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NIETZSCHE'S ETERNAL RETURN

Why thinkers of every political persuasion keep finding inspiration in the philosopher.



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Nietzsche raged against democracy, but also against nationalism and anti-Semitism. Illustration

The philosopher's work has been taken up by a wide range of thinkers, from Karl Marx to Sigmund Freud, and it takes a strong philosopher to assume control of a preposition and propel it into a foreign

language. That is what Friedrich Nietzsche did with the word *über*. In German, it can mean “over,” “beyond,” or “about.” You are reading an essay *über* Nietzsche. As a prefix, *über* is sometimes equivalent to the English “super”—*übernatürlich* is “supernatural”—but it has less of an aggrandizing effect. Nietzsche altered the destiny of the word when, in the eighteen-eighties, he began speaking of the *Übermensch*, which has been translated as “superman,” “superhuman,” and “overman.” Scholars still debate what Nietzsche had in mind. A physically stronger being? A spiritual aristocrat? A kind of cyborg? “Overperson” might be the most literal equivalent in English, although it is unlikely that DC Comics would have sold many comic books using that title.

In 1903, three years after Nietzsche’s death, George Bernard Shaw published his play “Man and Superman,” in which he equated the *Übermensch* with an overflowing “Life Force.” Three decades later, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two Cleveland teen-agers, created the first “Super-Man” story, depicting the character not as a caped hero but as a bald, telepathic villain bent on “total annihilation.” Super-Man soon reemerged as a muscle-bound defender of the good, and during the Second World War he jumped into the fight against the Nazis. It’s unclear whether Siegel and Shuster knew of Nietzsche in 1933, but the word “superman” hardly existed in English before the philosopher’s ideas began to spread.

As Nietzsche worked his wiles on generations of English-speaking college students, the word *Übermensch* increasingly stood on its own, and “über” slipped into English as a prefix. In the nineteen-eighties, *Spy* described the Hollywood agent Michael Ovitz as an “*über*-agent.” The umlaut-free car-sharing service Uber, originally known as UberCab, is a related development, hinting at Silicon Valley fantasies of world domination. In the late twentieth century, the word “super” rebounded into German as all-purpose slang for “very”; if you wish to describe something as really, really cool, you say that it is *super super toll*. Somewhere, Nietzsche is laughing hysterically while screaming in anguish.

The adventures of “super” and “über” are a case study in the inescapability of Nietzsche’s philosophy, which has affected everyday discourse and modern political reality like no body of thought before it. Countless books on Nietzsche are published in dozens of languages each year, linking him to every imaginable zone of life and culture. One can read about the French Nietzsche, the American Nietzsche, the pragmatic Nietzsche, the analytic Nietzsche, the

feminist Nietzsche, the gay Nietzsche, the black Nietzsche, the environmentalist Nietzsche. Lurking amid the crowd of avatars is the proto-fascist Nietzsche—the proponent of pitilessness, hardness, and the will to power who is cited approvingly by such far-right gurus as Alain de Benoist, Richard Spencer, and Aleksandr Dugin. Can a philosopher who has sown such confusion be said to possess a coherent identity? Or, as Bertrand Russell once argued, is Nietzsche merely a literary phenomenon?

When I was in college, in the nineteen-eighties, the French Nietzsche held sway. It was the heyday of post-structuralism, and Nietzsche appeared to anticipate one of the central insights of that era: that we are at the mercy of ever-shifting systems and perspectives. The work of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida is all but inconceivable without Nietzsche's example. So many professors distributed photocopies of the 1873 essay "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" that we could have recited it as a postmodern pledge of allegiance: "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms. . . . Truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are."

In the past few decades, other Nietzsches have come to the fore. Anglo-American philosophers have aligned him with various schools of post-analytic thought, seeing him as an idiosyncratic kind of psychologist or sociologist. Nietzsche's political thinking is also a trending topic, although his ideas are devilishly difficult to reconcile with modern conceptions of left and right. He raged against democracy and egalitarianism, but also against nationalism and anti-Semitism. Nietzsche is often quoted in the chat rooms of the far right, and he also surfaces regularly in leftist discussions about the future of democracy.

Walter Kaufmann, the German-American émigré whose translations of Nietzsche were long the standard versions in English, once declared that the philosopher's writings are "easier to read but harder to understand than those of almost any other thinker." Ideologues keep trying to appropriate him because they want his rhetorical firepower on their side. Yet Nietzsche, like his fallen idol Richard Wagner, is at once emphatic and ambiguous, overbearing and elusive. Nietzsche's famous adage that there are "no facts, only interpretations" is among his more debatable propositions, but it applies perfectly well to his own infuriating, invigorating body of work.

The itinerant, solitary, sickly life of Nietzsche has been told many times, most recently in English by the biographer Sue Prideaux, in “I Am Dynamite!” The title comes from an unnerving passage in “Ecce Homo,” Nietzsche’s autobiographical book of 1888, which was completed a couple of months before he descended into insanity, at the age of forty-four:

I know my lot. One day my name will be linked to the memory of something monstrous [*etwas Ungeheures*]*—*to a crisis like none there has been on earth, to the most profound collision of conscience, to a verdict invoked against everything that until then had been believed, demanded, held sacred. I am no man, I am dynamite.

How a Lutheran pastor’s son, trained in classical philology, ended up on that precipice of brilliance and madness is the essential drama of Nietzsche’s life. The passage has been read as an eerie premonition of his future appropriation by the Nazis—although there is no way of knowing exactly what kind of crisis is meant. *Ungeheuer* is an ambiguous word, hovering between the monstrous and the gigantic. Kaufmann translated it as “tremendous,” which takes away too much of the ominousness. Here is the sumptuous difficulty of Nietzsche: when you drill down on a word, an abyss of interpretation opens.

Nietzsche grew up in the village of Röcken, outside Leipzig. The church where his father preached still stands; Nietzsche, the scourge of Christianity, is buried in a plot next to the building. The elder Nietzsche, like his son, was afflicted by severe physical and mental problems—violent headaches, epileptic strokes, amnesiac episodes—and died at the age of thirty-five, when Friedrich was four. Nietzsche himself had a mental breakdown in middle age. The old story that his breakdown stemmed from syphilis is now widely doubted; a likelier explanation is a hereditary neurological or vascular disorder. Neurologists in Belgium and Switzerland have concluded that he had CADASIL, a genetic condition that causes repeated strokes.

“I Am Dynamite!” lacks the philosophical scope of prior biographies by Rüdiger Safranski and Julian Young, but Prideaux is a stylish and witty narrator. She begins with the pivotal event in Nietzsche’s life: his introduction, in 1868, to Wagner, the most consequential German cultural figure of the day. Nietzsche would soon assume a professorship in Basel, at the astonishingly young age of twenty-four, but he jumped at the chance to join the Wagner operation. For the next eight years, as Wagner completed his operatic cycle “The Ring of the Nibelung” and

prepared for its première, Nietzsche served as a propagandist for the Wagnerian cause and as the Meister's factotum. He then broke away, declaring his intellectual independence first with coded critiques and then with unabashed polemics. Accounts of this immensely complicated relationship are too often distorted by prejudice on one side or another. Nietzscheans and Wagnerians both tend to off-load ideological problems onto the rival camp; Prideaux succumbs to this temptation. She insists that Nietzsche's talk of a superior brood of "blond beasts" has no modern racial connotation, and casts Wagner's Siegfried as an Aryan hero who "rides to the redemption of the world." In fact, Siegfried is a fallen hero who rides nowhere; the redeemer of the world is Brünnhilde.

Prideaux's picture of the Wagner-Nietzsche relationship fails to explain either the intensity of their bond or the trauma of their break. Early on, Nietzsche was hopelessly infatuated with Wagner's music and personality. He described the friendship as "my only love affair." As with many infatuations, Nietzsche's expectations were wildly exaggerated. He hoped that the "Ring" would revive the cultural paradise of ancient Greece, fusing Apollonian beauty and Dionysian savagery. He envisaged an audience of élite aesthetes who would carry a transfiguring message to the outer world. Wagner, too, revered Greek culture, but he was fundamentally a man of the theatre, and tailored his ideals to the realities of the stage. At the first Bayreuth Festival, in 1876, Nietzsche was crestfallen to discover that a viable theatre operation required the patronage of the nouveau riche and the fashionable.

Personal differences between the two men provide amusing anecdotes. Nietzsche made sporadic attempts at musical composition, one of which caused Wagner to have a laughing fit. (The music is not very good, but it is not as bad as all that.) Wagner also suggested to Nietzsche's doctor that the young man's medical issues were the result of excessive masturbation. But the disagreements went much deeper, revealing a rift between ideologies and epochs. Wagner embodied the nineteenth century, in all its grandeur and delusion; Nietzsche was the dynamic, destructive torchbearer of the twentieth.

When they first met, they shared an admiration for the philosophical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer, who saw a world governed by the insatiable striving of the will. Only through the renunciation of worldly desire, Schopenhauer posited, can we free ourselves from our incessant drives. Aesthetic experience is one avenue to self-overcoming—an idea that the art-

besotted Nietzsche seized upon. But he disdained Schopenhauer's emphasis on the practice of compassion, which also promises release from the grasping ego. Wagner, by contrast, claimed to value compassion above all other emotions. "Parsifal," his final opera, has as its motto "*Durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor*" ("The pure fool, knowing through pity"). Nietzsche's 1878 book, "Human, All Too Human," his inaugural assault on Wagner and Romantic metaphysics, hammers away at the word *Mitleid*, considering it an instrument of weakness. In its place, Nietzsche praises hardness, force, cruelty. "Culture simply cannot do without passions, vices, and acts of malice," he writes.

These views made Wagner wince, as the diaries of Cosima Wagner, his wife, attest. In an earlier essay entitled "The Greek State," Nietzsche had declared that "slavery belongs to the essence of a culture." The intellectual historian Martin Ruehl speculates that Wagner persuaded Nietzsche to omit the essay from his first book, "The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music" (1872), which culminates in a paean to Wagner. During the same period, though, Nietzsche was castigating German tendencies toward nationalist chauvinism and anti-Semitism—conspicuous elements in Wagner's political blatherings. What seems particularly unfortunate about the break is that each man had an acute sense of the other's blindnesses.

Nietzsche not only rejected the sublime longings of nineteenth-century Romanticism; he also jettisoned the teleology of historical progress that had governed European thought since the Renaissance, and that had found its most formidable advocate in Hegel. Instead, Nietzsche grounded himself in a version of naturalism—the post-Darwinian conviction that humans are an animal species, led by no transcendent purpose. This turn yields Nietzsche's most controversial concepts: the announcement of the death of God; the "eternal return," which frames existence in terms of endlessly repeating cycles; and the will to power, which involves a ceaseless struggle for survival and mastery. It might be said that Nietzsche, in backing away from Wagner, backed into his own mature thought—the celebration of Dionysian energy, the "triumphal yes to life over and above all death and change."

Between his final meeting with Wagner, in 1876, and his mental collapse of 1889, Nietzsche lived the life of an intellectual ascetic. Health problems caused him to resign his professorship in 1879; from then on, he adopted a nomadic life style, summering in the Swiss Alps and wintering, variously, in Genoa, Rapallo, Venice, Nice, and Turin. He wrote a

dozen books, of increasingly idiosyncratic character, poised between philosophy, aphoristic cultural criticism, polemic, and autobiography. He worked out many of his ideas during vigorous Alpine hikes—a practice fondly re-created by John Kaag in the recent book “[Hiking with Nietzsche](#).” The possibility of a romance with the psychologist Lou Andreas-Salomé arose and then subsided; a serious relationship was probably beyond his reach. The landscape of the mind consumed his attention. As Safranski wrote, “For Nietzsche, thinking was an act of extreme emotional intensity. He thought the way others feel.”

Translating Nietzsche is a difficult task, but the swagger of his prose, with its pithy strikes and sudden swerves, can be fairly readily approximated in English. Kaufmann, in his translations, brought to bear a strong, pugnacious style. In his introductions and footnotes, he distanced Nietzsche from fascist bombast—naming the *Übermensch* the “Overman” was just one strategy—and recast him as a kind of existentialist. But Kaufmann underplayed Nietzsche’s slippery elegance, and his choice not to translate “Human, All Too Human” and its successor, “[Dawn](#)” (1881), gave a skewed view of the thinker’s development. A series of translations from Cambridge University Press covered the gaps. Now Stanford University Press is halfway through a [nineteen-volume edition](#) of Nietzsche’s complete writings and notebooks. The press has been threatened with cuts in funding, but if the project is achieved English readers will have, for the first time, access to the entirety of Nietzsche’s work.

Since 1967, the German publisher De Gruyter has been amassing a critical edition of Nietzsche’s complete writings, which can be browsed on a dizzyingly comprehensive Web site, [nietzschesource.org](#). This monumental project has, to the annoyance of some scholars, attracted increasing attention to Nietzsche’s extensive notebooks. These show a less awe-inspiring side of the philosopher, as he jots down items from his reading and delivers utterances esoteric, mundane, and bizarre:

When five people speak together, a sixth always has to die.

The Chinese eat very many dishes in very small portions.

I could become the European Buddha.

If you aren’t a bird, be careful not to camp above an abyss.

Woman is so little satisfied with herself that she would rather permit herself to be beaten

than—

The last thought is left blessedly unfinished. Nietzsche's misogyny is a brute fact that no pageant of interpretation can disguise.

Yet the notebooks contain some of Nietzsche's most vital, pungent writing. Consider a remarkable passage from 1885, which appears in the most recent Stanford volume, "Unpublished Fragments (Spring 1885–Spring 1886)," in a translation by Adrian Del Caro. It has long been known to readers as the final section of "The Will to Power," Nietzsche's posthumous so-called magnum opus, assembled under the direction of his reactionary sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, and published in 1901. To come across it in the Stanford edition, free of Förster-Nietzsche's tendentious and often deceptive editorial practices, is a bracing shock:

And do you also know what "the world" is to me? Should I show it to you in my mirror? This world: a colossus [*Ungeheuer*] of energy, without beginning, without end, a firm, unshakable magnitude of energy that does not get bigger, does not get smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself, as a whole unchangeable in size, an economy without expenditures and losses, but likewise without growth, without income, encased by "nothingness" as by its border, nothing blurring, wasted, nothing infinitely extended, but laid into a definite space as a definite force, and not a space that would be "empty" anywhere, rather as force everywhere, as play of forces and waves of forces . . . this my *Dionysian* world of eternal self-creating, of eternal self-destroying, this mystery-world of the doubly voluptuous, this my beyond good and evil, without goal, if a goal does not lie in the happiness of the circle, without will, if a ring does not have good will for itself—do you want a *name* for this world? A *solution* for all its riddles? a *light* for you too, you hiddenmost, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly?—*This world is the will to power—and nothing else!* And you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing else!

The central sentence actually goes on for almost twice as long, disrupting the rat-a-tat rhythm that is typical of Nietzsche's later writing. He generally resisted the epic long-windedness of nineteenth-century German prose, but here he makes an exception as he verbally acts out the condition of universal flux. An additional wrinkle is that the diction begins to resemble the ecstatic love duets of Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" ("Without naming / Without parting / Newly knowing / Newly burning"). You could quibble with this or that choice in Del

Caro's rendering—the statuesque word “colossus” seems a poor choice for *Ungeheuer*—but the passage has the right racing, dancing energy.

No creature in Nietzsche's menagerie of concepts has caused as much trouble as the will to power. At first glance, this entity strongly resembles Schopenhauer's all-devouring will. For Martin Heidegger, the will to power was the last gasp of metaphysics—an attempt to capture the “basic character of all beings,” which Heidegger wishes to supplant with his post-metaphysical idea of being-in-the-world. Gilles Deleuze, the chief guru of the French Nietzsche, wrote, “The will to power is not force but the differential element which simultaneously determines the relations of forces (quantity) and the respective qualities of related forces.” One needn't know exactly what Deleuze means here to accept the underlying proposition that Nietzsche understands power less as a struggle for domination over others than as a struggle for power over *oneself*. Rather than fleeing abjectly from the will, as in Schopenhauer, one should seek to harness it, master it, ride it out.

When Nietzsche revisits this material, in “Beyond Good and Evil” (1886), he pulls back abruptly, placing the will to power in a hypothetical, almost ironic frame. He begins, “Supposing nothing were ‘given’ as real besides our world of desires and passions . . .” After a series of qualifications, he concludes, “Supposing finally that we were to succeed in explaining our entire life of drives as the taking shape and ramification of a basic form of the will—namely of the will to power, as *my* proposition has it . . . then we would have earned the right to unequivocally determine all effective force as: *will to power*.” Nietzsche, for all his bravado, likes to hedge his bets, as Tom Stern points out in the introduction to “The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche.” He writes that the philosopher's style is one of “rhetorical questions, ellipses, fables, mini-dialogues, hints that much is left unsaid, and apparent praise for seeming to be other than you are.”

This cyclone of nuance goes missing when we reduce Nietzsche to maxims. Nor should we try to extract a system that can be summarized on a chalkboard. Ultimately, his writing is a mode of criticism, of *übersubjective* intellectual reportage, grounded in extreme self-awareness. Freud is said to have commented that Nietzsche “had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was ever likely to live.”

Monsters lurk in the Nietzschean deep. It cannot be a random mishap that so many unpleasant people have taken pleasure in his work. None other than Jacques Derrida discouraged talk of “falsifications” of Nietzsche, fascist or otherwise. “One can’t falsify just anything,” Derrida wrote, with unaccustomed bluntness. (One can, in fact, falsify anything, as a glance at the morning paper shows, but the point holds.) However selective the Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche may have been, it replicated elements of his thought. He did write that equality is the “greatest of all lies,” and divided humanity into a hierarchy of the weak and the strong. Hans Stark, the head of the admissions detail at Auschwitz, had a sign over his desk reading “*Mitleid ist Schwäche*” (“Compassion Is Weakness”). This could be read as a crude condensation of Nietzsche’s diatribe against compassion in “The Antichrist.”

Ronald Beiner, in a new book entitled “Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right,” claims that the resurgence of far-right political movements around the world is evidence of Nietzsche’s nefarious influence. His hostility to absolute truth, Beiner writes, has “left us vulnerable to harsh new ideologies that appear to regard respect for truth as a snare.” To be sure, a circuitous chain of connections is needed to get from “Thus Spake Zarathustra” and “Beyond Good and Evil” to Donald Trump’s ravings about “fake news” or the vicious fictions of Sandy Hook conspiracy theorists. Merely to announce a high regard for truth is no guarantee that truth will be uttered. Indeed, some of the most hideous acts in history have been committed by people who believe themselves to be in sole possession of absolute truth. In the American context, merchants of hatred hardly need to look to a nineteenth-century German philologist for inspiration: they can draw on older and deeper wells at home.

Beiner is right to urge latter-day interpreters to abandon talk of an apolitical Nietzsche, but he is arguing largely with a previous generation of scholars. There is no lack of contemporary publications that deal forthrightly with Nietzsche’s political thinking: these include Hugo Drochon’s “Nietzsche’s Great Politics,” Tamsin Shaw’s “Nietzsche’s Political Skepticism,” and Gary Shapiro’s “Nietzsche’s Earth: Great Events, Great Politics.” Stern catalogues Nietzsche’s most problematic traits in the “Cambridge Companion,” although he adds the caveat that “we must have more categories available to us than ‘Nazi/not-Nazi,’ ‘anti-Semite/anti-anti-Semite,’ ‘far-sighted/foolish’ or ‘to be attacked/defended at all costs.’”

A recurring theme in these studies is that Nietzsche could be a fiercely prescient analyst of

democratic politics, and that we can learn from his observations without following him into antidemocratic invective. In an essay in the “Cambridge Companion,” Christa Davis Acampora writes, “A popular view of Nietzsche regards him as an advocate of bald expressions of power, but he is better understood as someone who *investigates*—rather than *celebrates*—power.” Who can deny that human beings are a fundamentally predatory species, and that no political system or moral code has yet tamed our worst impulses? Nineteenth-century thinkers in the tradition of Hegel anticipated the attainment of a perfected state of humanity; instead, as Nietzsche foresaw, a century of unprecedented horrors ensued. During the Cold War, the powers that defeated fascism brought the world to the brink of a nuclear war that would have made the Second World War seem like a minor episode in comparison. Today, anthropogenic climate change is causing mass extinctions. To quote Zarathustra: “The Earth has a skin, and this skin has diseases. One of these diseases is called, for example, ‘humanity.’”

Nietzsche’s central insight about the modern state—one that greatly influenced the sociology of Max Weber and the political thinking of Carl Schmitt—is that it faces a crisis of authority. When power is no longer divinely ordained, the right to govern is contested. In “Human, All Too Human,” Nietzsche predicted that, as the democratic state secularized itself, there would be a surge of religious fanaticism resistant to centralized government. On the other side, he anticipated a zealous adherence to the state on the part of nonbelievers. Religious forces might seize control again, engendering new forms of enlightened despotism—“perhaps less enlightened and more fearful than before.” These struggles could go on for a while, Nietzsche writes. In one long paragraph, he prophesies the history of the twentieth century, from fascism to theocracy.

To the opponents of democracy, Nietzsche says, in essence: Just wait. Liberal democracy will devour itself, creating conditions for authoritarian rule. Disorder and instability will sow distrust in politics itself. “Step by step, private companies will absorb the functions of the state,” Nietzsche writes. “Even the most tenacious remnants of the old work of governing (the activity, for example, that is supposed to protect private persons from one another) will finally be taken care of by private entrepreneurs.” The distinction between public and private spheres will disappear. The state will give way to the “liberation of the private person (I take care not to say: of the individual).”

And here we are, in the twenty-first-century world of laissez-faire economics and unregulated Big Tech monopolies. As the political philosopher Urs Marti has pointed out, Nietzsche sometimes sounds less like a proto-Nazi than like a neoliberal or a libertarian. A notebook entry from 1885-86 looks ahead to “a superior kind of human being that thanks to its preponderance of willing, knowing, wealth and influence, makes use of democratic Europe as its most pliable and flexible tool for taking the destinies of the earth in hand, for shaping ‘the human being’ itself as an artist would.” Silicon Valley tycoons strive to become just such *übermenschlich* innovators. The entrepreneur Peter Thiel, an avid reader of Nietzsche, says things like “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible.” In this light, Nietzsche’s opposition to nationalism and anti-Semitism looks less virtuous. For tech billionaires, national and racial hatreds are inconveniences; their authoritarianism wears a cosmopolitan face, promising frictionless commerce for all.

Is that what Nietzsche wants? His avoidance of the word “individual,” in favor of “private person,” suggests skepticism. And a crucial aspect of his world view militates against monopolistic power. In 1995, Lawrence Hatab published a fascinating book called “A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy,” which emphasizes the philosopher’s attachment to the Greek agon—competition among worthy adversaries, whether athletic or artistic. Hatab revisits that connection in an essay, in the “Cambridge Companion,” on the will to power. In Nietzsche’s reading, the Greek mentality abhorred the idea of an *Alleinherrschaft*, a “domination by one.” The Athenian institution of ostracism originated in the need to expel individuals who threatened the balance of power. As Hatab observes, the rite of the agon “rules out violence, because violence is actually an impulse to *eliminate* conflict by annihilating or incapacitating an opponent.” In “Ecce Homo,” Nietzsche writes, “I attack only a winner.” He goes after the most tyrannical, domineering forces—hence, his critiques of God and Wagner.

The relevance for the modern democratic state is clear. James Madison’s vision of constitutional checks and balances, of divided powers in equilibrium, is agonistic politics in action. When one entity gathers too much power, the system ceases to function. Nietzsche’s political philosophy would appear to hope for such an outcome, but in “Human, All Too Human” he performs a typical backtracking maneuver. Having forecast the death of the state, he adds, “To *work* toward the diffusion and realization of this idea is admittedly something else.” The enterprise could lead to “destructive experiments.” It is a good thing, then, that, in all likelihood, “the

state will *still* persist for a good while yet.”

Behind Nietzsche’s array of extreme positions is a much less alarming belief: that the only healthy state for humanity is one in which rival perspectives vie with one another, with none gaining the upper hand. The same attitude governs his fundamental epistemological position about the nature of truth. Each competitor in the agon is expected to stake his or her claims on truth; Nietzsche advanced his own opinions with utmost vehemence. The ultimate truth is that no claim should achieve dominion over all others. As Richard Rorty maintained, Nietzsche can be understood as a particularly flamboyant kind of pragmatist. We don’t think of William James as a “dangerous mind,” and yet he, too, said, “Damn the Absolute!”

Whenever I feel bewildered by endless interpretive skirmishes over the philosophical Antichrist, I return to Alexander Nehamas’s “Nietzsche: Life as Literature,” which appeared in 1985 and retains a commanding place on the near-infinite Nietzsche bookshelf. Nehamas, a Greek-American thinker steeped in classical studies, essentially made a virtue of Bertrand Russell’s dismissal of Nietzsche. The contradictions in Nietzsche’s writings cohere, Nehamas writes, if we look at him as a literary figure who worked within a philosophical context, and who crafted a persona that functions as a literary character of novelistic complexity.

The disparity between the living Nietzsche and the written one was indeed drastic. He was a fragile, sensitive, gentle person with elegant manners, constantly striving to mask his inner turmoil and physical distress. He let his personal anguish be reflected in a universal predicament: how can we hold to our convictions in the face of chaos, conflict, decay, and death? The idea of the eternal return—the prospect of having to live one’s life over and over, every detail repeated, every pain alongside every joy—becomes all the more potent when one thinks about having to relive *that* life, to its terrible end.

Nietzsche remains a heroic figure in intellectual history because his lonely, desperate quest seems to join up with so many other expeditions of the mind and soul. Wherever you travel, in sunny climates or in the shadowlands, Nietzsche has gone before you. Such is the temper of what may be the most openhearted and unproblematic passage in all of his writings—the closing aphorism of “Dawn,” perhaps his most beautiful book:

All these bold birds who fly out into the wide, widest open—it is true! At some point they will not be able to fly any farther and will squat down on some pylon or sparse crag—and very grateful for this miserable accommodation to boot! But who would want to conclude from this that there was *no longer* a vast and prodigious trajectory ahead of them, that they had flown as far and wide as one *could* fly! All our great mentors and precursors have finally come to a stop, and it is hardly the noblest and most graceful of gestures with which fatigue comes to a stop: it will also happen to you and me! Of what concern, however, is that to you and me! *Other birds will fly farther!* ♦

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