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NIETZSCHE (1844-1900)

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was an unconventional philologist and anti-idealist philosopher born in Saxony and educated at the universities of Bonn and Leipzig. His father, who died when Nietzsche was a child, was a Lutheran pastor whose religious beliefs were not shared by a son who was scathing of Christianity and of liberalism. A brilliant student, greatly influenced by Schopenhauer early on, at 24 Nietzsche became professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. His first books were *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which divided experience between the two categories 'Dionysian' (aesthetic pleasure) and 'Apollonian' (rational discourse), and *Untimely Meditations* (1873-6), after which he had to retire from the university for reasons of ill health in 1878. He suffered a complete mental breakdown in 1889 after finishing his autobiography *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is* (published in 1908). A prolific, idiosyncratic and epigrammatic writer, his mature and best-known works (for which he accepted the term 'aristocratic radicalism') are *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886), *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One* (1883-92), in which he expounds his theories of the *Übermensch*, (superman or overman) who is above societal morality, of the 'will to power', eternal recurrence and the death of God.

In the 1886 edition of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche added a prefatory piece entitled 'Essay in Self-Criticism', in which he foreshadows the Modernists' self-scrutinising and their concern with aesthetics as the primary responsibility of the artist if not of all individuals, overthrowing a Victorian fetishisation of morality:

Art - and *not* morality - is represented as the actual *metaphysical* activity of mankind ... it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that the existence of the world is *justified*. The whose book, indeed, recognizes only an artistic meaning and hidden meaning behind all events. ... One may call this whose artist's metaphysics arbitrary, idle, fantastical - the essential thing about it is that it already betrays a spirit who will one day and regardless of the risk take up arms against the *Moral* interpretation and significance of existence.

In line with this, Modernism was the first secular literature, in which natural selection replaced God's ordering of creation and a human will to power eclipsed the divine will. World War I shattered any remaining belief in natural or supernatural benevolence, in terms of aristocratic *noblesse oblige* or providence. However, almost every article of faith challenged by the Modernists had previously been attacked by Nietzsche, whose pronouncement in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that 'God is Dead' makes him an important figure to follow Marx, Darwin and Freud, but his influence is much wider. Nietzsche was a prophet, an iconoclast and a brilliant original scholar. Increasingly, he seems to be the figure who most overshadows twentieth-century critical theory; however, his position was not unique and his ideas had parallels and precursors (Søren Kierkegaard is the most often cited), as well as followers in the existentialists of the twentieth century, such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), the greatest influence on Nietzsche's early work, developed a philosophy of the will founded on a deeply pessimistic view of the universe (see *The World as Will and Idea*). An atheist, he believed, along with Plato and Immanuel Kant, that the world is only a physical manifestation of an underlying cosmic reality, which for Schopenhauer was 'the will' – whether the human thought of movement behind action or the timeless force of desire that Schopenhauer believed animated the universe, and led meaninglessly to all suffering because the will was never sated. While for Schopenhauer the 'will' denoted something metaphysical, which led him to recommend the denial of life, for Nietzsche it described a physiological complex of drives and impulses, and he moved increasingly to advocate its joyful celebration. Unfortunately, in a diagnosis that would appeal greatly to Yeats, Nietzsche felt that, far from attending to the positive forces of its will, a repressed and enervated modern society was sick, led by frivolity and morbidity: a wilderness in need of a prophet.

If this view were true, as Nietzsche thought, it might explain why his idea of the driven will was co-opted by aggressive temperaments and oppressive political factions. Nietzsche's holistic view of universal will, most strongly expressed in *The Will to Power* (1885-8, publ. 1901), identified not 'power' but relations of power between forces, the driving energy behind human life. Life was to him therefore an endeavour to maximise one's own feelings of power over other people or things; an idea which, if not checked by other convictions, could result in such extremes as dictatorship, asceticism, self-punishment or sadism. Such beliefs, as well as being influential on modern theorists such as Foucault, Lyotard and Derrida, also led to political, especially fascistic, interpretations of Nietzsche's designations of different moralities for 'masters' and 'slaves'. This was compounded by his famous theory of the 'overman', the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche believed that the highest goal humanity could achieve was an 'overman', a 'new creative being who could transcend religion, morality and ordinary society, could further culture not reason, and whose life-affirming slogan would be 'Become what you are'.

Better than anyone, in texts like *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886, translated into English in 1907) Nietzsche expresses the contradictions and contrariness of a new aesthetic: 'We moderns, we half-barbarians. We are in the midst of our bliss only when we are most in danger.' He yearns for a new individual to create for the future new values – 'the revaluation of all values' – and to reject the present as already fading into the past. Nietzsche is also the theorist of nihilism, a term coined by Ivan Turgenev for *Fathers and Sons* (1861) but more fully explored in the misanthropic protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864), discussed above. In *The Will to Power*, a posthumously published book compiled from Nietzsche's 1880s' notebooks by his sister, later a Nazi supporter, Nietzsche describes 'European Nihilism', in the title of Book One, in terms of the centralising and secularising processes of modern politics. In Sections 22-3, he says of nihilism: 'It is ambiguous: A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active* nihilism. B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism.' The first is actively, violently destructive, the second is marked by futility, resignation and cynicism. Both kinds would be evident in the attitudes of different movements banded together under the heading of Modernism, in which a climate of revolution was as evident in the calls to destroy as in those to create.

In his first book, where he delineated the now dominant ordered, rational Apollonian mentality and the suppressed creative, aesthetic Dionysian spirit, Nietzsche had argued that one of the

problems of the modern age was that people had lost touch with tragic myth, with the sensuality, intuition and truth found in Greek tragedy, and especially the Dionysian principle of dream and chaos expressed in Greek music. Both Darwin and Freud also contributed to an increased interest in myth. For many Modernists, mythology, such as the story of Oedipus's murder of his father and marriage to his mother in Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannos*, was thought to obey a logic much closer to the subjective and associative promptings of the unconscious mind than to the formal progression of scientific inquiry. To writers like Yeats, Eliot and Joyce the importance of myth applied to contemporary literature was in its ordering power which the disharmony of modern society and culture had lost and only art could recapture. One critic has concluded that:

In writers, the search for order and pattern began in its own negation, in the overwhelming sense of disorder and fragmentation caused by the modern materialist world. The artist as seer would attempt to create what the culture could no longer produce: symbol and meaning in the dimension of art, brought into being through the agency of language. (Friedman 1981: 98)

Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (12 vols, 1890-1915), which was greatly influential on Eliot's *The Waste Land*, is a key text which charts the connections between pagan rites and Christian religion. In literature, a progressive shift can be detected from the dismantling of religious narrative elements to the construction of new mythological models. For example, Hardy expressed a new set of values in his later novels which are nonetheless haunted by biblical allusions, archetypes and punishments, but the Modernist writers who followed turned instead to classical models, most famously in *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*. They also set about creating their own myths and Bibles in all-encompassing works such as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) or Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913 on).

In Britain, Nietzsche's ideas were propagated by the literary and cultural journal *The New Age*, which also, for example, first published most of Katherine Mansfield's early short stories, and his opinions became widely known after the publication in English of *Beyond Good and Evil* in 1907. He had admirers in Wyndham Lewis and D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence's most admired novels, *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920, but completed 1916), are suffused with Nietzschean language. Consider, for example, this speech by Birkin to Ursula in *Women in Love*: "But your passion is a lie," he went on violently. "It isn't passion at all, it is your will. It's your bullying will. You want to clutch things and have them in your power. ... You have only your will and your conceit of consciousness, and your lust for power, to *know*." (92). The earlier novel, whose second half is concerned with Ursula's emergence as a mature, sexual individual, also takes the assertion of 'will' as the principal motivation behind battling egos, such as that of Ursula's father: 'He was abstract, purely a fixed will' (117). Ursula's own key problem is the Nietzschean one of how to 'become what you are': 'How to become oneself, how to know the question and the answer of oneself, when one was merely an unfixed something-nothing, blowing about like the winds of heaven, undefined, unstated' (268).

For writers in Britain and across Europe, Nietzsche's assault on religion was particularly influential, as was his emphasis on the individual mind, which he opposed to the mass of the mindless 'herd'. In writers like James, Conrad and Forster there is also a clear artistic approach to fashioning chaos into an order of some kind, expressing the mind's unique subjective view in

an essentially purposeless universe without authority or structure. Nietzsche's attack on science as not explanation but description also appealed to the artists who wanted to express better worlds, to seize the future for aesthetic principles. Another key belief expressed by Nietzsche was 'eternal recurrence', a theory misrepresented as simply the view that all experience is eternally repeated but best comprehended as an axiom for affirmative life: the individual *should* live each moment as though it were to be eternally repeated. An emphasis on not linear but cyclical time, brought to many Europeans by African culture, became a frequent Modernist stylistic device, and many critics have commented on the circularity of works like Joyce's *Ulysses*, which at the most basic level, for example, starts and ends with the same letter, or *Finnegans Wake*, in which the opening and closing sentences to the novel run into and complete each other. But, Nietzsche was recommending far more than an acknowledgement of life's cyclical patterning; eternal recurrence insisted upon the need to experience life to the full, to make the most of every moment and to accept responsibility for present actions – whatever the individual chooses to do should be for all time, and so every person ought to strive to fulfil their potential or simply to 'become' what they are, and so should live as if they wanted each moment to come back again.

Lastly, Nietzsche's hatred for systematisers is visible in the Modernists' earnest desire to speak for and as individuals; to express the internal not describe the external world which was in almost every respect the product of a constricting social and aesthetic hegemony which needed questioning. Such systems included the philosophical, social, political and moral guidelines people turned to for convictions which were not their own; for example, Nietzsche railed against the debilitating influence of concepts such as guilt, pity, equality and democracy. After the strait-laced public morality professed by the Victorians, it was liberating for writers such as Lawrence and Joyce that Nietzsche deemed ethical beliefs the instinct of the herd, because he thought convictions of this kind are always held by groups, made up of weak individuals who are only strong collectively. Morality thus, with the death of God, had been exposed as a function of self-interest and power. New criteria of judgement, based on aesthetics, were needed for art, and in many ways for life too.

Nietzsche's questioning of all certainties, in his assertions that truths are undisclosed errors or that facts are temporary, and his emphasis on relativity, interpretation and uncertainty, anticipates not only the art but also the science of the twentieth century. Nietzsche's original understandings of morality, aesthetics, truth and language are reminders of literature's many roots in philosophical ideas, and in this respect his contributions to Western thought were crucially added to by such thinkers as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who first stated the idea that individuals do not speak through language so much as language speaks through them, and Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who conceived the idea that all human reasoning is a kind of 'language game' rather than an objective engagement with reality or truth. Nietzsche was the first philosopher to consider extensively human responsibility and freedom in a universe without God, but perhaps his primary legacy is to persuade philosophers and writers that truth is an 'army of metaphors' and that human reality is composed, first and foremost, of language, a subject of study revolutionised, if posthumously, by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.