

Introduction

The text

Nietzsche published each of the first three parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (TSZ hereafter) separately between 1883 and 1885, during one of his most productive and interesting periods, in between the appearance of *The Gay Science* (which he noted had itself marked a new beginning of his thought) and *Beyond Good and Evil*. As with the rest of his books, very few copies were sold. He later wrote a fourth part (called “Fourth and Final Part”) which was not published until 1892, and then privately, only for a few friends, by which time Nietzsche had slipped into the insanity that marked the last decade of his life.¹ Not long afterwards an edition with all four parts published together appeared, and most editions and translations have followed suit, treating the four parts as somehow belonging in one book, although many scholars see a natural ending of sorts after Part III and regard Part IV as more of an appendix than a central element in the drama narrated by the work. Nietzsche, who was trained as a classicist, may have been thinking of the traditional tragedy competitions in ancient Greece, where entrants submitted three tragedies and a fourth play, a comic and somewhat bawdy satyr play. At any event, he thought of this final section as in some sense the “Fourth Part” and any interpretation must come to terms with it.

¹ Nietzsche went mad in January 1889. For more on the problem of Part IV, see Laurence Lampert’s discussion in *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 287–91. For a contrasting view (that Part IV is integral to the work and a genuine conclusion), see Robert Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra’s Dionysian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

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TSZ is unlike any of Nietzsche's other works, which themselves are unlike virtually anything else in the history of philosophy. Nietzsche himself provides no preface or introduction, although the section on TSZ in his late book, *Ecce Homo*, and especially its last section, "Why I am a Destiny," are invaluable guides to what he might have been up to. Zarathustra seems to be some sort of prophet, calling people, modern European Christian people especially, to account for their failings and encouraging them to pursue a new way of life. (As we shall discuss in a moment, even this simple characterization is immediately complicated by the fact that Nietzsche insists that this has nothing to do with a "replacement" religion, and that the book is as much a parody of a prophetic view as it is an instance of it.)² In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche expresses some irritation that no one has wondered about the odd name of this prophet. Zarathustra was a Persian prophet (known to the Greeks as Zoroaster)³ and he is important for Nietzsche because he originally established that the central struggle in human life (even cosmic life) was between two absolutely distinct principles, between good and evil, which Nietzsche interpreted in Christian and humanist terms as the opposition between selflessness and benevolence on the one hand and egoism and self-interest on the other. Nietzsche tells us two things about this prophet:

Zarathustra created this fateful error of morality: this means he has to be the first to recognize it.⁴

(Nietzsche means that Zarathustra was the first to recognize its calamitous consequences.) And:

[t]he self-overcoming of morality from out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming of the moralists into their opposite – into me – that is what the name Zarathustra means coming from my mouth.⁵

That is, we can now live, Zarathustra attempts to teach, freed from the picture of this absolute dualism, but without moral anarchy and without sliding into a bovine contentment or a violent primitivism. Sometimes, especially in the first two parts, this new way of living is presented

² Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (hereafter EH), in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), §6, pp. 129–31.

³ Estimates about when Zarathustra actually lived vary from 6000 BCE to 600 BCE. Somewhere between 1500 BCE and 1000 BCE would appear the safest guess. Nietzsche, however, evinces virtually no interest in the historical Zarathustra or the actual religion of Zoroastrianism.

⁴ EH, §3, p. 145. ⁵ Ibid.

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in sweeping and collective, historical terms, as an epochal transition from mere human being to an “overman,” virtually a new species. This way of characterizing the problem tends to drop out after Part II, and Zarathustra focuses his attention on what he often calls the problem of self-overcoming: how each of us, as individuals, might come to be dissatisfied with our way of living and so be able to strive for something better, even if the traditional supports for and guidance toward such a goal seem no longer credible (e.g. the idea of *the* purpose of human nature, or what is revealed by religion, or any objective view of human happiness and so forth). And in Part III Zarathustra asks much more broadly about a whole new way of thinking about or imagining ourselves that he believes is necessary for this sort of re-orientation. He suggests that such a possibility depends on how we come to understand and experience temporality at a very basic level, and he introduces a famous image, “the eternal return of the same” (which he elsewhere calls Zarathustra’s central teaching), to begin to grapple with the problem. He himself becomes deathly ill in contemplating this cyclical picture; not surprisingly since it seems to deny a possibility he himself had hoped for at the outset – a *decisive* historical revolution, a time after which all would be different from the time before. Many of the basic issues in the book are raised by considering what it means for Zarathustra to suffer from and then “recover” from such an “illness.”

The interpretive problem

TSZ is often reported to be Nietzsche’s most popular and most read book, but the fact that the book is so unusual and often hermetic has made for wildly different sorts of reception. Here is one that is typical of the kind of popular reputation Nietzsche has in modern culture:

Together with Goethe’s *Faust* and the New Testament, *Zarathustra* was the most popular work that literate soldiers took into battle for inspiration and consolation [in WW I – RP]. The “beautiful words” of Zarathustra, one author wrote, were especially apt for the Germans who “more than any other Volk possessed fighting natures in Zarathustra’s sense.” About 150,000 copies of a specially durable wartime *Zarathustra* were distributed to the troops.⁶

⁶ Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 135. The quotation cited is from Rektor P. Hoche, “Nietzsche und der deutsche Kampf,” *Zeitung für Literatur, Kunst und Wissenschaft* 39:6 (12 March 1916).

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Now it is hard to imagine a book less suitable for such a purpose than Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It is true that Zarathustra had famously said, "You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I tell you: it is the good war that hallows any cause" (p. 33), but even that passage is surrounded by claims that the highest aspiration is actually to be a "saint of knowledge," and that only failing that should one become a warrior (what sort of continuum could this be?), and that the "highest thought" of such warriors should be one commanded by Zarathustra, and it should have nothing to do with states and territory but with the injunction that human being shall be overcome. (What armies would be fighting whom in such a cause?)⁷ Moreover one wonders what "inspiration and consolation" our "literate soldiers" could have found in the Fellini-esque title character,⁸ himself hardly possessed of a "warlike nature," chronically indecisive, sometimes self-pitying, wandering, speechifying, dancing about and encouraging others to dance, consorting mostly with animals, confused disciples, a dwarf, and his two mistresses. And what could they have made of the speeches, with those references to bees overloaded with honey, soothsayers, gravediggers, bursting coffins, pale criminals, red judges, self-propelling wheels, shepherds choking on snakes, tarantulas, "little golden fishing rods of wisdom," Zarathustra's ape, Zarathustra speaking too "crudely and sincerely" for "Angora rabbits," and the worship of a jackass in Part IV, with that circle of an old king, a magician, the last pope, a beggar, a shadow, the conscientious of spirit, and a sad soothsayer?

What in fact could *anyone* make of this bewildering work, parts of which seem more hermetic than Celan, parts more self-indulgent and bizarre than bad Bob Dylan lyrics? Do we know what we are *meant* to make of it? Nietzsche himself, in *Ecce Homo*, was willing to say a number of things about the work, that in it he is the "inventor of the dithyramb,"⁹ that with

⁷ In EH, §1, p. 144 when Nietzsche says that after Zarathustra "the concept of politics will have then merged entirely into a war of spirits" he does not pause to tell us what a war, not of bodies, but of *spirits* might be. And he goes on to say "there will be wars such as the earth has never seen," and we might note that he seems to mean that different sorts, *types* of "wars" will make up "great politics."

⁸ Cf. EH, §1, p. 144: "I do not want to be a saint, I would rather be a buffoon . . . Perhaps I am a buffoon . . . And yet in spite of this or rather not in spite of this – because nothing to date has been more hypocritical than saints – the truth speaks from out of me. – But the truth is *terrible*: because *lies* have been called truth so far."

⁹ A dithyramb was a choral hymn sung in the classical period in Greece by fifty men or boys to honor the god Dionysus.

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TSZ he became the “first tragic philosopher,” and that TSZ should be understood as “music.” When it is announced, as the work to follow *The Gay Science*, we are clearly warned of the difficulty that will challenge any reader. Section §342 had concluded the original version of *The Gay Science* with “Incipit tragoedia,” and then the first paragraph of TSZ’s Prologue. Nietzsche’s warning comes in the second edition Preface:

“*Incipit tragoedia*” [tragedy begins] we read at the end of this suspiciously innocent book. Beware! Something utterly wicked and mischievous is being announced here: *incipit parodia* [parody begins], no doubt.”¹⁰

Are there other works that could be said to be both tragedies and parodies? *Don Quixote*, perhaps, a work in many other ways also quite similar to TSZ?¹¹ If Nietzsche announced that his TSZ can and should be read as a parody, what exactly would that mean? I do not mean what it would mean to find parts of it funny; I mean trying to understand *how* it could be both a prophetic book and a kind of send-up of a prophetic book. How it could both present Zarathustra as a teacher and parody his attempt to play that role? Why has the work remained for the most part a place simply to mine for quotations in support of Nietzschean “theories” of the overman, the Eternal Return of the Same, and the “last human beings”; all as if the theories were contained inside an ornate literary form, delivered by Nietzsche’s surrogate, an ancient Persian prophet? At the very least, especially when we look also to virtually everything written after the later 1870s, when Nietzsche in effect abandoned the traditional essay form in favor of less continuous, more aphoristic, and here parabolic forms, it is clear that Nietzsche wanted to resist incorporation into traditional philosophy, to escape traditional assumptions about the writing of philosophy. In a way that point is obvious, nowhere more obvious than in the form of TSZ, even if the steady stream of books about Nietzsche’s metaphysics, or value theory, or even epistemology shows no sign of abating. The two

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (hereafter GS), edited by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), §1, p. 4.

¹¹ The intertwining of the two dramatic modes of tragedy and comic parody appear throughout the text. A typical example is at the end of “The Wanderer” in Part III, when Zarathustra laughs in a kind of self-mocking and then weeps as he remembers the friends he has had to leave behind. (p. 123). It is also very likely that Nietzsche, the “old philologist,” is referring to the end of Plato’s *Symposium*, where Socrates claims that what we need is someone who can write both tragedies and comedies, that the tragic poet might also be comic (*Symposium*, 223c–d).

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more interesting questions are rather, first, what one takes such resistance to mean, what the practical point is, we might say, of the act of so resisting, what Nietzsche is trying to *do* with his books, as much as what his books mean, if we are not to understand them in the traditional philosophical sense. (It would have been helpful if, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche had not just written the chapter “Why I Write Such Good Books,” but “Why I Write Books At All.”) Secondly, why has this resistance been so resisted, to the point that there are not even many disputes about TSZ, no contesting views about what *parodia* might have meant?

One obvious answer should be addressed immediately. It may be so hard to know what TSZ is for, and so easy simply to plunder it unsystematically, because the work is in large part a failure. TSZ echoes Romantic attempts at created mythologies, such as William Blake’s, as well as Wagner’s attempt to re-work Teutonic myth, but it remains so *sui generis* and unclassifiable that it resists even the broadest sort of category and does not itself instruct us, at least not very clearly or very well, about how to read it. That it is both a tragedy and a parody helps little with the details. Large stretches of it seem ponderous and turgid, mysteriously abandoning Nietzsche’s characteristic light touch and pithy wit. The many dreams and dream images appealed to by Zarathustra jumble together so much (in one case, grimacing children, angels, owls, fools, and butterflies as big as children tumble out of a broken coffin) that an attempt at interpretation seems beside the point. (When a disciple tries to offer a reading of this dream – and seems to do a pretty fair job of it – Zarathustra ultimately just stares into this disciple’s face and shakes his head with apparent deep disappointment.) These difficulties have all insured that TSZ is not read or studied in university philosophy departments anywhere near as often as the Nietzschean standards, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Uses and Disadvantages of History*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Genealogy of Morals*.

This is understandable, but such judgments may be quite premature. Throughout the short and extremely volatile reception of his work, Nietzsche may not yet have been given enough leeway with his various experiments in a new kind of philosophical writing, may have been subject much too quickly to philosophical “translations.” This is an issue – how to write philosophy under contemporary historical conditions, or even how to write “philosophically” now that much of traditional philosophy itself is no longer historically credible – that Nietzsche obviously devoted

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a great deal of thought to, and it is extremely unlikely that his conclusions would not show up in worked out, highly crafted forms. They ask of the reader something different than traditional reading and understanding, but they are asking for some effort, even demanding it, from readers. This is especially at issue in TSZ since in so far as it could be said to have a dominant theme, it is *this* problem, Zarathustra's problem: who is his audience? What is he trying to accomplish? How does he think he should go about this? While it is pretty clear what it means for his teaching to be rejected, he seems himself very unsure of what would count as having that teaching understood and accepted. (The theme – the question we have to understand first before anything in the work can be addressed – is clearly announced in the subtitle: *A Book for All and None*. How could a book be for all and none?)

Thus Spoke Zarathustra as a work of literature?

On the face of it at least some answers seem accessible from the plot of the work. Zarathustra leaves his cave to revisit the human world because he wants both to prophesy and help hasten the advent of something like a new “attempt” on the part of mankind, a post “beyond” or “over the human” (*Übermensch*) aspiration. Such a goal would be free of the psychological dimensions that have led the human type into a state of some crisis (made worse by the fact that most do not think a crisis has occurred or that any new attempt is necessary). Much of the first two parts is thus occupied with setting out these failings, and the various human types who most embody them, railing against them by showing what they have cost us, and intimating how things might be different. Some such failings, like having the wrong sort of relation to oneself, or being burdened with a spirit of revenge against time itself, are particularly important. So we are treated to brief characterizations of the despisers of the body, the pale criminal, the preachers of death, warriors, chastity, the pitying, the hinterworldly, the bestowers of virtue, women, priests, the virtuous, the rabble, the sublime ones, poets, and scholars. Along the way these typologies, one might call them, are interrupted by even more figurative parables (On the Adder's Bite, the Blessed Isles, Tarantulas, the Stillest Hour), by highly figurative homilies on such topics as friends, marriage, a free death, self-overcoming, redemption, and prudence, as well as by three songs, Night Song, Dance Song, and Grave Song.

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However, we encounter a very difficult issue right away when we try to take account of the fact that in all these discussions, Zarathustra's account is throughout so highly parabolic, metaphorical, and aphoristic. Rather than state various claims about virtues and the present age and religion and aspirations, Zarathustra speaks about stars, animals, trees, tarantulas, dreams, and so forth. Explanations and claims are almost always analogical and figurative. (In his discussion of TSZ in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche wrote, "The most powerful force of metaphor that has ever existed is poor and trivial compared with the return of language to the nature of imagery.")¹² Why is his message given in such a highly figurative, literary way? It is an important question because it goes to the heart of Nietzsche's own view of his relation to traditional philosophy, and how the literary and rhetorical form of his books marks whatever sort of new beginning he thinks he has made. Philosophy after all has traditionally thought of itself as clarifying what is unclear, and as attempting to justify what in the everyday world too often passes without challenge. Philosophy tries to reveal, we might say in general, what is hidden (in presuppositions, commitments, folk wisdom, etc.). If we think of literature in such traditional ways, though, then there is a clear contrast. A literary work does not assert anything. "Meaning" in a poem or play or novel is not only hidden, and requires effort to find; our sense of the greatness of great literature is bound up with our sense that the credibility and authority of such works rests on how much and how complexly meaning is both profoundly and unavoidably hidden and enticingly intimated, promised; how difficult to discern, but "there," extractable in prosaic summaries only with great distortion. Contrary to the philosophical attempt (or fantasy) of freeing ordinary life from illusions, confusions and unjustified presuppositions, one way in which a literary treatment departs from ordinary life lies in its great compression of possible meanings, defamiliarization, "showing" paradoxically how much *more* is hidden, mysterious, sublime in ordinary life than is ordinarily understood. (One thinks of Emily Dickinson's pithy summary: "Nature is a haunted house, but art is a house that wants to be haunted.")¹³

¹² EH, §6, p. 130.

¹³ Emily Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, ed. T. H. Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 236. There is another text by a "Nietzschean" author that might also serve as, might even have been, a commentary on this aspect of TSZ – Kafka's famous parable, "On Parables:"

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What would it mean to present a “teaching” with so many philosophical resonances, so close to the philosophy we might call “value theory,” in a way that not only leaves so much hidden, but that in effect heightens our sense of the interpretive work that must be done before philosophical reflection can hope to begin (if even then), and even further impedes any hermeneutic response by inventing a context so unfamiliar and often bizarre? There is a famous claim concerning truth and appearance and a set of complex images that are both relevant to this question.¹⁴

Truth, appearance, and the failure of desire

In more traditional philosophical terms, Nietzsche often stresses that we start going wrong when we become captured by the picture of revealing “reality,” the “truth,” beneath appearances, in mere opinions. This can be particularly misleading, Nietzsche often states, when we think of ourselves in post-Kantian modernity as having exposed the supposed groundlessness “underneath” the deceptive appearances of value and purpose, when we think that we have rendered impossible any continuation of Zarathustra’s pronounced love of human beings, life, and the earth. Some impasse in the possible affirmation of value (what Zarathustra calls

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says, “Go over,” he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder [Drüben], something unknown to us, something that he cannot designate more precisely either, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day; that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality; in parable you have lost.

Franz Kafka, *The Basic Kafka* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), p. 58. It is well known that Kafka read and admired Nietzsche. The story about his vigorous defense of Nietzsche against Max Brod’s charge that Nietzsche was a “fraud” is often cited. See Klaus Wagenbach, *Kafka*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 41.

¹⁴ I pass over here another complex dimension of Nietzsche’s literary style. Zarathustra is not Nietzsche, any more than Prospero is Shakespeare, and appreciating the literary irony of the work is indispensable to a full reading. I have tried to sketch an interpretation along these lines in “Irony and Affirmation in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” in *Nietzsche’s New Seas: Explorations in Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*, ed. Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 45–74.

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“esteeming”) has been reached (“nihilism”) but this “radical enlightenment” picture is not the right description. (See Zarathustra’s attack on the “preachers of death” and his rejection there of the melancholy that might result when “they encounter a sick or a very old person or a corpse, and right away they say, ‘life is refuted’” (p. 32).) And Nietzsche clearly wants to discard as misleading that simple distinction between appearance and reality itself. He is well known for claiming, in his own mini-version of the self-education of the human spirit in *The Twilight of the Idols*, that

We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps? . . . But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world.*¹⁵

However, even if this sort of suspicion of the everyday appearances (that they are merely a pale copy of the true world, the true ideal, etc.) is rejected, it is very much not the case that Nietzsche wants to infer that we are therefore left merely to achieve as much subjectively measured happiness as possible, nor does he intend to open the door to a measureless, wildly tolerant pluralism. As he has set it out, Nietzsche’s new philosophers (or post-philosophers) are still driven by what he calls a modern “intellectual conscience”:¹⁶ they want to know if what matters to them now ought to matter, whether there might be more important things to care about. Even though not driven by an otherworldly or transcendent or even “objective” ideal beneath or above the appearances, they should still be able to “overcome themselves” and in this way, to escape “wretched contentment.” That is, they cannot orient themselves from the question, “What matters *in itself*?” as if a reality beneath the appearances, but even without reliance on such a reality, a possible self-dissatisfaction and striving must still be possible if an affirmable, especially what

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 50.

¹⁶ GS, §2, p. 29. See also the remark in *Daybreak*, about how the drive to knowledge

has become too strong for us to be able to want happiness without knowledge or [to be able to want the happiness] of a strong, firmly rooted delusion; even to imagine such a state of things is painful to us! Restless discovering and divining has such an attraction for us, and has grown as indispensable to us as is to the lover his unrequited love, which he would at no price relinquish for a state of indifference – perhaps, indeed, we too are unrequited lovers. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale and ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §429, p. 184)