The legacy of Friedrich Nietzsche

by Roger Kimball

On the world Nietzsche predicted and precipitated.

The ideal of morality has no more dangerous rival than the ideal of supreme strength, of a life of maximum vigor, which has also been called the ideal of aesthetic greatness. That life is in truth the ultimate attainment of the barbarian, and unfortunately in these days of civilization’s withering it has won a great many adherents. In pursuance of this ideal man becomes a hybrid thing, a brute-spirit, whose cruel mentality exerts a horrible spell upon weaklings.

—Novalis

I am no man, I am dynamite.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Of all nineteenth-century thinkers, perhaps only Karl Marx has surpassed Nietzsche in his influence on the twentieth century. And not even Marx has exercised the intellectual and spiritual fascination commanded by his unhappy countryman. Indeed, as more and more of the political regimes erected under the banner of Marxism repudiate Marx’s ideas, it becomes ever clearer that much of what makes the modern world modern also makes it Nietzschean. Nietzsche’s glorification of power and his contention that “there are altogether no moral facts” are grim signatures of the age. So, too, is his enthusiasm for violence, cruelty, and the irrational. As Erich Heller put it, Nietzsche has “drawn the fever-chart of an epoch.”
This is not to say that Nietzsche would approve of the societies that his ideas have shaped so profoundly. On the contrary, he would regard both the proliferation of democracy and the triumph of mass media and popular culture with a distaste bordering on horror. He would abominate the widespread attack on rank, hierarchy, and social distinction; the political emancipation of women in particular he would reject as (to quote from *The Genealogy of Morals*) “one of the worst developments of the general uglification of Europe.” Even the casual atheism, relativism, and hedonism of our time—even, that is, behavior and attitudes that might seem (in Nietzsche’s arresting phrase) “beyond good and evil”—would earn his contempt precisely for being adopted casually: it was a first principle with this enemy of first principles to make nothing easy for himself—or for us.

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One of Nietzsche’s greatest fears was creeping mediocrity. If the Übermensch represented his ideal—the ideal of a being strong enough to create his own values, strong enough to live without the consolation of traditional morality—the opposite of the Übermensch was the timid creature Nietzsche called *der letzte Mensch*, “the last man.” In a famous passage near the beginning of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has Zarathustra warn a crowd of followers about this grave spiritual danger:

“Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer give birth to a star. Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the last man.

“’What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?’ thus asks the last man, and he blinks.

“The earth is small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest.

“’We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one’s neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.

“Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully… A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the
end, for an agreeable death.

“One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment become too harrowing…

“No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse…

“One is clever and knows everything that has ever happened: so there is no end of derision. One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled—else it might spoil the digestion.

“One has one’s little pleasure for the day and one’s little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health.

“‘We have invented happiness,’ say the last men, and they blink.”

Having heard Zarathustra’s description, the crowd shouts: “Give us this last man, O Zarathustra … Turn us into these last men!”

I have quoted this at such length because it provides an outline of practically everything Nietzsche found contemptible: the last man’s lack of striving and ambition, his meekness and absorption in “little pleasures,” even his obsession with health.

If much that characterizes the modern world would disgust Nietzsche, little about its spiritual landscape would surprise him. In announcing “the death of God”—something he described as “the greatest recent event”—Nietzsche foresaw the rise of anomie, the spreading sense of angst and meaninglessness, “the unbearable lightness of being”: the whole existentialist panoply of despair and spiritual torpor. All this he diagnosed under the heading of nihilism: the situation in which “the highest values devalue themselves” and the question “Why?” finds no answer. The last man, he predicted, would be one response to nihilism, but the full implications of the death of God had yet to unfold. “The event itself is far too great,” he wrote, “too distant, too remote from the multitude’s capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of having arrived as yet.” And when they did arrive, what certainties would not suddenly become dispensable!—“for example, the whole of our European morality.” Not for nothing, perhaps, did Nietzsche put the first announcement of the death of God in the mouth of a madman. To say that he welcomed this development would be only half true. He thought that it meant liberation, yes: with the death of God, Nietzsche believed that man would be free to create values that accord more generously with human nature than do inherited religious values. But he knew that the loss of religious faith also threatened man with a terrifying rootlessness. What happens when “the highest values devalue themselves”? Who or what will take the place of God? What prodigies will fill the vacuum left by a faltering morality? What unfathomed comforts will man devise for himself in the absence of faith? To a large extent, Nietzsche’s philosophy is an attempt to live with
these questions: to probe the loss, the temptations, the opportunities that they imply. Nietzsche also seemed to believe that he had fashioned a novel—and honest—response to nihilism, though it is not always clear that his answers are usefully distinguishable from the problems that they are meant to address.

An inventory of the philosophers, writers, and artists whom Nietzsche influenced would form a compendious tour of twentieth-century culture. Heidegger, Sartre, and the other existentialists are inconceivable without Nietzsche; so indeed is Max Weber’s theory of value; writers from Rilke, Yeats, Gide, and George Bernard Shaw, to Thomas Mann, W.H. Auden, and Wallace Stevens were all deeply influenced by aspects of his thought; ditto for D.H. Lawrence, Hermann Broch, Robert Musil, André Malraux; Oswald Spengler, author of The Decline of the West, wrote that he owed “almost everything” to Goethe and Nietzsche; Nietzsche’s most famous book, Also sprach Zarathustra, provided Richard Strauss with inspiration and a title for a symphonic tone poem; Freud acknowledged that Nietzsche’s insights about human motivation “agree in the most amazing manner” with psychoanalysis; and on and on.

Nietzsche snidely remarked that Christianity was “Platonism for the masses.” In the academy today we have what we might call Nietzscheanism for the masses, as squads of cozy nihilists parrot his ideas and attitudes. Nietzsche’s contention that truth is merely “a moveable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms,” for example, has become a veritable mantra in comparative literature departments across the country. But even if Nietzsche’s corrosive beliefs about truth, morals, and religion seem custom-made for fashionable academics, in other respects he is hardly what one would call politically correct. “When a woman has scholarly inclinations,” Nietzsche tells us in Beyond Good and Evil (1886), “there is usually something wrong with her sexually.” “What is truth to woman? From the beginning nothing has been more alien, repugnant, and hostile to woman than truth—her great art is the lie, her highest concern mere appearance and beauty.” Of course, since Nietzsche insisted that truth is “ugly” and exalted “mere appearance,” it might be possible to give a positive interpretation of this statement. But I doubt that any hermeneutical legerdemain can salvage his remark that a man who has “depth” should think about woman as “Orientals” do: “as a possession.”

More even than with most thinkers, people have taken very different sorts of things from Nietzsche. This is partly a function of his style, which is epigrammatic, literary, and sometimes elusive to the point of enigma. Many of his central ideas and doctrines—the Eternal Recurrence, the Übermensch (which Shaw slyly translated as “superman,” thus giving the idea a slightly comic aura), even the Will to Power—have functioned more as suggestive metaphors than as arguments. Indeed, while it cannot exactly be said that Nietzsche spurned arguments, one has the sense that he resorted to them reluctantly: how much better—more dramatic, more convincing—to present an unforgettable image instead of stooping to develop an argument! “Alles, was tief ist, liebt die Maske”: “Whatever is profound,” Nietzsche wrote, “loves masks.” Certainly, Nietzsche loved masks. He was a philosopher, but he often wrote like a poet; and poets, he proclaimed in Zarathustra.
He is, at any rate, rightly regarded as one of the great masters of German prose. Because of serious eye trouble—Nietzsche was often close to blindness for much of his adult life—he could neither read nor write for extended periods. He tended to compose in his head during long daily walks. “[G]ive no credence to any thought,” he advised, “that was not born outdoors while one moved about freely.” Hence his preference for the aphorism or very short essay. Most of Nietzsche’s books are really a series of aphorisms or extended aphorisms strung together. The contention that such a form is unsuitable to serious philosophical reflection was something Nietzsche rejected: “It is aphorisms! Is it aphorisms?—May those who would reproach me thus reconsider and then ask pardon of themselves.” For Nietzsche, the aphorism was the favored companion of insight: nimbler and more eloquent than discursive argumentation. “I approach deep problems like cold baths,” he confided: “quickly into them and quickly out again. That one does not get to the depths that way, not deep enough down, is the superstition of those afraid of the water, the enemies of cold water; they speak without experience. The freezing cold makes one swift.” Nietzsche’s particular speciality was the psychological aphorism: the scalpel-like exposure of motives. Here are a few from *Beyond Good and Evil*:

He who does not wish to see what is great in a man, has the sharpest eye for that which is low and superficial in him, and so gives away—himself.

Anyone who has looked deeply into the world may guess how much wisdom lies in the superficiality of men.

One begins to mistrust very clever people when they become embarrassed.

When we have to change our mind about a person, we hold the inconvenience he causes us very much against him.

The abdomen is the reason why man does not easily take himself for a god.

“I have done that,” says my memory. “I cannot have done that,” says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually—memory yields.

Despite Nietzsche’s virtues as a stylist, however, it is worth noting that he did not always write well. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for example, is a pretentious rhetorical swamp, punctuated here and there with glittering observations. (Nietzsche, who believed that with Zarathustra he had “given mankind the greatest present that has been given to it so far,” obviously thought otherwise: “Having understood six sentences from it,” he remarked in *Ecce Homo*, “would raise one to a higher level of existence than ‘modern’ man could attain.”) And Nietzsche himself admitted that *The Birth of Tragedy* was often “badly written, ponderous, embarrassing, image-mad and image-
confused, sentimental, in places saccharine to the point of effeminacy, uneven in tempo, without the will to logical cleanliness.” It is an irony that many of Nietzsche's admirers have been most beguiled by elements of his work—the idea of the artist as purveyor of “metaphysical comfort” in The Birth of Tragedy, for example, or the quasi-biblical rhetoric of Zarathustra—that he later rejected or refused to acknowledge.

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Nietzsche’s style puts a premium on expression; coherence is another matter. Many critics have endeavored to show that, taken as a whole, his work reveals considerably more unity than is at first apparent; it also undoubtedly reveals a more systematic character that one might initially suspect: epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics—Nietzsche had distinctive things to say about all the traditional philosophical topics, albeit he often said them in an untraditional way. It may well be true, as one commentator suggested, that Nietzsche’s books are easier to read and harder to understand than those of almost any other thinker. A trip through Nietzsche’s books will reveal wildly disparate claims about truth, chastity, the Germans, Wagner, the Jews, morality, science, art, and Christianity—to mention a few topics that absorbed his attention. It is easy to quote Nietzsche to almost any purpose, and it is not surprising that his work has been mined to support ideas that he would radically oppose. Given his insistence that “one does not only wish to be understood when one writes, one wishes just as surely not to be understood,” this is hardly surprising. The existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers offered the excellent advice that one should not rest content with any assertion in Nietzsche’s works until finding a passage that contradicted it: only then would one be in a position to decide what he really meant.

While those influenced by Nietzsche fall into many categories, one useful dividing line is between those who came to Nietzsche before Nazism and those who came later. The former can seem remarkably innocent. Typical is the American writer H.L. Mencken. In his book The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche (first published in 1908), Mencken presents us with a bluff, irascible Nietzsche who sounds a good deal like … H.L. Mencken. “Broadly viewed,” he writes, Nietzsche’s ideas “stand in direct opposition to every dream that soothes the slumber of mankind in the mass…They are pre-eminently for the man who is not of the mass, for the man whose head is lifted, however little, above the common level”— in short, you understand, they are for men a lot like us. Mencken praises Nietzsche’s work as a “counterblast to sentimentality”; but what is most likely to strike a contemporary reader is precisely Mencken’s own sentimentality: his description of Nietzsche’s “noble, and almost holy” sister, Elisabeth, for example, when in fact Elisabeth shamelessly exploited her brother’s reputation for her own ends. Even more striking is his sentimentalization of Nietzsche’s ideas about morality. For Mencken, Nietzsche was a free-thinking iconoclast, a prickly but not utterly disagreeable ally in the war against what Mencken
Nietzsche liked to think of himself as unzeitgemäss, “untimely.” He believed that his solitary wanderings and meditations had brought him insights far too advanced and devastating for most of his contemporaries. And indeed, some of Nietzsche’s writings on truth, language, and morality seem extraordinarily prescient—or at least extraordinarily contemporary. But Mencken’s fondness for his thought suggests that Nietzsche was also very much a product of his time, that he was strikingly “timely” as well as untimely. His apotheosis of art, his “immoralism,” his celebration of instinct at the expense of reason, his attack on the middle-class, religion, etc.: all this was part of the heady intellectual atmosphere of the fin de siècle, in England and America as well as in France and Germany. Even as Nietzsche was suggesting that “to tell the truth is to lie according to a fixed convention,” so, for example, Oscar Wilde was bemoaning the “decay of lying” and warning readers not to be led astray “into the paths of virtue.” It is worth remembering, however, that attacks on virtue are most attractive when virtue remains well established, just as the homage to power, violence, cruelty, and the like seems amusingly bracing only so long as one doesn’t suffer from them.

Nietzsche railed against “Shopkeepers, Christians, cows, females, Englishmen, and other democrats” in a way that Mencken and others could admire and emulate. But Mencken’s bluster, alternately amusing and obnoxious, presupposed the society and basic values he attacked; Nietzsche’s polemic challenged both in the most fundamental way. Where Mencken pronounced anathema on teetotalers, the YMCA, and chiropractic, Nietzsche sought to overturn the very foundation of Western morality. He summed it up this way in The Will to Power: “My purpose: … to demonstrate how everything praised as moral is identical in essence with everything immoral.” What would this mean? As always, there are conflicting passages in Nietzsche. In Dawn (1881), he concedes that “It goes without saying that I do not deny—unless I am a fool—that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged—but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided for reasons other than hitherto.” Since for Nietzsche “there are altogether no moral facts,” there are no actions that are good or bad in themselves; if one ought to pursue a course of action traditionally called moral, it is not because it is good, but purely for pragmatic reasons. The consequences of this anti-moral view of morality become clearer when one considers Nietzsche’s notorious distinction between “master morality” and “slave morality.” In The Genealogy of Morals, where Nietzsche elaborates the distinction, he reminds us that “One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid blond beast prowling about avidly in search of spoils and victory.” Once given free rein, Nietzsche writes, his “nobles” are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey. They savor a freedom from all social constraints, they compensate themselves in the wilderness for the tension engendered by protracted confinement and enclosure within the peace of society, they go back to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey, as triumphant monsters who perhaps emerge from a disgusting procession of murder, arson, rape, and torture, exhilarated and undisturbed of soul.
In 1887, such glorification of violence and “the voluptuousness of victory and cruelty” may have been merely piquant; by the 1930s, when the Nazis appropriated Nietzsche’s rhetoric as a garland for their murderous deeds, it had become impossible to view such passages neutrally. Nietzsche’s sympathetic commentators are no doubt correct that he would have been horrified by Nazism and the Third Reich. And they are also right that he regarded himself as an ardent “anti-anti-Semite.” But, as Nietzsche himself recognized, part of what makes him “dynamite” is the inextricable link between his attack on morality and the immoralism of his “blond beasts.” Insofar as someone accepts this, he notes, “his belief in morality, in all morality, falters.”

Nietzsche’s attack on morality flows directly from his understanding of the nature of man. The chief philosophical influence on Nietzsche’s worldview was undoubtedly Arthur Schopenhauer, “the one teacher and severe taskmaster of whom I boast,” as Nietzsche put in Schopenhauer as Educator (1874), the third of his Untimely Meditations. At the center of Schopenhauer’s philosophy is the revolutionary contention that the traditional understanding of man as the “rational animal” is all wrong. In a move that anticipated Nietzsche and Freud, he inverts the Platonic-Christian view of man, claiming that man is essentially will, not reason. According to Schopenhauer, reason, consciousness, morality, judgment—all the properties that we associate with the ego—are mere epiphenomena of the essentially unfathomable and purposeless striving that animates all nature.

Schopenhauer believed that man’s bondage to the will condemned him to permanent suffering and unhappiness. “Willing,” he writes, “springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering.” Every apparent satisfaction is merely a prelude to boredom or fresh desire. Hence Schopenhauer’s inveterate pessimism. “Existence is certainly to be regarded as an error or mistake,” he concludes, “to return from which is salvation.” Schopenhauer placed such a high value on art and aesthetic experience precisely because in art he found a temporary refuge from the imperatives of the will. Aesthetic experience “raises us out of the endless stream of willing… . [F]or the moment we are delivered from the miserable pressure of the will. We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still.”

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Schopenhauer’s teaching made an indelible impression on Nietzsche, as it did on so many of his contemporaries. Both the idea that man—that all of nature—is essentially will and his almost
religious view of aesthetic experience became permanent features of Nietzsche’s thought. Nietzsche at first also accepted Schopenhauer’s pessimism. But in his mature work, he inverted Schopenhauer’s ethics just as Schopenhauer had inverted the traditional anthropology. Not only was the tradition wrong in seeing man as primarily a rational animal, Nietzsche argued, it was wrong in valuing being over becoming, permanence over evanescence, timelessness over time. Making a virtue of a necessity, Nietzsche came to exalt willing — and hence suffering—as the source of all joy and power. This was his essential innovation on Schopenhauer. Where Schopenhauer saw art as a kind of propaedeutic to renunciation, for Nietzsche art was an alternative to renunciation and the pessimism it presupposed. Instead of disparaging the will, Nietzsche celebrated it. For him, Schopenhauer’s repudiation of existence was evidence of a “rancor against time” that we must learn to overcome. In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche criticizes those who “encounter a sick or an old man or a corpse, and immediately they say, ‘Life is refuted.’ But only they themselves are refuted, and their eyes, which see only one face of existence.” Paradoxically, in order to affirm himself in his entirety, man must learn to affirm himself in his incompleteness: as mortal and essentially time-bound. Man must learn to say “yes” to time. Whether Nietzsche believed he had achieved the radical affirmation of mortality that he championed is open to question. Although time and again he speaks of himself as a “yea-sayer,” he portrays even *Zarathustra* as being bitten by the “tarantula” of revenge; and in one note he confesses that “I have tried to affirm life myself—but ah!”

There is a tremendous pathos in Nietzsche’s struggle to affirm life. In his investigation into the origin of values, he always asked what lack, what need, what deficiency could have prompted the creation of a given value. In *The Gay Science* (1887), for example, he boasts that “my eye grew ever sharper for that most difficult and captious form of ... backward inference from the work to the maker, from the deed to the doer, from the ideal to those who need it.” Yes, indeed: what need could have created the chilly ideal that Nietzsche erected for himself?

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born on October 15, 1844, in Röcken, Saxony. The eldest of three children, he was named for Friedrich Wilhelm king of Prussia, whose birthday he shared. The man who would later declare that Christianity was “the calamity of millennia” and who would sign himself “The Antichrist” was swaddled in religion when a child. His father, Karl Ludwig, was a Lutheran preacher and son of a cleric. He was a cultivated man: musical, bookish, and not a little worldly. In the late 1830s he served as a minor courtier, tutoring the three Prussian princesses at Altenburg. He obviously made a favorable impression on the king, for his pastorate at Röcken was in the gift of the crown. Nietzsche’s mother, thirteen years her husband’s junior, was also a parson’s child, brought up to be dutiful and pious. When she married, in 1843, the seventeen-year-old bride joined her husband in a household that included his widowed mother and two unmarried stepsisters. The family of the future apostle of “overflowing health” also featured a potpourri of ailments. Early on the myopic young Friedrich began suffering from the migraines that would plague him throughout his life, while his aunts and grandmother chronically battled a variety of nervous and gastric complaints: these, too, would come to plague Nietzsche. His father was even more unlucky. In 1848 he began suffering from a mysterious brain disease. The
diagnosis—a diagnosis that haunted Nietzsche in later life—was “softening of the brain.” He was thirty-six when he died the following July.

More tragedy was to come. In 1850, Nietzsche’s youngest sibling, Joseph, died. Unable to provide for her family on a widow’s pension, Frau Nietzsche soon moved with Friedrich and his doting sister Elisabeth to Naumburg to rejoin her mother- and sisters-in-law who had moved there shortly after Karl Ludwig’s death. The serious, exceedingly fastidious youth seemed destined for the cloth. His chief interests were music and theology, and his grave demeanor and absorption in religion inspired his schoolmates to dub him “the little pastor.” In 1858, Nietzsche won a full scholarship to Schulpforta, the Eton and Winchester of German boarding schools. He did poorly in mathematics but excelled in languages and literature. By all accounts, Nietzsche became the mildest of men: quiet, unassuming, infallibly courteous and correct. Yet there can be no doubt that he possessed a will of iron. Even as a youth he practiced “self-overcoming” with terrifying severity. Ronald Hayman, one of Nietzsche’s many biographers, recounts a revealing episode from the philosopher’s schooldays. Nietzsche got into an argument about Gaius Mucius Scaevola, the legendary Roman soldier who, captured by the enemy, is said to have thrust his right hand unflinchingly into a fire to prove his indifference to pain. Not to be outdone, the young Nietzsche took a handful of matches, lighted them, and held the burning sticks steadily in his outstretched palm until a prefect knocked them to the ground. The boy had already been badly burned.

Although he continued to be drawn to theology and music—Nietzsche would go on to compose a good deal of piano music, which is of approximately the same quality as his mature theology—he decided to study classical philology. He went first to Bonn, and then followed his mentor, the eminent philologist Friedrich Ritschl, to the University of Leipzig in 1865. It was soon after arriving in Leipzig that Nietzsche stumbled upon an edition of Schopenhauer’s chief philosophical work, The World as Will and Representation, in a second-hand book shop.
It was in 1865, too, that the distinctly unworldly Nietzsche visited Cologne. Having asked his guide to take him to a restaurant, he was taken instead to a brothel. Stunned by the gauze-clad whores, Nietzsche stood transfixed for a moment. “Then I made instinctively for the piano as being the only soulful thing present,” he reported in a letter. “I struck a few chords, which freed me from my paralysis, and I escaped.” Whether Nietzsche later returned to this or similar establishments is a matter of dispute. Many commentators think that Nietzsche died a virgin; Freud speculated that he had contracted syphilis at a male brothel in Genoa; and Thomas Mann believed it “incontestable” that Nietzsche’s madness was the product of tertiary syphilis. He made Adrian Leverkühn—the protagonist of *Doctor Faustus* whom he modeled on Nietzsche—seek out the prostitute Esmeralda and, despite her warnings, deliberately infect himself: a prelude to his pact with the devil. Nietzsche himself, shortly after he went mad, claimed that he had twice infected himself in 1866, though he was by then an unreliable witness. It is worth noting, in any event, that if his mental collapse was caused by syphilis, the disease took an irregular course: he did not become incontinent, his speech was not slurred, and he retained some control over his memory.

In 1867 Nietzsche embarked upon his two years’ compulsory military service but was discharged after a few months because of an injury he sustained falling off a horse. Returning to Leipzig, he made up in philology what he lacked in horsemanship. “He will simply be able to do anything he wants to do,” Ritschl wrote, noting that Nietzsche was “the first from whom I have accepted any contribution at all while he was still a student.” The future looked bright: in 1868 he met and became intimate with Wagner and his wife, Cosima. The following year, although lacking his doctorate, he was appointed to the chair of philology at the University of Basel on Ritschl’s recommendation. Leipzig hastily conferred the missing degree. In 1870 he was promoted to full professor and became a Swiss citizen. At the beginning, at least, Nietzsche seems to have been an effective and popular teacher. A series of public lectures he delivered in 1871 each drew a crowd of about three hundred. Nietzsche’s older colleague at Basel, Jacob Burckhardt, the great historian of the Renaissance, noted that “in places they were quite enchanting, but then a profound melancholy would make itself heard.”

When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, Nietzsche volunteered to serve as a hospital steward at the front, in order, as he put it, to contribute his “small share to the Fatherland’s alms box.” The delicate scholar soon fell prey to diphtheria and dysentery. There is some conjecture—generally rejected—that he may have also contracted syphilis from tending wounded soldiers. Mencken’s claim that Nietzsche was “a slave to drugs” is something of an exaggeration, though it is true that around this time he acquired the life-long habit of dosing himself with various drugs. In addition to indulging in other specifics, in later years he regularly resorted to such potent sedatives as veronal and chloral hydrate to combat the nightmare of chronic insomnia.

Although he occasionally boasted of his strong constitution, the truth is that by the mid-1870s Nietzsche was a physical wreck and had to be extremely careful about his diet. “Alcohol is bad for me,” he confided in the second section of *Ecce Homo*, “Why I Am So Clever”: “a single glass of
wine or beer in one day is quite sufficient to turn my life into a vale of misery.” In 1876 he had to take a leave from teaching, and by 1879 his health had so far degenerated that he was forced to resign from Basel altogether. Given his battery of ailments, what is extraordinary is not that he finally went mad, but that he remained lucid and productive for so long. “My existence is a frightful burden,” he wrote to a physician in 1880.

Constant pain, a sensation akin to seasickness for several hours a day, semi-paralysis in which speech is difficult for me, by way of change furious convulsions (in the throes of the last I vomited for three days and nights; I thirsted for death)…. If only I could describe to you the continuousness of it, the constant pain and pressure in the head and on the eyes …

Although he had earlier made two proposals of marriage (one to Lou Salomé, who later became Rilke’s mistress and a friend of Freud’s), by the time he came to publish The Genealogy of Morals in 1887, Nietzsche believed that “the philosopher abhors marriage, … marriage being a hindrance and calamity on his path to the optimum.” From 1879 until his collapse, Nietzsche lived an increasingly isolated, peripatetic existence, subsisting largely on an exiguous pension granted him by Basel. A single room in modest boarding houses in Rome, Sils Maria, Nizza, Mentone, Genoa, Turin: Nietzsche became a wandering rentier, ever in search of salubrious climate for his wretched health. As the Eighties progressed, he found himself with few friends and scarcely more readers. In 1886 he subsidized the publication of Beyond Good and Evil, perhaps his most brilliant book. He wrote to his friend Peter Gast that he would have to sell three hundred copies to recoup his expenses. A year later the book had sold 114 copies. “I am solitude become man,” he wrote in one mournful note.

While a few critics, including Hippolyte Taine, wrote admiringly of Nietzsche’s books, his later work was almost completely ignored until the very end of his mentally competent life. In 1888, the Danish critic Georg Brandes delivered a popular series of lectures on his work in Copenhagen, signaling the beginnings of fame. Alas, early in January 1889 Nietzsche collapsed on the street in Turin, throwing his arms around the neck of a mare that had just been flogged by a coachman. Over the next few days, he managed to dispatch a handful of raving letters signed “Dionysus,” “The Crucified,” etc. His letter to Jacob Burckhardt, for example, begins by assuring his old colleague that “In the end I would much rather be a Basel professor than God; but I have not dared push my private egosim so far as to desist for its sake from the creation of the world. You see, one must make sacrifices however and wherever one lives.” To his friend Franz Overbeck he confided that “I am just now having all anti-Semites shot.” After conferring with Burckhardt, Overbeck came and removed Nietzsche to a clinic in Basel. Some of Nietzsche’s friends claimed to suspect that his madness was just one more mask, one more bit of feigning; in fact his situation was hopeless. After the attentions of various specialists, Nietzsche was released in the care of his mother. He had moments of relative lucidity, but he never regained his faculties. Nietzsche lingered on in mental twilight for a decade, unaware of his rapidly growing notoriety. His sister, however, was quick to capitalize on it. Fresh from her failed attempt to establish an echt
German colony in Paraguay with her husband, Bernhard Förster, a rabid anti-Semite who had recently committed suicide, she soon managed to obtain sole jurisdiction over her brother’s unpublished writings. Changing her name to Förster-Nietzsche to compound the effect, she appointed herself chief guardian and privileged interpreter of his ideas. In order to exploit the burgeoning Nietzsche cult more effectively, she eventually moved her brother to Weimar—the city of Goethe and Schiller—and set about controlling access to his papers, forging letters, and publishing contrived books from miscellaneous notes. She took particular care to emphasize those passages that accorded with her own nationalistic and anti-Semitic inclinations, thus helping to pave the way for the Nazi’s glorification of Nietzsche’s philosophy. By the time that he died in August 1900, Nietzsche was world famous. But he had long since been unable to appreciate or even comprehend his triumph.

By all accounts, Nietzsche became the mildest of men: quiet, unassuming, infallibly courteous and correct. Yet there can be no doubt that he possessed a will of iron.

In 1872 Nietzsche published his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* (revised in its 1886 edition to *The Birth of Tragedy: Or, Hellenism and Pessimism*). Far from justifying the academic establishment’s lavish faith in a young unknown, Nietzsche’s book seemed calculated to inspire the wrath of the philological establishment. The sharpest barb came from Nietzsche’s contemporary at Berlin, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, who went on to become the most distinguished philologist of his generation. Enititled *Zukunftsphilologie!* —“Philology of the Future,” a disparaging allusion to Wagner’s “Music of the Future”—Wilamowitz’s pamphlet did indeed catch Nietzsche out in a number of factual errors. And it is probably the case that many of Nietzsche’s ideas about the origin of Greek tragedy are, in point of fact, mistaken.

But in an important sense, Wilamowitz’s attack was beside the point. For whatever else it is, *The Birth of Tragedy* is not a contribution to academic philology. Completely lacking in scholarly apparatus, it is a bold, speculative inquiry not only into the birth of tragedy, but also into its death and promised rebirth in the operas of Richard Wagner. In part the book is a polemic against the sunny, rationalistic view of Greek culture epitomized by Johann Winckelmann’s epithet “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.” For Nietzsche, the neo-classical view of classical culture was shallow and naïve. In its craving for order, it entirely missed the underworld of Dionysian suffering and chaos that stood behind the stately Apollonian figures of the Greek gods and heroes. “The Greek knew and felt the terror and horror of existence,” Nietzsche wrote. “That he might endure this terror at all, he had to interpose between himself and life the radiant dream birth of the Olympians.” Tragedy was the name of this interposition: Apollo becomes the medium of
Dionysus, beguiling suffering by aestheticizing it. Indeed, in one of his most famous lines—repeated three times in the course of *The Birth of Tragedy*—Nietzsche insists that “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.”

But *The Birth of Tragedy* was much more than an interpretation of Greek culture. It was also the beginning of Nietzsche’s criticism of modernity for its allegiance to rationalism and science. In the opposition he drew between Socrates as the embodiment of reason and the Dionysian wisdom of tragedy, Nietzsche was writing as much about nineteenth-century Europe as he was about fifth-century Athens. Modernity has been definitively shaped by Socrates’ “audacious reasonableness,” as the triumph of science and technology reminds us daily. Yet perhaps Socrates’ commitment to reason at the expense of the irrational elided reality rather than revealed it? Perhaps, as Nietzsche said, it was “a sign of decline, of weariness, of infection, of the anarchical dissolution of the instincts?” Truth vs. life: it was Nietzsche’s startling conclusion that science was at bottom allied with nihilism because of its uncompromising commitment to truth. “All science,” he wrote, “has at present the object of dissuading man from his former respect for himself.” In order to salvage life from science “the value of truth must for once be experimentally called into question.” It is one of the curious features of Nietzsche’s mature thought that he wished to question the value of truth while upholding honesty as his one remaining virtue. Traditionally, the moral virtues have been all of a piece. For example, Aquinas observes that “nearly all are agreed in saying” that the moral virtues are interconnected, that “discernment belongs to prudence, rectitude to justice,” and so on. It is worth asking whether honesty, sundered from the family of virtues, remains a virtue—whether, in the end, it even remains honest. Untempered by other virtues, honesty functions not so much to reveal truth as to expose it. Is that honest? Nietzsche clung to honesty after abandoning the other virtues because it allowed him to fashion the most ruthless instrument of interrogation imaginable. Difficulty, not truth, became his criterion of value. Thus he embraced the horrifying idea of the Eternal Recurrence primarily because he considered it “the hardest possible thought”—whether it was also true didn’t really matter.

Nietzsche opposed honesty to truth. He looked to art as a “countermovement to nihilism” not because he thought that art could furnish us with the truth but because it accustomed us to living openly with untruth. “Truth is ugly,” Nietzsche wrote in *The Will to Power*. “We possess art lest we perish from the truth.” Of course, there is also such a thing as dishonest art: art that offers not an affirmation of existence but promises an escape from it. Just that, for Nietzsche, was the problem with Wagner and all romanticism: by “counterfeiting … transcendence and beyond” Wagner abandoned honesty for the illusion of redemption. What Nietzsche wanted was art that recognized and embraced its status as art, that reveled in appearance as appearance. “If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this cult of the untrue,” he wrote in *The Gay Science*, then the realization of the general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science—the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation—would be utterly unbearable. Honesty would lead us to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us to avoid such consequences: art as the good
Ultimately, Nietzsche’s ideal asks us to transform our life into a work of art. Accepting Schopenhauer’s inversion of the traditional image of man, Nietzsche no longer finds human life dignified in itself: if man is essentially an expression of irrational will, then in himself he is morally worthless. This is the dour irony that attends Nietzsche’s effort to burden man with the task of creating values rather than acknowledging them. And it is here, too, that Nietzsche’s aestheticism and his rejection of morality intersect. For Nietzsche, man is not an end in himself but only “a bridge, a great promise.” In order to redeem that promise, man must treat life with the same imperiousness and daring that the artist brings to his work. If, as Nietzsche argued, “life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness,” then it is hardly surprising that the perfect aesthete will also be the perfect tyrant.

Nietzsche never tired of pointing out that the demands of traditional morality fly in the face of life. One might say, Yes, and that is precisely why morality is so valuable: it acknowledges that man’s allegiance is not only to life but also to what ennobles life—that, indeed, life itself is not the highest court of appeals. But for Nietzsche the measure of nobility is the uninhibited pulse of life: hence his penchant for biological and physiological metaphors, his invocation of “ascending” and “descending” forms of art and life. He defines the good as that which enhances the feeling of life. If “to see others suffer does one good, to make others suffer even more,” then violence and cruelty may have to be granted the patent of morality and enlisted in the aesthete’s palette of diversions. In more or less concentrated form, Nietzsche’s ideal is also modernity’s ideal. It is an ideal that subordinates morality to power in order to transform life into an aesthetic spectacle. It promises freedom and exaltation. But as Novalis points out, it is really the ultimate attainment of the barbarian.


Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of The New Criterion and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest book is The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia (St. Augustine’s Press).

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