche does not dissociate knowledge from morality. Knowledge involves describing and evaluating the way life is, and the morality that he defends will be attuned with "what is."

The attunement of knowledge and morality is not as straightforward as it seems, however. Nietzsche also credits morality and religion for educating humankind and lifting it up from the animal realm. Humans, in his view, need to be lied to, and morality is a lie that they tell to themselves. Although this lie worked wonders through history and gave individuals their spirituality, he argues, history has now reached a point in which the restrictions imposed by morality are no longer lifting humanity up but dragging it down to an abyss of guilt. “The *power* man has achieved now allows a *reduction* of those means of discipline of which the moral interpretation was the strongest.”¹⁰ This situation makes it necessary to assess our past history anew and to invent new scales with which to weigh all current moral values and to determine, for the first time, the order or “rank” of greatness among humans.¹¹ In this dangerous journey, the attunement that he expects between knowledge and morality fails. Knowledge, he wrote in an early essay, “attains as its final goal only—annihilation.”¹² Knowledge unveils life as meaningless and goalless. And this leads to another sort of question: How do I live, once I know that life is meaningless? In coping with this question, Nietzsche must remind himself that he does not find any problem with his own life: “No, life has not disappointed me.” He is doing fine since “the great liberator came to me: the idea that life could be an experiment of the seeker for knowledge,” and knowledge a world of dangers, victories, and heroic exploits (GS; 324). “*How should I not be grateful to my whole life?*” he asks in *Ecce Homo*.

Nietzsche’s philosophy is an attempt to endow life with the significance it lacks, through myths, art, and genealogical stories, and by posing questions that, for him, are turning points in human history. Unknowingly at times, and at other times utterly self-consciously, he constructs an epic story of his life, which achieves its highest meaning in his conclusion that he is both the awareness of all past missteps and the embodiment of the pregnant potentialities of all of human history. The past resurfaces in his own consciousness, and he will tell humanity what life really is and why it requires a philosophy of reconciliation. In achieving this, he becomes heroic, because he has faced his own highest suffering and hopes (GS; 268). Notwithstanding his claims to the contrary, this amounts to a

philosophy of redemption.¹³ He acts as a redeemer of life by presenting life as it really is and removing all the scoria that corrode human nature.

THE LITERATURE ON NIETZSCHE IS RICH IN VALUABLE interpretations of different strands of his philosophy or even of the entire corpus. However, my contention is that three themes—the metaphysics of meaning, the unconscious, and the philosophy of reconciliation—have not yet received the attention they deserve as defining Nietzsche’s philosophical endeavors. This is a lacuna that my study seeks to fill. These three themes, moreover, are anchored on a superb storytelling, which he intimated very early in the connection he saw between philosophy and fiction: “*The natural history of the philosopher*. He knows in that he fictionalizes, and he fictionalizes in that he knows” (PRS; 53).¹⁴

Nietzsche’s genealogical accounts, as well as his indictment of morality, are in my view both philosophical inquiries and also stories that he tells to himself and us in order to come to grips with his intellectual agenda. His writings contain a profusion of vignettes pointing to the origins of this or that phenomenon, yet one is at a loss to find instances in which he offers evidence, be it empirical or textual, to underpin his arguments. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, the philological evidence he musters to derive “guilt” from “debt” is rather thin. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, his descriptions of Greek culture and his thoughts on the Greeks’ attitude toward guilt are suspect. This thinness of evidence, however, does not matter, in the sense that it would be a major misunderstanding to judge Nietzsche’s arguments by the standards of historiography. Nietzsche was even more dismissive: “All historians speak of things which have never existed except in imagination” (D; 307). He was not nor did he intend to be a historian. He was a philosopher, and, as such, he was working from within a tradition going back to Plato, in which archetypes condense or are a summation of an entire worldview. This is the case for Socrates’ idea of virtue and for the Good in Plato’s ideal polis. Nietzsche’s conceptual archetypes are the Dionysian, the Apollonian, noble morality, slave morality, asceticism, decay, sickness,

health, and so on. Usually, his genealogies are offered as tentative hypotheses and preliminary sketches, even where the tone of his writing is one of certitude. In many cases, his genealogical stories are modified or abandoned in favor of new ones.

Take, for example, Nietzsche's arguments about the origins of morality in *Human, All Too Human* (1878). In sections 39, 94, 96, and 99, respectively, Nietzsche offers four different accounts of the stages through which morality developed. These should be regarded as snapshots from different angles and, as such, not necessarily conflicting. In section 39 Nietzsche traces morality to the primeval times of an ancestral humanity;³⁵ in section 94 he discusses the stages of morality from the standpoint of the individual; in section 99 he does the same from the viewpoint of the state; and in section 96 he focuses on the relationship between morality, customs, and tradition. However, the version presented in section 96 establishes a succession that not only departs from the other versions, but will be reversed in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887). The "morality of piety," Nietzsche states in section 96, "is in any event a much older morality than that which demands unegoistic actions." That is, the morality of piety appears first and then is followed by the morality of egoistic actions. This view is completely absent from sections 39, 94, and 99. In 1886 and 1887, Nietzsche will reverse this order and claim that the first expression of morality was based on the egotism of the noble class, which was then followed by the morality of piety, namely, the morality of the slaves.

Nietzsche's genealogies, I suggest, should be understood by us as philosophical, anthropological, and literary devices, which neither prove chance or contingency, nor possess an epistemological superiority. Rather, they show how different or arbitrary a present-day meaning is, when compared to its origins. This reasoning presupposes, of course, that one accepts the validity of Nietzsche's accounts of the origins of a particular concept or institution. He frequently makes statements that expect our assent or rejection, without furnishing us with the grounds to assent or reject. Some of his genealogies appear as the lost thread of a larger picture, and the

only one who has access to this picture is Nietzsche himself. Only he could understand the significance of the lost thread, by locating it in its proper place. In other cases, however, Nietzsche's genealogies are invitations to think differently and to see matters from a new vantage point.

As I mentioned above, the philosophical reflections and stories that comprise his genealogical inquiries do not attempt to demonstrate contingency. They also do not seek to avoid universal truths. Nietzsche believes in some truths that, in his view, are universal. Life is tragic for the universal truths and falsehoods it contains. And it is not the falsehoods that trouble Nietzsche; it is the truths of life, truths that in his assessment we fear and from which most of us recoil, but truths that he wants to face head-on. The standard of weakness, for him, is how much falsehood a person tamely accepts, and the standard of strength is how much truth the individual can bear.

Art, for Nietzsche, is a valuable help in bearing hard truths, but the aesthetic dimension is not enough to provide the spiritual solace he cherished. Art may weaken, strengthen, or mesmerize, but there is always a tinge of deception to it. Art must beautify and falsify life to make it bearable. Nietzsche eschews this dimension of art. In 1888 he writes about the importance of facing life as it is. As I will argue, the doctrine of the eternal recurrence is crucial to his philosophy to the extent that it provides a solution to, and reconciliation with, the metaphysics of meaning. The idea of eternal recurrence, not art, allows us to decipher and cheerfully bear the riddle of existence. "To the paralyzing sense of general disintegration and incompleteness I opposed the *eternal recurrence*" (WP; 417).

In the first chapter I spell out the relationship between meaning and storytelling in Nietzsche's philosophy. In chapter 2, I discuss Nietzsche's view of genealogy; examine its relation to physiology; and assess the epistemological superiority that is ascribed to genealogy in most interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy. Building on the arguments advanced in chapter 2, I provide in chapter 3 a detailed reevaluation of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. In chapter 4, I trace Nietzsche's conflicting examinations of art, and then turn to

the role played by the unconscious in chapter 5. This chapter serves as a stepping-stone to a detailed examination of the metaphysics of meaning in chapter 6. Chapter 7 takes stock of important modifications in Nietzsche's arguments in 1888, and in chapter 8, I address his understanding of modernity. In chapter 9, I present Nietzsche's philosophy of reconciliation, review the epic character of his spirituality, and recapitulate my arguments on historiobiography and storytelling.