2012

Nature, Nurture and Nietzsche's Faith in Life

Nalin Ranasinghe

Assumption College, nranasin@assumption.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/philosophy-faculty

Part of the Philosophy Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation


This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.
Nature, Nurture and Nietzsche’s Faith in Life

Nalin Ranasinghe

Nietzsche’s earliest published works are also his clearest. They reveal an intense struggle between pessimistic presuppositions and life-affirming aspirations. Since this paradoxical opposition extends throughout Nietzsche’s philosophical career, thoughtful consideration of its origin may shed light on some of his bewildering later writings. Using close readings of *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT) and the second *Untimely Meditation: On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* (UM2) I will show how and why Nietzsche goes back to Classical Greece seeking a pessimism of strength adequate to the dire threat posed by the Death of God. This event, famously proclaimed by Nietzsche, came about through the triumphs of science and democracy. Yet the herald of these lusty tidings was himself deeply troubled by the cultural and moral chaos that he saw following the consequent unopposed rise of egalitarianism and collapse of hierarchy; he tried hard to combat and forestall nihilistic developments that would lead to the Death of Man.

Nietzsche was convinced that without religious or aristocratic power to curb them, the hubris of vulgar democratizing forces would bring about the suicide of humanity itself. Although recent events may well have justified these fears, his deeply misanthropic assumptions poisoned his own noble attempts to rescue high culture from vulgar demotic civilization. These views also led him to develop a philosophy of history that legitimized untruth, prejudice and violence. At the level of practice, his underlying pessimism caused Nietzsche to endorse a political regime that uncannily reproduced the tripartite structure, noble lies and
cynical psychology of Plato’s draconian Republic. Sadly, this fusion of radically Modern means—symptomatic of the very decadence Nietzsche sought to forestall—and lofty Classical ends helped set in motion a cult of power that first caused two World Wars and then, over-reacting to itself, engendered a virulently resentful anti-humanism that has mortally wounded both the nation state and the academy—spawning an incontinent generation of de-politicized consumers who live as post-natural slaves.

The first two parts of this chapter will study Nietzsche’s earliest writings. Here he is most confident about his project and accordingly, quite explicit about its bleak ontological assumptions. In his later most famous writings, Nietzsche chooses to be poetic rather than philosophical; he nevertheless signals fairly clearly that this change in idiom has to do with his loss of faith in the capacity of his own generation to bear the great spiritual burdens demanded by the Death of God. Accordingly, as the gap between the spiritual haves and have-nots of the world widened dramatically, he came to believe that his generation’s moral decadence had to be accelerated. Thus, the few who still knew the meaning of nobility would see the need to direct humanity towards an elitist culture of life-affirmation and away from the ruins of post-Christian egalitarianism. He feared that since his own age was already poorly prepared for the brutal demands made by life, the future could leave the human spirit permanently impotent. Even though he did not really believe with his sometime disciple Heidegger that anything truly noble would survive the storm of nihilism, Nietzsche hoped that the mighty Dionysian energies unleashed by immediate cultural chaos would be sufficient for the philosophers of the future to rebuild European culture according to his specifications.

PART I: THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY

In his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche prophetically called for the recovery of the daimon of tragedy to exorcize the specter of nihilism haunting the doomed European civilization of his day. Soon after Bismarck had triumphantly proclaimed the German Reich as the successor to the Holy Roman Empire, a young philologist sternly warned his hubristic fatherland that it had no right to place itself at the pinnacle of European Culture. Nietzsche scandalized the Hellenists and educators of his day by scornfully ridiculing their belief that Athenian culture, celebrated by Pericles as the School of Hellas, was all sweetness and light: a harmonious blend of logic, oratory, mathematics, music and architecture. Instead, he contended that these shining Apollonian achievements arose out of a dark and unblinking realism about the objective value of human life. Nietzsche claimed that European civilization, just like that of Athens, would be overthrown by its own hubris and optimism if it ignored the more dangerous roots of culture. He warned that the regnant democratic values of equality and freedom, coupled with an arrogant belief in the powers of reason and the pursuit of effortless pleasure, would produce dissipation, decadence and calamity. Correctly seeing that man could not live by bread (and circuses) alone with-
out nihilism ensuing, he sought to create new modes of spiritual authority and political order.

Nietzsche’s early views were much influenced by Schopenhauer’s assertion that the primal entity at the heart of reality is a blind unconscious Will to Life. All things are illusions, short-lived dreams generated by the Will as it strives endlessly to perpetuate its darkly irrational existence. While Schopenhauer’s mood is one of Buddhist resignation towards human bondage to the passions, Nietzsche seeks to articulate the tenets of a so-called pessimism of strength. He will try to educate a few good men who would drain this bitter cup of truth with him, whilst praising life and promoting tragic virtue.

Nietzsche claimed that Greek tragedy was a higher synthesis of the two very different ways of coping with the harsh realities and cruel necessities of human life. Sophocles seems to have anticipated Schopenhauer’s insight into the human condition in words he attributed to Silenus: “O wretched ephemeral race ... what is best for you is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born ... but the second best is for you to die soon” (Oedipus at Colonus 1224 ff.). Mortals naturally have two ways of evading awareness of their unfortunate state of embodied individuality: they can either take refuge in Apollo through otherworldly dreams and delusive illusions, or they could temporarily extinguish their consciousness entirely and lose themselves in an ecstatic celebration of Dionysian intoxication and excess. Of course this suggests, contra Socrates, that the examined life is emphatically not worth living; even though it is said to be our highest and most divine faculty, rationality is truly the greatest source of misery and torment to our species.

Yet Nietzsche tells us that the invention of tragedy, which we must recall served as both a cultural and religious institution, made it possible for the Athenians to live in a manner that consciously celebrated the highest possibilities of both man and life itself. This means that philosophy, which strives optimistically to discover a veiled truth that could only blind and nauseate it, had to be subordinated to the muse of poetry. Nietzsche himself decisively resolves the dispute between the poets and the philosophers in favor of the former party. In Nietzsche’s own words BT took on the problem of science, which caused nihilism when it was left to its own devices and treated as an end in itself. Science had to be viewed by art, and art had to serve the interests of life if mankind was not to be overwhelmed by pessimism and decadence. Nietzsche suggests that the period of Greek decadence began when sophisticated rationalism, democracy and prosperity corrupted the Athenians, who had in their virtuous past been inspired by the divine madness of Dionysus to staunchly affirm life in all of its bittersweet fullness.

Tragedy, which literally means “trag-odes” or “goat-song” may be seen as the belatedly enlightened swan song of a sacrificial victim or scapegoat who sees his life flash before him and celebrates its completeness. This inspired institution made it possible for the demos of a Greek polity to recover oneness and gain wisdom as they studied the life and passion of Dionysus, literally god-son or son of God, through the sublime veil of music. The tragic hero, whether Oe-
dipus, Orestes, or Heracles, was an incarnation of Dionysus—the bastard son of Zeus—who painfully gains human recognition of his divinity, only to be torn to shreds by his frenzied followers at this moment of apotheosis as they seek to possess and consume his body and blood. While Dionysus does perform seemingly divine miracles, his mortal part ensures that these are short-lived—albeit glorious. Gods live and die so that life may continue to have meaning for mankind.

This re-enactment of the famous choice of Achilles would also give sober understanding and a measure of comfort to those condemned by the grim necessities of poverty and nature to expect nothing more than a life of changeless obscurity. Whilst admiring the beauty of heroic striving, when presented with the inevitable results of hubris and excess they learn not to envy the great in their temporary exaltation. There is suddenly not so much distance between lives of short-lived glory and bitter obscurity; indeed the hero gains immortality in the memories of those many who continually find enlightenment in contemplating his agon. Nietzsche's main point is that mortal life can only be justified as an aesthetic experience; it can never give us lasting happiness or moral justification. He condemns both Christianity and Science for their optimism: the one speaks of a loving personal God and the other promises impossible happiness in this life—which offers no final solutions. In other words, strange gods are worshipped and the youth are corrupted.

Nietzsche harshly criticizes Euripides and Socrates for fatally undermining Athens by invoking moral criteria in aesthetic/religious matters and demanding that the tragic regime justify itself rationally. By making the rational individual—not the extended satyr chorus of tragedy—the measure of meaning, these two decadent intellectuals destroyed the unity of the polis and tore apart the veils of Maya that protected humanity from the naked ugliness of Fortuna. While Nietzsche ironically suggests that Euripides is both a thinker and a poet, he reserves his shrillest criticism for Socrates who equated beauty with logical intelligibility, not appreciating that beauty replaced intelligibility as the only means of grasping the living truth about reality. Nietzsche ironically quotes Socrates' famous statement that Anaxagoras with his Nous seemed like a sober man amidst a throng of drunken revelers. But this meant that, like Euripides, Socrates refused to understand the Dionysian theodicy. He knew nothing and took pride in his ignorance; but this only meant that, since his instincts were unhealthy and ignoble, he could not know the heightened awareness of the ecstatic bacchante. His daimon was a negative principle.

Nietzsche's brief history of the West is completed when we look to his later works. Under the influence of the rationalistic criticism of Euripides and Socrates, along with the forces of hubris and democratization that both caused and were accelerated by the Peloponnesian War, the tragic culture of Athens buckled and died. It was replaced by an Alexandrian regime of scientific rationality that was transplanted through the world conquered by the Macedonian empire. Even though the Hellenistic age was soon replaced by a thousand years of Roman Christianity, which renewed and deepened the Socratic opposition of life and
morality by dismissing the Earth as a vale of tears and looking to an afterworld for truth and justice, the Reformation soon revived the Alexandrian project. The Reformers spawned a moralistic and technological culture that after strangling the promising aesthetic revival begun by Renaissance humanism then caused God’s death and religion’s redundancy by creating a democratic empire of cultural Philistinism. Democracy and technology are closely related because the Christian belief in a God who loves all equally regardless of deserts, thus leaving all men equal after the Death of God, is compatible with a world where admiration at the heroic deeds of exceptional individuals is replaced by lazy faith, greedy hope and undeserved charity—vices based on the anonymous and inhuman generosity of science.

Although BT concludes with an embarrassing panegyric to Richard Wagner, Nietzsche offers little explanation as to how the Bard of Bayreuth would restore tragedy and redeem humanity from cultural philistinism. One of the chief weaknesses of this work is its exaggerated belief in the power of music to bring about a political revolution. Even if tragedy was the cultural cement of Athens, the sheer size of the modern state militates against its playing this role in his time or ours; vulgar nationalism or violent fascism would be more likely to be spawned in the modern era. Though his next work on this theme does not refer to Wagner or Socrates, Nietzsche is far more explicit about the political and historical categories informing his thoughts.

**PART II: THE USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY**

While his first *Untimely Meditation* directly discussed the problems posed by the non-event of the Death of God and deplored the smug culture of historical optimism and cultural philistinism that pervaded the Second Reich, it is only in UM2 that Nietzsche develops a philosophy of cyclical history for the post-Christian epoch. Yet, although this essay into history is brilliantly insightful and strikingly original, it has many classical antecedents that Nietzsche is careful not to mention. The solution to the problem of history posited in this work is structurally similar to that put forward in BT; in both instances he offers three possible solutions to the problem of decadence; they include a higher synthesis that prudently incorporates the strengths of the other two positions.

UM2 begins by warning of the risk of a culture being overwhelmed by an indigestible glut of historical data. Reprising Silenus’ warning to the curious, Nietzsche argues that the uneducated must not be exposed to the heartbreaking cruelty and meaningless chaos of the totality of human history; seeing that life is devoid of meaning or value, the best fall victim to apathetic relativism and the worst embrace violent barbarism. As we cannot all be a-historical, like cattle living in the eternal now, Nietzsche argues that history must be formed and made conducive to life. “And this is the universal law; a living thing can only be healthy, strong, and fruitful when bounded by a horizon.” This is “the basis for cheerfulness, a good conscience, a joyful deed and confidence in the future. All
of them depend, in the case of an individual as of a nation, on the existence of a
line dividing the bright and knowable from the dark and obscure.”

Like the Sabbath, history was made for man; it must serve life and cannot
judge it. In the language of BT history needs a muse, a Wagner. His art provides
the players with a master plot and historical horizon in which they will act. In
turn, these actions give their non-critical spectators a sense of spiritual gravity
and source of meaning. In UM2 Nietzsche identifies three different kinds of
history: Monumental, Antiquarian, and Critical. They are described respectively
as being appropriate to those who (a) act and strive, (b) preserve and revere, and
(c) suffer and seek deliverance. While this regime could very easily be viewed
in traditional mediaeval terms, as being composed of nobles, clergy and peasants
respectively, things are not as simple as they seem.

Monumental history is created for those worthies who restlessly strut and
fret about the world-historical stage. Nietzsche describes them as those who de­
sire immortal fame and turn to history; they must believe in the continued possi­
bility of greatness—even if this is gained through falsely imposing past prece­
dents on a different present, “monumental history deceives by analogies,” and
only result in barbarism and genocide. Seeking to literally emulate the feats of
past heroes, and valuing glory above life, they are eternally opposed to those of
the common herd who seek to live at any cost and refuse to believe that the vio­
lent young bravos of the present could ever match the deeds of their godlike
ancestors. Those hoi polloi who “preserve and revere” whilst believing in provi­
dence and historical necessity, are the true consumers of Antiquarian history.
They are the backward looking chorus of believers and kneeling camels on
whose bowed backs the drama of history is staged for the future. Both types
need each other; pious Antiquarian history gives heroism an afterlife by sancti­
fying the violent deeds and forgetting the brutal times of the Monumental glory­
hounds.

The bearers of Antiquarian remember the past but are themselves forgotten,
while the heroes of Monumental history must forget much to be remembered.
Heroes cannot afford to recall “the essential condition of all happenings, this
blindness and injustice in the soul of him who acts.” The hero is as single­minded as a mother nursing her child: “He who acts loves his deed infinitely
more than it deserves.” Zarathustra says that he “makes his virtue his addiction
and his catastrophe: for his virtue’s sake he wants to live on and live no longer.
(He) does not want to have too many virtues. One virtue is better than two—it is
more of a noose on which his catastrophe may hang.” Yet, these nooses are
woven together by the Nous of a Critical historian who turns out to be a real
maker of history—whilst not being counted among its heroes. While we know
far more about Achilles than we do about Homer, it is yet legitimate to ask if the
choreographer is greater than his dunce-like dancer. Also, would the original
Achilles recognize himself in the Iliad? Is it better to be known or renowned?
Nietzsche would have us see poets like Homer, Plato, Shakespeare, and himself
as invisible and uncrowned makers (poietes) of human nature.
Achilles and Alexander are good examples of the profane material that history is made from. For all we know Achilles, who lived 400 years before Homer, was a brutal young thug—a Greek Billy the Kid—whose life was magically transmuted into an eternal symbol of doomed mortality by the poet's genius. Critical reading of the Homeric epics reveals ample evidence to support the view that these works actually warn mankind against ever repeating the violent folly of their ancestors, deeds that plunged Greece into many centuries of darkness. Still, 400 years after Homer, a "monumental" reading of his poems would lead another young thuggish military genius, Alexander, to destroy Greek liberty forever whilst seeking to emulate Achilles and conquer the entire world.

It is clear that neither the lions of Monumental history nor the camels of Antiquarian history are capable of seeing the naked truth: the empty randomness and ugly necessities governing human events. It takes an exceptional person to unblinkingly observe these phenomena; blind Homer and exiled Thucydides come to mind, and their understanding is often accompanied by an inability to exercise power in their own name and time. Yet they can train the historical actors of the future whilst also providing less discerning and fearful mortals comforting shadows to light their way to justly obscure graves. They hope that this "new stern discipline" of critical history will "implant in us a second nature so that our first nature withers away" in "an attempt to give our-selves a posteriori a past in which one would like to originate in opposition to that in which one did."21

There is much that is violent about Critical history. "If he is to live, man must possess and from time to time employ the strength to break up and dissolve."22 Blindly oblivious to justice, it sees that every past "is worthy to be condemned for that is the nature of human things ... violence and weakness have always played a mighty role in them."23 Yet this violence is in the service of Life "that dark driving power that insatiably thirsts for itself" and passes judgment "its sentence is always unmerciful, always unjust ... For all that exists is worthy of perishing ... to live and to be unjust is one and the same thing."24 Nietzsche reminds us that historical justice can only be vindicated by posterity: "only he who constructs the future has the right to judge the past."25 We are warned not to seek the appearance of justice if we are called to the dreadful vocation of being a just man.26 It seems that these critical historians are trying to follow and imitate Schopenhauer’s Will to Live.

Still, Critical historians who "suffer and seek deliverance” cannot gain anything like salvation in the ontology described by Nietzsche. They merely find transcendence from the nauseating spectacle of human delusion and impotence by continually weaving the shining Apollonian illusions that protect the many from the naked Dionysian truth about themselves. This royal art of weaving is used as an image of true statesmanship in Plato’s eponymous dialogue; the ruler has to spin together the spirited and moderate elements of the citizenry so that his polity endures.27 The tragic poet plays the same role in uniting historical actors and spectators to praise Dionysus, the god of chaos, while keeping him safely beyond the city walls. Likewise, the Critical historian’s esoteric art ensures
that the Monumental and Antiquarian narratives stay safely within the horizons defined by their respective powers to bear truth and sustain the endless relay race of life.\textsuperscript{28}

\textbf{INTERLUDE: BACK TO THE FUTURE?}

The tripartite account of history that Nietzsche has set forth here must be seen to correspond to a much older account of human types originally articulated by a poet who lived at about the same time as Homer. In his \textit{Works and Days} Hesiod divided mankind up into those who could see, those who could learn to see, and those who were incapable of seeing. In taking about sight, he is referring to the \textit{"mathema"} the knowable things. This corresponds in a way to the word \textit{"idea"} which in its non-technical original sense meant the \textit{"look"} of a thing. Hesiod distinguishes between (a) those rare seers who are not blinded by ignorance and passion, (b) the few, who learn to see and live by learning from those who know and (c) the incorrigibles who will never learn to see or live properly.\textsuperscript{29}

Nietzsche is less hopeful since, as we know, he believes that only very few can or should look into the heart of darkness and see reality as it is. His three types of history are, as we have seen intended for (a) the hidden creators of artificial truth, (b) those few who learn to act on the tragic-historical stage created by the creators, and (c) the herd-like masses capable only of mindless and superstitious lives. We note that even the first class will avert their eyes from primal reality and instead contemplate the intermediary Apollonian world of their creation. In other words, the three types must co-exist collectively.

There is also an even more significant intellectual antecedent to this tripartite regime. Although Nietzsche vigorously attacks Socrates and Plato in the name of pre-philosophic tragic pessimism, his own solution to the problems of progressive philistinism ultimately amounts to a flatfootedly literal recreation of the draconian regime, which I interpret as satirically depicted in Plato’s \textit{Republic}. His three kinds of history exactly correspond to the three soul types: Intellectual Guardians, Heroic Warriors and Herd-like Workers. All of them held in a cave by different relationships towards commonly held noble fictions. While the perfectly just city of the \textit{Republic} is fated to self-destruct, and can be shown to be a \textit{reductio-ad-absurdum} of tyranny and utopian authoritarianism, the several historical lies that Nietzsche deploys here are intended to be the basis of an actual polity. While Plato’s \textit{Republic} mutedly tries to show that the soul rather than the city is the true bearer of virtue,\textsuperscript{30} Nietzsche has so little trust in the soul’s power to be virtuous that he places his trust in the outcome of a process ruled by chance, fraud and violence. Thus, ten years later, in the \textit{persona} of Zarathustra, a Nietzsche grown old and wise urged a generation of free spirits to sacrifice themselves for the future.\textsuperscript{31} While religious German soldiers going to the Great War were given a Bible to take with them, the irreligious could choose Nietzsche’s \textit{Thus Spoke Zarathustra} as alternative reading for the trenches.\textsuperscript{32}

In BT and UM2, Nietzsche hoped that Wagner and he would jointly create the ruling mythology for the Post-Christian age. These wishful dreams were
finally dashed at Bayreuth 1876 when Wagner revealed himself to be merely another Romantic seeking redemption.\textsuperscript{33} This meant that, since Nietzsche soon despaired of finding the spirited or Monumental class that would follow him, he had to turn directly to the rabble. Just as laconic Socrates had to learn music, Nietzsche had to become the mouthpiece of Dionysus. Like Moses, he saw that he had to lead a small band of free spirits out of the equivalent of the Fleshpots of Egypt: the vulgar optimism of Imperial Germany. As this quest for "free spirits" proved fruitless, Nietzsche realized that he had to look beyond his own time; like Moses he had to unleash plagues on the present, advance the collapse of modern civilization, and brew all of Europe a deadly brew of anarchic violence. He also had to become reconciled to not entering his Promised Land as its philosopher king. No longer the guide and master of his own exodus, he had to become a sacrifice and bridge for the over-man. Just as Dionysus is doomed to perish at his moment of apotheosis, Nietzsche must "go under" and take a generation down with him if his hopes are to stand any chance of success. This is why the sometime prophet of Dionysus self-consciously calls himself "the crucified one."\textsuperscript{34} Instead of living as wise sage, he had to perish gloriously as a misunderstood god.

\textbf{PART III: ZARATHUSTRA AND HIS PROGENY}

This is also why, while Nietzsche's earliest writings were relatively easy to understand but hard to follow, his last works are as enticingly easy to follow as their ultimate purpose or end is obscure. Since "Zarathustra's Prologue" is rich in symbolism, and contains the essence of Nietzsche's movement from tragedy to comedy, I will decipher some of its pregnant and suggestive images that give provide the key to his masterpiece.

In this prologue to \textit{Zarathustra}, ominously titled "a book for everyone and no-one" Nietzsche, who earlier described himself as a kind of Prometheus figure, carrying his ashes up to his mountain\textsuperscript{35}—presumably because his fire had been refused—now decides to return to humankind.\textsuperscript{36} Ten years have lapsed since his last abortive donation, a period roughly corresponding to the years 1873-1883: the time separating \textit{UM2} from the first part of \textit{Zarathustra}. The sage now bears all of mankind a gift, whilst conceding to a retired hermit that he too no longer loves man.\textsuperscript{37} The classical reference suggests that Promethean fire, representing enlightenment for those few with forethought, will soon be replaced by Pandora—literally all-giving or giving to "all." This donation is made to the demotic many who must be compelled to become free spirits. Seeing that his gift, the neglected cave-fire of tragedy, is going out, Prometheus turns arsonist\textsuperscript{38}. The "all" of the rabble receive a bright shiny gift, albeit one they neither appreciate nor understand. This Pandemic firebrand will drive them from their decadent cave-like civilization, out into reality. However their ultimate destination is not revealed.
When Zarathustra enters a town, and meets a crowd assembled to watch a tightrope walker, for entertainment now rules public space, he uses the opportunity to preach the over-man. Claiming that man (like all the other beasts) must evolve towards something better, he warns that man at present is “more ape than any ape.” 39 What is truly human? The sage claims that the over-man shall be “the meaning of the earth.” 40 By this he means one who justifies life, not pointing to any otherworldly reward or kingdom, but by living well in the fullness of reality. He fears that post-religious man will regress to become a crassly hedonistic animal—one whose selfishness will betray both the earth and the long struggle of life that gave birth to consciousness and reason. While Zarathustra is very critical of religious men who tormented the body, he has scathing words for those who indulge the flesh and leave their souls poor, filthy and wretched. 41 This endless tug of war between body and soul cannot be the meaning of life. Rather, the great powers latent in human nature, the unity of the human mind and the bounty of nature, must be actualized to celebrate life. Zarathustra scolds those who too niggardly in exercising their virtues. 42

This raises the interesting question whether it is nobler to dedicate oneself to destroying the forces of negation that stifle the souls of others, or to living as good and exemplary a life as possible. We have seen much to suggest that Nietzsche would combine the two but stress the former; a career devoted to the tearing down of idols would be just the kind of brief glorious life that Greek tragedy praised; furthermore, UM2 with its emphasis on the artificiality of culture does not stray very far from the wisdom of Schopenhauer and Sophocles on the transcendent value of existence; life is cruel and there is nothing beyond the body, shadows and cave.

The crowd had hitherto taken Zarathustra’s words as praise for the tightrope walker who begins his doomed act as the sage continues to extol selflessly heroic sacrificial virtue. He warmly proclaims his love for those who squander their souls, and make their virtue an addiction and catastrophe; he blesses those who justify the future and redeem the past by their wish to perish of the present. 43 When Zarathustra finally realizes that he is not understood, he appeals to his audience’s shame by describing the last man and his victimless crime: the invention of the art of vicarious happiness. 44 But even this shift to negative rhetoric does not work as he expected.

Zarathustra’s last man no longer has “whirling chaos” in himself and can’t give birth to a “dancing star”: moreover, he will not despise himself for this impotence. To him, human categories like love, creation and longing have no meaning; everything is small and he makes everything small. This man’s race is ineradicable and he lives longest. Priding himself on his invention of happiness, the last man practices neighborly love out of prudence; he blinks continually because he can’t concentrate on anything for too long; 45 his sleep is drugged and his health is his religion; he only works because it is diverting and nothing is worth serious attention. Leading and following require too much effort for the last man who merely desires to feel what everyone feels; to him we are all the same. 46
Zarathustra is amazed to find that his dark prophecy meets with wild enthusiasm. "Give us the last man," the crowd cries like those who once said: "Give us Barabbas!"47 "Turn us into these last men, Then we shall make you a gift of the over man."48 Following this total breakdown in communication, a dejected Zarathustra is left alone with the broken body of the fallen tightrope walker to ponder the dismissive vulgarity of the urban crowd.

This desire for the last man meant that Zarathustra's greatest fear had all but materialized; strikingly, the crowd's comic optimism is more nauseating to the seer than the violence of history; like the tightrope walker, he too has plunged into the abyss of despair.49 Having starved their souls by first denying the stern classical virtues, and then losing faith in an afterlife where sentimental virtue would prevail over superb vice, the rabble were quite prepared to renounce their souls (along with their human heritage of reason, conscience and freedom) in exchange for a drugged dream of mindless comfort and endless entertainment. God's death had become a cliché to the last man's shameless parents who knew themselves only as pleasure centers. Godless Zarathustra could no longer shock them: God had been made redundant by the triumphs of science and democracy. But this only meant that (just as Christian rulers took over the Roman Empire instead of ending it) the rabble would delegate the powers of God to a democratic over-manager. He would have a popular mandate to rule as a good shepherd over tame beasts.

It is quite clear that such a regime would be inherently unstable; human nature being what it is, any ruler would surely be corrupted—if not by his own vices then surely by the attenuated attention spans and hedonistic foci of his subjects.50 These "penultimate men" would be led by their desires and have minimal sense of a common good. As Nietzsche brilliantly observed in his Twilight of the Idols, once we abolish the "real world" of the idealists, the apparent world is also swept away in the flood of becoming.51 It would seem that rank, order and rule could only be re-established in such a narcissistic society after a rude interregnum of anarchy that would reacquaint the populace with the ugliness of reality and destroy all of the optimistic assumptions that advanced cultural decadence.

Yet, since we know that Nietzsche also believes in the artificiality of culture, he cannot afford to believe that Apollo will restore what Dionysus has not destroyed. While he did not anticipate the invention of nuclear weapons that could destroy the planet or foresee the insidious risk of environmental degradation, his instinct in this matter was sound. A weakened culture must first be destroyed and then rebuilt or restored as soon as possible, if necessary by hastening the very forces of decadence that "push down what is falling."52 Nietzsche enters the prologue as a Jester who makes the tightrope walker, also a symbol of the old morality of two worlds, fall to his death making way for a violent new order.53

This is why Zarathustra, at the end of his prologue, leaves the dead to bury the dead.54 He now seeks living disciples but even these unidentified men are urged to lose him and find themselves.55 Earlier, he begged them to remain faith-
ful to the earth; they were to give life a new human meaning by recovering the virtues exiled by otherworldliness. These rehabilitated virtues are violent and destructive. Zarathustra’s disciples had to restore the heroic qualities lost when the “penultimate men” invented happiness by abolishing or forgetting the quintessentially human qualities of love, courage and honor in the name of pusillanimous prudence and passive-aggressive piety. The hour for Monumental history had come. The stubbornly held Antiquarian history of the pious slaves would otherwise implode. This cultural collapse occurs as they await the coming of a redeeming over-man; He establishes the era of the last man, the Son of Man, a Kingdom that lasts forever.

In Zarathustra’s account of the three metamorphoses of spirit, he tells of three stages of history that must come to pass. These stages correspond to the tripartite schema of UM2, albeit in a diachronic (not synchronic) way. The first stage, the Camel, is the era of Antiquarian history; the Camel is like the tightrope walker we met, with a broken back. It may be seen as human being-for-itself seeking being-in-itself by its passive refusal of freedom. Invulnerable only in the heel, it must humbly bear every burden of faith, and struggle through the swirling sands of history, until it turns into a Lion. The Camel fears anarchy and bears new laws well, giving them time to become instinct and second nature. But when laws are tired and irrelevant, the last man rides in on its stiff-necked reverence.

The stage of the Lion is the transformation that Zarathustra must steel himself to bring about; in other words, like Moses, his eyes are not destined to witness the culmination of the entire process. The Lion’s task is to denounce and destroy all that is false, old and morally coercive. He must find and destroy the old Dragon that enslaved the camel-like spirit for many thousands of years. The Dragon of tradition enslaved the spirit with the words “thou shalt.” This Dragon, representing all created value, jealously guards the treasure of human freedom. The Lion cannot create values, but it must deliver the spirit from enslavement by roaring out its sacred “NO.” The Lion must find vanity, illusion and caprice in even the most sacred things so that the spirit may be liberated from the burden of sin and slavery. Though the Lion frees the spirit from ancient loves and dead duties, this spirit is yet a purely destructive force. Its transformation into the glorious form of Monumental history may only occur when the Lion is given new horizons that will explain and glorify its great acts of destruction. This blond beast needs these pellucid justifications to cleanse and purify its deeds; only these purposes and reasons will give beauty and nobility to a gory narrative that would otherwise depict little more than prideful sound and vengeful fury.

Only Apollo can give subsequent grace and healing beauty to a chaotic Bacchanal—an orgy of the spirit that must surely be incapable of being beheld by a sober witness. Here we see the third Critical stage of history: the Child. One is reminded of Heraclitus saying that “kingship belongs to a child” but more suggestive is the lyre playing David who slew a Lion and killed the armor-clad dragon Goliath using a child’s toy. The David of Michelangelo is an
iconic image of the cool judgment and easy confidence of the Renaissance—the era that should have followed the Reformation and the lionine nay-saying stance of Luther.61

Although Nietzsche, from the vantage of critical history, has already sketched out the form of the transformations that he would like to see, we have noted that he is Moses and not David; this means that he speaks only as a “seer” of the future. Much of Zarathustra treats of the difficulty that Nietzsche, the diffident classicist, finds in adapting his message to the loud demotic tones of the Lion. The difficulty of this task is considerable: he has to convince an entire generation—the generation of WWI and the trenches—to go under or commit suicide. Like Moses the stammerer, he finds a priestly mouthpiece in Zarathustra—a Nietzsche grown old and wise—who shatters the tablets of dualist morality62 and kindles the sacred fire of his people. It is in this persona that Nietzsche will play his part in the transition between Antiquarian and Monumental history. He will be bringing about the actual deeds of Monumental history, as we noted when discussing the life and myth of Achilles, these deeds are far uglier than the shining accounts of glorious feats that his posterity will see and be inspired by. This was why, with the exception of the Founder, Joshua, none of the lost generation of the Exodus could take his own memories of Moses, Egypt and Sinai into the Promised Land.

The time finally comes for Zarathustra-Nietzsche to give affirmation to the voice of the Lion that he will successfully employ in his last works; he is compelled to do so after a kind of Gethsemane scene where the old sage finally drains the chalice of violence to the lees as a toast to his shameless bride: Life.63 The age-old Homeric affinity between Ares and Aphrodite is used to transform the wild irrational Will of Schopenhauer into a prodigal feminine principle of life that he and his disciples will follow when they are pledged to “Be faithful to the Earth.” More accurately however, the true subtext for this dalliance with life’s vitality and violence is the virile humanism of Machiavelli’s Prince.

Dame Fortuna, Machiavelli’s promiscuous replacement for Fate, both appreciates and drains youthful virility; once a prince or poet has had his way with her, there is no guarantee that she will always be his muse and mistress.64 He must prove his love for life repeatedly on what could only be called the slaughter-bed of Fortune. When an old woman advises Zarathustra: “You are going to woman? Don’t forget the whip!”65 Nietzsche is clearly thinking of his Italian predecessor. The same claim could be made of his notorious claim that “Good and bad women all want a stick.”66 When Zarathustra is nauseated by the prospect of the eternal return of the same,67 it is because this has the same prodigal fertility of the Will to Life. Of course this principle of the eternal return suggests that the cyclical order of things is not entirely irrational or random; it is ruled by an evolving version of cyclical history in dialectical interaction with the Will as power. This Thucydidean force of ananke (necessity) whips Fortuna and directs her historical trajectory. Nietzsche finds that this human meaning to history is a less nauseating goal to command and preserve.
Now since the era of the Camel had barely ended in Nietzsche's own time, it was clear that the era of Critical history and philosophy was many generations away—beyond the trenches and holocausts of the bloody Twentieth Century. Yet, for all this, Nietzsche does address the philosophers of the future. Among other things, he does this to ensure that his master plan or outline of critical history will be available and understood, even if not necessarily followed, when the time finally comes for the philosopher-poet to take in hand the tiller of Zeus and guide the destiny of man.

Post-Modernist philosophers have famously offered their accounts of a liberal Nietzsche, basing their scholarship on some of our subject's more inflammatory writings—works written with the express intention of demolishing the strongest remnants of the culture of the past so that the badly over-due revaluation of values could come about. If there is any doubt about Nietzsche's own expectations as to what a new and sustainable culture would look like, one only needs to turn to *The Antichrist* (*AC*), one of his last and most radical works, where he lays out an account of a tripartite political regime that still faithfully hews to the model set forth in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Plato's *Republic*.

In the *Antichrist*, Nietzsche lavishes high praise on the Law of Manu, saying that "Here, the noble class: the philosophers and the warriors, stand above the mass." Nietzsche further states that "A law such as that of Manu ... sums up the experience, prudence and experimental morality of many centuries; it concludes: it creates nothing further." By this he means that once the age of the Lion is over, the philosopher-founders establish a rigid new law code: "At a certain point in the development of a people, the most circumspect stratum, that is, the one who sees furthest back and ahead, declares the experiment to be concluded ... what must now be prevented above all is further experimentation, a continuation of a fluid state of values, testing, choosing, criticizing values ad infinitum."

Nietzsche now goes on to explicitly endorse the tripartite model after first stating that an order of castes or rank is "the supreme and dominant law which is sanctioned by the natural order and naturally lawful, an institution over which no arbitrariness or modern idea possesses any authority." Every healthy society has "three types which condition each other and gravitate, differently, physiologically; each has its own hygiene, its own field of work ...Nature not man distinguishes the pre-eminently spiritual ones, those who are eminently strong in muscle and temperament and the mediocre ones; the last are the great majority, the first as the elite."

Those of the highest caste are said to "find their happiness where others would find their destruction: in labyrinths, in hardness against themselves and others, in experiments; their joy is self-conquest ... they rule not because they want to but because they are; they are not free to be second." Likewise the second class are "the guardians of the law, those who see to order and security, the noble warriors and above all the king as the highest formula of warrior, judge and upholder of the law." “Those of this class are the executive arm of the
most spiritual ... that which does everything gross in the work of ruling for them, their retinue, their right hands, their best pupils.”

Nietzsche finds nothing experimental or arbitrary about this: “The order of castes, the order of rank, merely formulate the highest law of life; the separation of the three types is necessary for the preservation of society, to make possible the higher and highest types.” We cannot underestimate the privileges of the lower class; the artisans in the Republic had comforts (private property and family) that were not available to the higher classes. Life is harder as one climbs higher. Nietzsche compares culture to a pyramid, which must stand on the mass-ive base of a “strong and solidly constructed mediocrity.”

In all of this we can see how Nietzsche, philosopher and fervent enemy of nihilism, satisfies the masses’ quest for substance and contentment (being-in-itself) by separating, from the misguided or uneducated “being-for-itself” of the spirited class, what he had previously united with it to advance decadence. Here, he is but reiterating Aristotle’s claim that man is a political animal, along with its corollary that those who can exist outside of a polity are either beasts or gods. But it is also worth noting that the classical polis did not interpose itself between man and world, but was an oikos for the soul; Hellenistic philosophy, which believed that man could be educated and the world improved, was not ruled by a rigid doctrine of types but held that the various elements of the soul could be led towards virtue by transcendent al Eros and maieutic example.

Even though Nietzsche’s thought represents a great advance over Schopenhauer’s pessimism, which only offer the diversion of art and music from an otherwise bleak and cruel world, Nietzsche’s basically hierarchic structures indicate the ultimately limited satisfaction that even the philosopher: “one who suffers and seeks deliverance,” can gain from this world. While his exhortations to “Be faithful to the Earth” and “Give life a new human meaning” are of much value in liberating the human spirit from the death-grip of other-worldly abstractions and resentful pieties, his preference for violence in both speech and deed is a minimal advance over religious resignation. He ends up using the power-driven idiom of the optimistic Moderns he despised—never ridding himself of the legacy of de-Hellenized and Post-Nicean Christianity, belief in an omnipotent creator ex-nihilo. Also, since Nietzsche did not believe in the “enduring power” or integrity of the soul, Socrates’ eponymous discovery, he deduced that any argument based on an appeal to truth is ultimately doomed to failure and disappointment. Accordingly, he appeals to Caesar and says that a philosopher is strong enough to bear truths that break most hearts.

Perhaps we should look to build further on Nietzsche’s recognition that getting rid of the true world also destroys the apparent by both acknowledging the fact that the Earth or purely physical world needs a superstructure of non-natural artifacts and intelligible objects (works of art, music, history and literature) and by also noting that this human meaning can be immortal and not historically conditioned propaganda—as Nietzsche may imply. While it may be fruitless to make rough love to Fortuna, sweet uses made of adversity in the past could outlive their immediate horizon and bring lasting solace and joy to all who cultivate.
their gardens: body and soul. Humanistic virtue of this kind is gained one soul at a time, but it makes it possible for anyone to see, and desire to share, a world of beauty they could expect all educated persons to participate in. This capacity gives us hope in humanity’s ability to live in a commonwealth of true human meaning: one that faithfully realizes the promise of Earth’s blind fertility. It also rejects that other infidelity to the Earth: the last man’s vain hope to dwell forever in a technological utopia.

NOTES


2. Gay Science #125 in PN p. 95.


4. See Nietzsche’s “Attempt at self-criticism” of BT in BW p. 17.

5. See Homer’s Contest, PN p. 33 ff.


8. BT in BW p. 42.


13. See Dionysus’ actions in Euripides’ Bacchae—the work that in Nietzsche’s opinion delivered the death blow to Greek tragedy.

14. BT in BW p. 80.

15. BT in BW p. 85.

16. UM p. 63.

17. UM p. 63.

18. UM p. 67.


21. UM p. 76.

22. UM p. 75.

23. UM p. 76.

24. UM p. 76.

25. UM p. 94.

26. UM p. 93.

27. See Plato, Statesman 309b.

28. See Beyond Good and Evil #150 in PN p. 280: “Around the hero everything turns into a tragedy; around the demi-god, into a satyr play; and around God—what? Perhaps into ‘world’?”


31. In his preface to *Human all too Human* Nietzsche admits that these free spirits did not and could not exist in his own time; he merely sought (imaginary) companions whom he could “send to the Devil” when he tired of them, HH #2.

32. Steven E. Aschheim notes that about 150,000 copies of a durable wartime edition of *Zarathustra* were distributed to the troops. See *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990*, (University of California Press, 1992) p.135.


34. PN p. 685.

35. Z in PN p. 122.

36. Z in PN p. 121.


41. Z in PN p. 125.


44. Z in PN p. 129.

45. Compare this to the warning given by Aristophanes to the descendents of the circle men in the *Symposium*: he threatens that they will be split into monopods if they continue to disobey the gods and pursue erotic politics (193a). The distracted blinking of the last men corresponds to the hopping of the easily diverted post-humans desired by Zeus.


48. Z in PN p. 130.

49. Z in PN p. 131.

50. This is surely how Plato meant books VII to IX of the *Republic* to be read. We’re also reminded of the “horror” in Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*.

51. TWI in PN p. 486.


55. Z in PN p. 190.

56. Z in PN p. 188.


60. 1 *Samuel* 17:36.

61. See *Gay Science* #358.


64. See Chapter 26 of *The Prince* by Machiavelli.

65. Z in PN p. 179.

66. *Beyond Good and Evil* #147 in PN p. 279.

68. AC in PN p. 642.
69. AC in PN p. 643.
70. AC in PN p. 644.
71. AC in PN p. 645.
72. AC in PN p. 645.
73. AC in PN p. 645-46.
74. AC in PN p. 646.
75. AC in PN p. 646.
76. AC in PN p. 646.
77. Aristotle \textit{Politics} 1253a27, see also TWI in PN 467.