

Introduction and background to his philosophy

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Philosophy was rudely awoken from these medieval reveries in the seventeenth century by the arrival of Descartes, with his declaration 'Cogito ergo sum' (I think therefore I am). An age of enlightenment had begun: knowledge was based on reason. But Descartes woke up more than the sleeping scholars. He also woke up the British. They soon responded to Descartes' rational claim by insisting that our knowledge is not based on reason, but on experience. In their zeal, these British empiricists soon destroyed all semblance of reason – reducing philosophy to a series of ever-diminishing sensations. Philosophy was in

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danger of going to sleep again. Then, in the middle of the eighteenth century, Kant awoke from his dogmatic slumbers and produced an even greater philosophical system than the one which had put philosophy to sleep throughout the Middle Ages. It looked as if philosophy would once again soon be emulating Rip van Winkle. Hegel reacted to this soporific situation by constructing a huge systematic four-poster bed of his own. Schopenhauer decided to try a different tack, and introduced a draught of chilly oriental philosophy into the Kantian bed. This had the effect of waking up the young Nietzsche, who leapt into the icy blast and began proclaiming a loud philosophy which was to keep everyone awake for a long time to come.

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With Nietzsche philosophy becomes dangerous again, this time with a difference. In previous centuries philosophy had been dangerous for philosophers; with Nietzsche it becomes dangerous for everyone. Nietzsche ended up by going mad, and this begins to show in the tone of his later writings. But the dangerous ideas started appearing long before he went mad, and have nothing to do with clinical insanity. They presaged a collective madness which was to have horrific consequences in Europe during the first half of twentieth century, and which shows ominous signs of recurrence today in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Nietzsche's larger philosophical ideas are barely worthy of the name – whether he's talking about supermen, eternal recurrence (the idea that we live our lives again and again throughout eternity), or the sole purpose of

civilization (to produce 'great men', such as Goethe, Napoleon and himself). His use of the Will to Power as a universal explanation is either simplistic or meaningless – even Freud's monism is more subtle, and Schopenhauer's less specific concept of the universal will is more convincing. Like any good conspiracy theory, Nietzsche's doctrine of the all-pervasive Will to Power contains the usual element of paranoia. But Nietzsche's actual *philosophizing* is as brilliant, persuasive and incisive as any before or since. When reading him you get the exhilarating feeling that philosophy actually matters (which is one of the reasons why he is so dangerous). And when he used the Will to Power purely as an analytic tool, it enabled him to discover constituent elements in human motives which few had formerly suspected. This allowed him to unmask the values to which these motives gave rise, and trace the development of these values over a broad historical canvas, illumi-

nating the very foundations of our civilization and culture.

Although Nietzsche is not entirely free from blame for the dangerous nonsense which has been spouted in his name, it must be said that most of this is a travesty of what he actually wrote. He had nothing but contempt for the proto-Fascists of his era, anti-Semitism disgusted him, and the idea of a nation of racially pure Germans becoming a master race would certainly have exercised his sense of humour to the full. Had he lived (and retained his sanity) until the 1930s, when he would only have been in his eighties, Nietzsche would certainly not have remained silent about the grotesque events taking place in his homeland – like some German philosophers of that era who claimed to be his successors.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844 in Saxony, which was by this time a province of the increasingly powerful kingdom of Prussia. Nietzsche was

descended from a long line of tradesmen, including hatters and butchers, but his grandfather and father were both Lutheran pastors. Nietzsche's father was a patriotic Prussian, who held his king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, in high esteem. When Ludwig Nietzsche's first son was born on the king's birthday, it was obvious that he had little chance of being named Otto. By an utterly meaningless coincidence all three were to die insane.

The first to go was Ludwig, who died in 1849. He was diagnosed as having 'softening of the brain' – and the autopsy apparently revealed that a quarter of his brain had been affected by 'softening'. This diagnosis is no longer fashionable with the medical profession, but Nietzsche's reputable biographers (who remain in the hard-brained minority) are convinced that Ludwig Nietzsche's insanity was not inherited by his son.

Nietzsche was now brought up in Naumburg in a house full of 'holy women' – which

included a mother, a younger sister, a maternal grandmother, and two slightly loopy maiden aunts. This appears to have affected Nietzsche's attitude towards women in later life, which falls into the same category as his maiden aunts. At the age of thirteen he went to boarding school at nearby Pforta – a prestigious establishment, the equivalent of a top English public school of the period. Here he received a good education along with the usual barbarities. Nietzsche, very much the product of his pious mollycoddled upbringing, became known as 'the little pastor', and carried off all the prizes. But he was so brilliant that eventually he couldn't help thinking for himself. By the age of eighteen he was beginning to doubt his faith. The clear-sighted thinker couldn't help noticing the square pegs in the round holes of the world about him. Typically, this thinking appears to have been done in complete isolation. Throughout his life Nietzsche was to be influenced in his

thought by very few living people (and not many dead ones either).

At the age of nineteen Nietzsche went to the University of Bonn to study theology and classical philology, with the aim of becoming a pastor. His destiny had been mapped out long beforehand by the 'holy women'; but already he was beginning to experience an unconscious urge to rebellion, which resulted in a transformation of his character. On arriving at university the solitary schoolboy unexpectedly became a typical gregarious student. He joined a smart fraternity, took to drinking with the lads, and in true Teutonic fashion even fought a duel. This was the usual artificial affair, which was stopped as soon as he had received his honourable scar – a slight nick on the nose, that was unfortunately later obscured by the bridge of his specs.

But this was only a necessary phase. By now Nietzsche had decided 'God is dead'. (This remark, now so closely associated with Nietz-

sche and his philosophy, was also made by Hegel some twenty years before Nietzsche was born.) At home in the holidays Nietzsche refused to take communion, and announced that he wouldn't be following in his father's footsteps by becoming a pastor. Next year he decided to switch to Leipzig University, where he would drop theology and concentrate on classical philology.

Nietzsche arrived at Leipzig in October 1865, the same month as he celebrated his twenty-first birthday. Around this time two events took place which were to transform his life. Whilst on a sight-seeing visit to Cologne, he visited a brothel. According to Nietzsche this visit was inadvertent. On arrival he had asked a street porter to lead him to a restaurant. Instead the porter took him to a brothel. The way Nietzsche later related it to a friend: 'All at once I found myself surrounded by half a dozen apparitions in tinsel and gauze, gazing at me

expectantly. For a brief moment I was speechless. Then I made instinctively for the only soulful thing present in the place: the piano. I played a few chords, which freed me from my paralysis, and I escaped.'

Inevitably, we only have Nietzsche's evidence regarding this unlikely episode. Whether or not the visit was quite so accidental, and whether or not Nietzsche ended up fondling only the keys of the piano, it's impossible to tell. Nietzsche was almost certainly still a virgin at this stage. He was an extremely intense young man, as well as being inexperienced and gauche in the ways of the world. (Though this didn't stop him from making pronouncements about such matters. Despite his sexual status, he earnestly informed a friend that he would need to keep three women to satisfy him.) Despite all this, I am inclined to believe Nietzsche's own account of the incident in Cologne.

However, on later consideration, Nietzsche

must have decided that he had been attracted by something more than the piano. He went back to the brothel, and almost certainly paid a few visits to similar establishments when he returned to Leipzig. Not long after this he discovered that he was infected. The doctor who treated him wouldn't have told him that he had syphilis (they didn't in those days, because it was incurable, much as they arrogantly lie about cancer nowadays). Even so, as a result of this incident Nietzsche appears to have largely abstained from sexual activity with women. Despite this he continued throughout his life to make embarrassingly self-revealing remarks about them in his philosophy. 'You are going to see a woman? Do not forget your whip?' (Though it's possible that owing to the type of bordello he'd visited, he thought it only fair that men should be equally armed for the fray.)

The second life-changing incident took place when he entered a secondhand

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bookshop and came across a copy of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. I took the unfamiliar book in my hands and began leafing through the pages. I don't know what demon it was that whispered in my ear: "Take this book home." So, breaking my principle of never buying a book too quickly, I did just that. Back home I threw myself into the corner of the sofa with my new treasure, and began to let that dynamic gloomy genius work on my mind . . . I found myself looking into a mirror which reflected the world, life and my own nature with terrifying grandeur . . . here I saw sickness and health, exile and refuge, Hell and Heaven.'

As a result of these astonishingly prophetic sentiments, Nietzsche became a Schopenhauerian. At this time, when Nietzsche had nothing to believe in, he needed Schopenhauer's pessimism and detachment. According to Schopenhauer, the world is merely representation, supported by an all-pervasive evil will.

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This will is blind and pays no attention to the concerns of mere humanity, inflicting upon its members a life of suffering as they strive against its manifestation all around them (the world). Our only sensible course is to lessen the power of the will within us by living a life of renunciation and asceticism.

Schopenhauer's pessimism didn't quite fit Nietzsche's nature, but he recognized its honesty and power at once. From now on, his positive ideas would first have to be of sufficient strength to go beyond this pessimism. The way forward lay through Schopenhauer. But most of all, Schopenhauer's concept of the fundamental role played by the will was to prove decisive. This was eventually to become transformed into Nietzsche's *Will to Power*.

In 1867 Nietzsche was called up for a year's national service in the Prussian army. The authorities were obviously fooled by the large and ferocious military moustache which Nietzsche had now cultivated beneath his

rather disappointing duelling scar, and he was despatched to the cavalry. This was a mistake. Nietzsche had great determination, but a pitifully frail physique. He suffered a serious riding accident and then rode on as if nothing had happened, in the best Prussian tradition. When Private Nietzsche got back to barracks he had to be hospitalized for a month. They promoted him to lance-corporal for trying, and then sent him home.

Back at Leipzig University Nietzsche was now recognized by his professor as the finest student he had seen in forty years. Yet despite this, Nietzsche was becoming disenchanted with philology and its 'indifference towards the true and urgent problems of life'. He didn't know what to do. In desperation he thought of switching to chemistry, or going off to Paris for a year to try 'the divine canon and the yellow poison absinthé'. Then one day he managed to secure an introduction to the composer Richard Wagner, who was

on an undercover visit to the city. (Wagner had been banished for revolutionary activities twenty years beforehand; and the ban remained despite the transformation of his extremist political views from left to right.)

Wagner had been born in the same year as Nietzsche's father, and from all accounts bore a striking resemblance to him. Nietzsche felt a strong – but largely unconscious – need for a father figure. He had never met a famous artist before, nor someone whose ideas were apparently so in accord with his own. In the course of their brief meeting Nietzsche discovered Wagner's deep love of Schopenhauer. Wagner, flattered by the attentions of the brilliant young philosopher, turned on his considerable charm to the full. The effect on Nietzsche was immediate and profound. Nietzsche was overwhelmed by the great composer – whose flamboyant character was at least the equal of his flamboyant operas.

Two months later Nietzsche was offered

the post of Professor of Philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland. He was still only twenty-four and had not yet even taken his doctorate. Despite his misgivings about philology, this was an offer he could not refuse. In April 1869 Nietzsche took up his post at Basel, and at once began giving extra lectures in philology. He wished to combine philology with philology, the study of aesthetics and the classics – welding together an instrument for analysing the faults of our civilization, no less. He quickly established himself as the rising young star of the university, and became acquainted with Jacob Burckhardt, the great cultural historian who was also on the university staff. Burckhardt, who was the first to elaborate the historical concept of the Renaissance, was the only mind of a similar calibre to Nietzsche's amongst the staff, and perhaps the only figure Nietzsche was to remain in awe of throughout his life. It's possible that Burckhardt might, at

this crucial stage, have exercised a steadying influence on Nietzsche, but his patrician reserve was to prevent this. And besides, the role of father figure had already been taken – by a far less steadying influence.

In Basel Nietzsche was only forty miles from Tribschen, where Wagner had taken up residence with Cosima, Liszt's daughter (who was at the time still married to a mutual friend of Liszt and Wagner, the conductor von Bülow). In no time Nietzsche became a regular weekend visitor to Wagner's sumptuous villa on the shores of Lake Lucerne. But Wagner's life was operatic in more than just musical, emotional and political terms. He was a man who believed in living out his fantasies to the full. Tribschen was like an opera in itself, and there was never any doubt about who was playing the leading role. Dressed in the 'Flemish style' (a blend of the Flying Dutchman and Rubens in fancy dress), Wagner strode beneath the pink satin walls and

rococo cherubs in his black satin breeches, tam o'shanter and effusively knotted silk cravat – declaiming amongst the busts of himself, vast oil paintings (subject ditto), and silver bowls commemorating performances of his operas. Incense wafted through the air, and only the music of the maestro was allowed to waft with it. Meanwhile Cosima ministered to her companion's histrionics, and made sure no one ran off with the perfumed pet lambs, beribboned wolfhounds and ornamental chickens which roamed the garden.

It's difficult to understand how Nietzsche was taken in by all this. Indeed, it's difficult to understand how anyone was taken in by it. (Wagner's extravagances left him constantly broke, and he relied on support from a string of rich benefactors, including King Ludwig of Bavaria who contributed heavily from the state exchequer.) Only when you listen to Wagner's music does the deep persuasiveness and fatal charm of his character become con-

ceivable. The composer himself was evidently as overwhelming as his spellbinding compositions. The immature Nietzsche was soon bewitched by this heady atmosphere, where leitmotifs of unconscious fantasy wafted through the rococo salons. Wagner may have been a father figure – but Nietzsche soon found he had an Oedipal itch for Cosima. Without daring to declare it (even to himself), he fell in love with her.

In July 1870 the Franco-Prussian War broke out. This was Prussia's chance to avenge its defeat by Napoleon, its opportunity to conquer the French and establish Germany as the major power in Europe. Filled with patriotic fervour Nietzsche volunteered for service as a medical orderly. Passing through Frankfurt on his way to the front, Nietzsche witnessed the lines of cavalry clattering through the streets in full regalia. It was as if a scale fell from his eyes. 'I felt for the first time that the strongest and highest

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Will to Life is not to be found in the struggle for existence, but in a Will of Power, a will to war and domination.' The Will to Power had been born, and though it was to go through considerable modification, eventually being seen in psychological and social rather than purely military terms, it was never to break quite free from its original military inspiration.

Meanwhile Bismark crushed the French, and Nietzsche began to discover that war was not all glory. On the battlefield at Wörth he found himself working amidst a field 'bespattered everywhere with human remains and reeking pungently of corpses'. Later, he was put into a railway cattle-truck to tend six wounded men on a journey which lasted over two days. Locked in amidst the shattered bones, gangrenous flesh and dying soldiers, Nietzsche manfully did his best – but by the time they arrived at Karlsruhe he was a broken man himself. He was shipped to

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hospital suffering from dysentery and diphtheria.

Despite this traumatic experience Nietzsche was back within two months teaching in Basel. He continued to overload himself with lectures in philosophy as well as philology, and began writing *The Birth of Tragedy*.

This brilliant and highly original analysis of Greek culture contrasts the clear-cut Apollonian element of classical restraint with the darker, instinctual Dionysian forces. According to Nietzsche the great art of Greek tragedy came from a fusion of these two elements, which was eventually destroyed by the shallow rationalism of Socrates. This was the first time the darker element of Greek culture had been emphasized, and Nietzsche's characterization of it as fundamental proved highly controversial. During the nineteenth century the Classical world was sacred. Its ideals of justice, culture and democracy appealed to the self-image of the emerging middle classes.

No one wanted to hear that this had all been a big mistake.

Even more controversial was Nietzsche's frequent use of Wagner and his 'music of the future' to illustrate his philosophical arguments. Indeed, he wrote to his publisher: 'The real aim [of this book] is to illuminate Richard Wagner, that extraordinary enigma of our time, in his relation to Greek tragedy.' Only Wagner managed to combine both the Apollonian and Dionysian elements in the manner of Greek tragedy.

This emphasis on the power-filled Dionysian element was to prove an essential part of Nietzsche's later philosophy. No longer could he condone Schopenhauer's 'Buddhistic negation of the Will'. Instead he pitted his Dionysian element against the Christian elements which he considered to have weakened civilization. He understood that most of our impulses are double-edged. Even our so-called better impulses have their dark or

degenerate side: 'Every ideal presupposes love and hate, reverence and contempt. The essential impulse can arise from either the positive or negative side.' In his view Christianity started from the negative. It had taken hold in the Roman Empire as the religion of the oppressed and slaves. This was everywhere evident in its attitude to life. It constantly sought to overcome our more powerful positive instincts. This negation was both conscious (in the espousal of asceticism and self-denial) and unconscious (with regard to meekness, which he saw as an unconscious expression of resentment, an inversion of aggression by the weak).

Likewise Nietzsche attacked compassion, the repression of true feelings and the sublimation of desire involved in Christianity – in favour of a stronger ethic closer to the instinctual origins of our feelings. God was dead, the Christian era was finished. At its worst, the twentieth century proved him

right. At its best, it showed that many of the better 'Christian' elements are not dependent upon a belief in God. Whether or not we now live closer to our basic feelings remains debatable.

Wagner was a supreme artist, but he was not up to philosophical thinking of this order. Gradually Nietzsche began to see through Wagner's intellectual disguise. Wagner was a walking ego, of great size and intuitive power – but even his love of Schopenhauer was a passing phase, just grist to the mill for his art. Previously Nietzsche had been willing to overlook certain nastier elements in the Wagner household, such as his anti-Semitism, his overweening arrogance, and his unwillingness to recognize the ability or needs of anyone other than himself. But there were limits. By now Wagner had moved to Bayreuth, where King Ludwig of Bavaria was building him a theatre which would be devoted exclusively to the performance of his operas (a project

which was to help bankrupt the Bavarian exchequer and contribute to Ludwig being deposed). In 1876 Nietzsche arrived at Bayreuth for the opening performance of Wagner's Ring cycle, but fell ill, almost certainly through psychosomatic causes. The megalomania and high art decadence had all become too much for the maestro's favourite disciple, and Nietzsche had to leave.

Two years later Nietzsche published his collection of aphorisms *Human All Too Human*, which completed the break with Wagner. The praise of French art, the psychological acumen and deflation of Romantic pretensions, and the sheer perceptiveness were all too much for Wagner. And worse still the work contained no unsolicited adverts for 'the music of the future'.

Perhaps more importantly, this work also succeeded in alienating some of Nietzsche's more genuine philosophical admirers. Ironically, the cause of this was the one reason he is

now universally admired (even by those who abhor his philosophy). In this work, Nietzsche began evolving the style which enabled him to become a master of the German language. (No mean task this, with a language such as German – one which has defeated even some of its most esteemed writers.) Nietzsche's style had always been clear and combative, his ideas concentrated yet immediately comprehensible. But he now took to writing in aphorisms. Rather than using long-winded argument, he preferred to present his ideas in a series of penetrating insights, swifly passing from topic to topic.

Nietzsche philosophized on the hoof in more ways than one. His best ideas came to him when he was out on his long walks in the Swiss countryside. He frequently claimed to have been out walking for longer than three hours, despite his frail health. (Though this could well be a projection of the Will to Power, rather than an actual manifestation

of it.) It's even been claimed that Nietzsche's aphoristic style results from his habit of pausing to jot down his thoughts in a notebook while he was out walking. Whatever the cause, this aphoristic habit of Nietzsche's was to result in a style unparalleled throughout Europe during the nineteenth century. This is a big claim (though Nietzsche would certainly have agreed with it). The nineteenth century was an age of great stylists. But with the exception of the French *enfant terrible* Rimbaud, no other writer sensed the coming linguistic revolution. One of tenor, rather than felicity. In Nietzsche's prose you can hear the coming voice of the twentieth century: this is the *language* of the future.

But all this didn't happen at once. When Nietzsche wrote *Human All Too Human* he was only beginning to find his voice. Even his ideas had in many cases yet to find their mark. This work is filled with an amazing range of psychological *apergus*. 'The fantasist denies

reality to himself, the liar does so only to others.' 'The mother of excess is not joy but joylessness.' 'All poets and writers enamoured of the superlative want to do more than they can.' 'A witicism is an epigram on the death of a feeling.' But in the end it all becomes too much. His admirers objected that he wasn't writing philosophy, and they were right. This is psychology, though of such quality that a few decades later Freud soon decided against reading any more Nietzsche – for fear he might discover there was nothing left to say on the subject. But the mixture of aphorisms and psychology doesn't make for a coherent extended work. Beneath the psychological *aspercus* there was little underlying train of argument to link the aphorisms. This led to the work being branded as unsystematic. Nietzsche's work was never to lose this tag – which is unfair. Because of his aphoristic style, he may have appeared unsystematic. But his ideas are as coherent and closely

argued as those confined within any of the great philosophic systems.

Yet of course he *was* unsystematic. Nietzsche's philosophy spelt the end of all systems. Or should have done – but there's always someone willing to have a try. (At precisely this time Karl Marx was hard at work in the British Museum – just a few seats along from where I am now sitting.)

Despite such flaws, *Human All Too Human* marks Nietzsche's emergence as the finest psychologist of his age – some feat, considering his lack of social experience. Nietzsche was essentially a solitary bird. In the normally accepted sense, he hardly knew anyone at all. He had no real friends. Throughout his life he retained a few close admirers, but his self-obsession prevented him from entering into the give and take of true friendship. So how did he acquire such profound psychological knowledge? Many commentators are of the opinion that Nietzsche's source in this sphere

was just one man – Richard Wagner. This is quite possible. Here indeed was a rich seam of psychological conundrum to be mined. Though such commentators tend to overlook the fact that Nietzsche also knew himself pretty well (if intermittently, and often a little selectively).

Nietzsche's psychological insights are of universal application, despite their eclectic sources – a misanthropic philosopher and a megalomaniac composer. Yet Nietzsche's access to his main psychological source was coming to an end. After the publication of *Human All Too Human* the break with Wagner became inevitable. The world for which Nietzsche was preparing in this work was the Brave New World of the future – one in which Good and Evil no longer existed in any transcendental way, a world of no absolute values or divine sanctions. Going on the attack, Nietzsche had exposed the subconscious motives of Christianity, the 'slave morality'

which attempted to emasculate the Will to Power. Meanwhile Wagner was now embarking upon his final work *Parsifal*, which signalled the end of his involvement with Schopenhauer and his return to the fold of Christianity. Their ways were parting for ever.

In 1879 Nietzsche was forced to resign his post at Basel on account of continuing illness. For years his health had been frail, and now he was a very sick man. He was granted a small pension, and advised to take up residence in a more clement climate.

For the next ten years Nietzsche roamed Italy, the south of France and Switzerland, constantly seeking a climate which would alleviate his illnesses. What was wrong with him? Just about everything, it seems. His eyesight had failed to the point where he was half blind (the doctor advised him to give up reading: he might as well have recommended that he give up breathing). He suffered from

violent incapacitating headaches which would sometimes confine him to bed for days on end, and he was generally a mass of physical ailments and complaints. His desk-top collection of elixirs, medicaments, pills, tonics, powders and potions put him in a class of his own, even amongst the great hypochondriacal philosophers. Yet this was the man who conceived of the idea of the superman. The element of psychological compensation in this idea should not detract from its central place amongst his other more acceptable ideas.

The superman made his appearance in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, a long 'dithyrambic' poem of almost unbearable bombast and earnestness, whose utter humourlessness is unrelieved by its author's attempts at 'irony' and leaden 'lightness'. Like Dostoyevsky and Hesse, it's unreadable unless you're a teenager – but the experience of this work at such an age can often 'change your life'. And not

always for the worse. The stupid ideas are easily spottable, and the rest make a challenging antidote to many accepted notions, requiring one to think deeply for oneself. The philosophy, as such, is almost negligible. But the exhortations to philosophy – to think for oneself – are powerful, as are the characterizations of our condition. 'Is there such a thing as up and down any more? Are we not drifting through infinite nothingness? . . . Surely ever deeper night is closing around us? Don't we need lanterns in the morning? Are we still deaf to the sound of the grave-diggers digging God's grave? Can't we smell the stench of divine putrefaction? . . . The most holy and mighty thing in the world bled to death under our knives . . . No greater deed has ever been done, and thanks to this deed whoever comes after us will live in a higher history than there has ever been.' Almost a century later the French existentialists began expressing such thoughts – in rather less boisterous terms –

and were hailed as the vanguard of modern thought.

On his endless tour of the spas and mild-winter resorts, Nietzsche was now introduced by his admirer Paul Rée to a twenty-one-year-old Russian woman called Lou Salome. Rée and Nietzsche (separately and together) would take her for long walks, and tried to fill her head with their ideas on philosophy. (Zarathustra was introduced to Lou as 'the son I will never have' - which was very fortunate for young Zarathustra, and not just because of the attention his name might have attracted in the school playground.) Lou, Nietzsche and Rée now became involved in a triangular set-up which is inconceivable in an age where anyone has even an iota of sexual *savoir-faire*. At first the three of them declared that they would all study philosophy and live together in a Platonic *ménage à trois*. Then Rée and Nietzsche both (separately) declared that they were in love with Lou, and decided

to propose to her. Unfortunately, Nietzsche made the ludicrous mistake of asking Rée to convey his proposal to Lou for him. (This does not invalidate Nietzsche's claim to being the greatest psychologist of his age, as anyone who has become involved in the love life of a psychologist will tell you.) Precisely who was in control of this situation is best demonstrated by a posed photograph of the three of them, taken in a studio in Lucerne. The two emotional virgins (aged thirty-eight and thirty-three) are harnessed to a cart, in which sits the twenty-one-year-old genuine virgin brandishing a whip.

In the end the three of them found themselves unable to maintain this high farce any longer, and they split up. Nietzsche was so distraught that he wrote: 'This evening I'll take enough opium to send me insane,' but eventually decided that Lou was unworthy to be either the mother or the sister of baby Zarathustra. (Lou went on to become one of

the most remarkable women of her age. After adopting the name Andreas-Salome from her pet husband (a German professor), she was to have a profound effect on two other leading figures of her time: having an influential affair with the great German lyric poet Rilke, and developing an intimate friendship with the ageing Freud.)

After wintering in Nice, Turin, Rome or Menton, Nietzsche would spend his summers '1,500 metres above the world and even higher above all human beings' in Sils Maria, a lakeside hamlet in the Swiss Engadine. Sils Maria is now a smart little resort (just seven miles down the road from St Moritz), but you can still see the simple room where Nietzsche used to stay and set up his medicine chest. Here the mountains rise sheer from the lakeshore towards the snowcapped 12,000-foot peak of Mount Bernina, which marks the Italian border. Behind the house you can take the remote paths up the mountainsides

where Nietzsche used to walk and think out his philosophy, pausing to jot down his conclusions in his notebook beside a lonely crag or a foaming mountain torrent. Some of the atmosphere of this region – the remote peaks, the sweeping views, the sense of isolated grandeur – creeps into the tone of his writings. When you see where Nietzsche did so much of his thinking, some of its faults and virtues become more explicable.

For the most part Nietzsche lived a life of utter isolation, renting inexpensive rooms, working continuously, and eating in cheap restaurants – at the same time doctoring his blinding headaches and debilitating ailments as best he could. It was not unusual for him to spend entire nights retching, and he was frequently incapacitated for three or four days in a week. What is more, this rapidly became a permanent state of affairs. Yet each year he produced a book of astonishing quality. Such works as *The Dawn*, *The Joyful Wisdom*, and

Beyond Good and Evil contain superb critiques of Western civilization, its values and its psychology – as well as its hang-ups. His style remains clear, and contains a minimum of loony ideas. This may not have been systematic philosophy, but it was certainly philosophizing of the highest order. Many (indeed most) of the fundamental values of Western man and Western civilization were tested and found wanting. As he expressed it in his unpublished notebook: ‘Christianity comes to an end – destroyed by its own morality (which cannot be replaced), a morality which in the end is forced to deny even the existence of its own God. The sense of truthfulness, so highly developed by Christianity, becomes sickened by the falsehoods and mendacity of all Christian interpretations of the world and of history. It rebounds from “God is truth” to “All is false”’. There has been no finer demolition job – though much of the purely philosophical demolition work had already been done over

a century beforehand by Hume. (But it needed to be done again because of the resurgence of German metaphysical systems.)

Throughout the 1880s Nietzsche continued to work on in solitude, unknown and unread, gradually driving himself ever harder as he found his utter solitude and lack of recognition ever more unbearable. Then in 1888 the Danish-Jewish scholar George Brandes began delivering lectures on Nietzsche’s philosophy at the University of Copenhagen. Unfortunately, by then it was too late. In 1888 Nietzsche finished no less than four books, and the cracks were beginning to show. His was a great mind and he knew it: it was imperative that the world should know this too. In *Ecce Homo* he describes *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as ‘the highest and deepest book in existence’ – a statement which stretches critical altometers and credulity alike. As if this isn’t enough, there follow chapters headed ‘Why I am so Wise’, ‘Why

I write such Great Books' and 'Why I am Destiny', in which he advises against alcohol, endorses oil-less cocoa, and commends his bowel habits. The bombast and self-absorption of Zarathustra were reappearing with a vengeance – in mania.

In January 1889 the end came. Whilst walking down a street in Turin he collapsed, flinging his arms tearfully around the neck of a cab horse which had just been whipped by its driver. Nietzsche was assisted to his room, where he wrote postcards to Cosima Wagner ('I love you, Ariadne'), the King of Italy ('My beloved Umberto . . . I am having all anti-Semites shot'), and to Jacob Burckhardt (signing himself 'Dionysius'.) Burckhardt understood what had happened, and passed the card on to one of Nietzsche's close admirers, who went at once to collect him. Nietzsche was now clinically insane, and never recovered. Almost certainly his condition would have been incurable even today.

It was brought on by overwork, solitude and suffering – but the prime cause was syphilis. This had reached the tertiary stage, which apparently involves 'mental paralysis'. After a brief spell in an asylum, Nietzsche was released into the care of his mother. He was now harmless, existing for much of the time in a catatonic trance which reduced him to an almost vegetable state. During his more lucid moments he appeared to have a vague memory of his past life. When he was handed a book, he remarked: 'Didn't I write good books, too?'

After Nietzsche's mother died in 1897, he was looked after by his sister Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche. This was the last person who should have been put in charge of him. Nietzsche's younger sister Elizabeth had married Bernard Förster, a failed schoolmaster who became a notorious anti-Semite. Nietzsche despised him both as a man and for his ideas. Förster had set up an Aryan race colony

called Nueva Germania in Paraguay, using poor yeoman farmers from Saxony. He ended up defrauding them, and then committed suicide. (The remnants of Nueva Germania still exist in Paraguay where the 'master race' now live much the same as the local Indians, virtually indistinguishable except for their blond hair.) When Elizabeth returned to Germany and took charge of her insane brother, she determined to turn him into a great figure. She moved him to Weimar, because of its elevated cultural associations with Goethe and Schiller, with the aim of establishing a Nietzsche archive. Then she began doctoring her brother's unpublished notebooks, inserting anti-Semitic ideas and flattering remarks about herself. These notebooks were published as *The Will to Power*, which has since been purged of this rubbish by the great Nietzsche scholar Walter Kaufmann, to produce what is arguably Nietzsche's greatest work.

At the outset he states the condition of the coming age: 'Scepticism about morality is decisive. The ending of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction after it has tried to escape into some metaphysical beyond, leads to nihilism. 'Everything lacks meaning' (the untenability of 'the Christian' interpretation of the world, in which such a huge amount of energy has been invested, awakens the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world are false).' This may appear to render all philosophy superfluous, but Nietzsche continues gamely nonetheless: 'The entire apparatus of knowledge is an apparatus for abstraction and simplification – directed not at knowledge, but at taking possession of things: "end" and "means" are as remote from its essential nature as are "concepts".' He goes on to show what our knowledge is: 'All our organs of knowledge and our senses are developed only as a means of preservation and growth. Trust

in reason and its categories, in dialectic, therefore the valuation of logic, proves only their usefulness for life, proved by experience – *not* that something is true.’

His psychological remarks remain as perceptive as ever, but now these lead from *apergus* to fundamental (and dangerous) insights. ‘*Pleasure* appears where there is the feeling of power. *Happiness* lies in the triumphant consciousness of power and victory. *Progress* lies in the strengthening of the type, the aptitude for strong use of the will. Everything else is a dangerous misunderstanding.’

Nietzsche eventually made it into the twentieth century, whose nature he had predicted so well. A pathetic pale little figure with an enormous military moustache, who had little idea of who or where he was, he finally died on 25 August 1900. By now his works had begun to attract the acclaim for which he had longed all his life, and his fame quickly spread.

Main philosophical concepts

Nietzsche’s philosophy was written mainly in aphorisms, and is not methodical. His *attitude* remains largely consistent, but his thought is constantly developing in different directions. This means that he frequently appears to contradict himself, or leaves himself open to conflicting interpretations. His was a philosophy of penetrating insights, not a system. Yet certain words and concepts recur again and again in his work. In these, the elements of a system are detectable.

The Will to Power

This is the major concept of Nietzsche’s philosophy. He developed it from two main sources: Schopenhauer and the Ancient Greeks. Schopenhauer had adopted the oriental idea that the universe was driven by a vast blind will. Nietzsche recognized the force of

this idea, and adapted it to human terms. In Nietzsche's studies of the Ancient Greeks, he discovered that the driving force of their civilization was the search for power rather than anything useful or immediately beneficial.

Nietzsche concluded that humanity was driven by a will to power. The basic impulse for all our acts could be traced back to this one source. Often it became transformed from its primary expression, or even perverted, but it was always there. Christianity *appeared* to preach the very opposite, with its ideas of humility, brotherly love and compassion. But in fact this was no more than a subtle perversion of the will to power. Christianity was a religion born out of slavery in the Roman era, and it had never lost its slave mentality. This was the will to power of slaves, rather than the more recognizable will to power of the powerful.

Nietzsche's will to power proved a very useful tool for him when he came to analysing

human motive. Acts which had previously appeared noble or honourably disinterested were now revealed as decadent or sick.

But Nietzsche failed to answer two main objections. If the will to power was the only yardstick, how could actions which appeared not to follow its immediate dictates be other than evil? And to say that the saint was exercising his will to power on himself was surely to render the concept so flexible as to be almost meaningless. Secondly, his notion of the will to power was circular: if Nietzsche's attempt to understand the universe was inspired by the will to power, surely the concept of the will to power was inspired by Nietzsche's attempt to understand the universe.

But the last word on this penetrating but dangerous concept should remain Nietzsche's: 'The manner of this lust for power has changed through the centuries, but its source is still the same volcano . . . What

we once did "for the sake of God" we now do for the sake of money . . . This is what *at present* gives the highest feeling of power.'

Eternal Recurrence

According to Nietzsche we should act as if the life we are living will go on recurring forever. Each moment we have lived through, we will have to relive again and again for eternity.

This is essentially a metaphysical moral fable. But Nietzsche insisted on treating it as if he believed in it. He described it as his 'formula for the greatness of a human being.'

This supreme and impossibly romantic stress on the importance of the moment is intended as an exhortation to live our lives to the full. As a passing poetic idea, it has some force. As a philosophical or moral idea, it is essentially superficial. It simply doesn't bear thinking through. The cliché: 'Live life

to the full' at least means something, however vague. The idea of eternal recurrence turns out on inspection to be meaningless. Do we remember each of these recurring lives? If we do, we would surely make changes. If we don't, they are of no relevance. Even an arresting *poetic* image – and this is one – must have more substance if it is to be regarded as more than mere poetry, and used as a principle, as Nietzsche intended.

The Superman

Nietzsche's superman had nothing whatsoever to do with the cloaked figure who flies through the skies of American comics. Perhaps it would have been better if Nietzsche's hero had adopted a few of his namesake's comic values. Clark Kent at least had a naive morality, which he attempted to impose on a rough and ready world of goodies and bad-dies. Nietzsche's superman had no truck with

such constraints as morality. His only 'morality' was the will to power. Yet, curiously, Nietzsche's descriptions of his superman show him inhabiting a world as filled with naïve simplicities as any comic.

The prototype for Nietzsche's superman was his Zarathustra – an impossibly earnest and boring fellow, whose behaviour exhibited dangerous psychotic symptoms. Admittedly the tale of Zarathustra was intended as a parable. But a parable of what? As a parable of *behaviour*. The parables that Christ preached in the Sermon on the Mount appear childishly simple – but on reflection are neither childish nor simple. They are profound. The parable of Zarathustra is childishly simple, and on reflection remains so. Yet its message is profound, despite this. Nietzsche preaches nothing less than the overthrow of Christian values: each individual must take absolute responsibility for his own actions in a godless world. He must make his own values in

unfettered freedom. There is no sanction, divine or otherwise, for his actions. Nietzsche foresaw this as the twentieth-century condition. Unfortunately, he also made prescriptions as to how we should behave in this condition. Those who followed his prescriptions (the tedious antics of Zarathustra) would become supermen.

Alas, Nietzsche's superman was to develop into more than the figure of comic fun that he so richly deserved to become. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche announces (through the mouth of his hero): 'What is the ape to man? A figure of fun or an embarrassment. Man will appear exactly the same to the superman.' Elsewhere he proclaims: 'The goal of *humanity* cannot lie in its end but in its *highest specimens*.' In this context he begins loosely and misguidedly linking the superman to such notions as 'nobility' and 'blood'. However, he was not talking in racial terms. He refers at one point to 'the *Almanac de*

Gotha: an enclosure for asses' and announces on another occasion: 'When I speak of Plato, Pascal, Spinoza, and Goethe, then I know their blood rolls in mine.' A Greek, a Frenchman, a Portuguese Jew and a German – all blood ancestors of the superman, in Nietzsche's view.

Afterword

Nietzsche died two deaths. His mind died in 1889, his body in 1900. Between these dates his work took on a life of its own – launching Nietzsche from almost total obscurity to worldwide intellectual eminence. Nietzsche would of course have considered this no more than his due. But this fame was to exceed even his own megalomaniac fantasies. It extended far beyond the field of philosophy – largely owing to Nietzsche's appeal to writers. The list of major twentieth-century figures Nietzsche influenced includes Yeats, Strindberg, O'Neill, Shaw, Rilke, Mann, Conrad, Freud, and countless lesser figures who were simply overwhelmed by his ideas. This was a philosophy with a difference: one with style and lucidity. Here was a philosophy you could actually read. And the fact that it was written in aphorisms meant you also had time to read it (or bits of it).