

Introduction: Nietzsche's Life and Works

Tom Stern

BIOGRAPHY

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in October, 1844 in Röcken, a small village in Prussian Saxony. He was the son of a Lutheran minister, who died when Nietzsche was not yet five, prompting the family to move to the town of Naumburg. In 1858, Nietzsche was offered a scholarship at Schulpforte (or 'Pforta'), a prestigious nearby boarding school. At Schulpforte, Nietzsche began to excel academically for the first time. In general, his lessons were intensively focused on Latin and Greek. They left him with an unrivalled classical education. As James Porter notes (in his essay in this volume), Nietzsche always thought of the ancients via the moderns, and always thought of the moderns via the ancients. His final essay at Pforta was a sixty-four page dissertation on the Greek poet, Theognis, written in Latin. In addition to the Latin and Greek texts which formed the backbone of his education, Nietzsche read some of the modern authors who would retain significance for him throughout his life – among them Shakespeare and Emerson.

Nietzsche's religious faith began to wane at Pforta, but this did not prevent him from choosing to read theology in addition to philology at the University of Bonn, where he began in 1864. At Bonn, he studied with the classicist Friedrich Ritschl. After just two semesters, he transferred to Leipzig, where he studied philology (now without theology). Nietzsche had moved to Leipzig, in part, because Ritschl had moved there and, indeed, Ritschl soon began to take particular interest in Nietzsche's studies. In addition to Ritschl's guidance, Leipzig saw three important developments. First, shortly after his arrival in 1865, Nietzsche bought and read Arthur Schopenhauer's

2 TOM STERN

masterpiece, *The World as Will and Representation*.¹ While he surely already knew something of Schopenhauer's ideas, reading the work itself made an enormous impression. According to Nietzsche's own testimony, he briefly attempted to live out the ascetic practices that Schopenhauer praises. Schopenhauer's intellectual influence on Nietzsche, which is the subject of Robert Wicks's essay in this volume, can hardly be overstated. The same can be said for the second Leipzig event: his meeting with Richard Wagner, who was there taking temporary shelter from the publicity surrounding the scandalous breakdown of his first marriage. Nietzsche had, by this time, come to love Wagner's music, and was therefore primed to like Wagner. Wagner knew this, and was therefore primed to like Nietzsche. Nietzsche's relation to Wagner is the subject of Mark Berry's essay in this volume.

A third and more mercurial influence began to be felt in Leipzig, where, in 1866, Nietzsche read Friedrich Albert Lange's *A History of Materialism and Critique of Its Present Significance*, published that year.² Lange, himself a former student of Ritschl, made two important claims. On the one hand, while empirical science is the best means we have for the pursuit of knowledge, discoveries within empirical science have revealed that adequate knowledge of the world (as it is in itself) is impossible for us. Scientific knowledge, the best we have got, is not good enough. On the other hand, Lange allows for, and even encourages, speculation about the unknown ultimate reality, as long as these quasi-poetic speculations are not mistaken for knowledge of a scientific calibre. Lange's book offered Nietzsche, among other things, an implicit objection to Schopenhauer's metaphysics as claiming illicit knowledge of ultimate reality, a substantial history of philosophy (including Kant), and a view, however partial, of Darwin's evolutionary theory and aspects of contemporary biological science. Although the fact of Lange's influence is undeniable, it is harder to pin down its nature and extent: notoriously, Nietzsche never once mentions him in a published work, and his unpublished remarks are usually critical, if not dismissive.³

With Ritschl's help, Nietzsche was offered a position as a professor of classical philology at Basel, where he moved in 1869. It is clear that, by this time, he had severe doubts about whether a career in this field was suited to him. But, in addition to financial security, Basel offered a further major advantage: it was close to Wagner's residence at Tribschen. Nietzsche became a frequent visitor, and a close friend. The friendship profoundly influenced his book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Neither plainly philological, historical, scholarly nor indeed philosophical in any conventional sense, it was quickly dismissed in a review by another former Pforta student, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, who accused him of shaming their alma mater. Shortly afterwards Nietzsche published four essays, known collectively as the *Untimely Meditations* (1873–6) and he wrote, but did not publish, an essay called 'On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense' (1873), which would later become highly influential.

As the title of his final meditation, 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', suggests, Wagner's influence loomed large over Nietzsche's Basel years. But by the time he wrote that essay, the enthusiasm had begun to wane. He attended part of Wagner's first festival at Bayreuth in 1876, but he seems to have been disappointed. In any case, the publication of his next book, *Human, All Too Human* (1878), was intended to mark a break with Wagner, and was certainly experienced by Wagner as such. Nietzsche had befriended Paul Rée, whose ideas, including the book *The Origin of the Moral Sensations* (1877), would exert considerable influence on him. Later, the friendship would end bitterly: through Rée, Nietzsche met Lou Salomé, then a brilliant young student in Rome, in 1882. Competition with Rée for Salomé's affections – a competition which both men ultimately lost – left Nietzsche isolated.

With the exception of serving very briefly, in late 1870, as a medical assistant during the Franco-Prussian War, Nietzsche remained at Basel for ten years. Always prone to bouts of bad health, by 1879 he was unable to continue to work. From then on, funded by a university pension, he moved continuously between various places

4 TOM STERN

in Germany, France, Italy and Switzerland. One preferred pattern was to spend winters in the Mediterranean and summers in the Alps. He was technically stateless, having given up his Prussian citizenship before taking his post in Basel, but never having taken Swiss citizenship. During these wandering years, Nietzsche wrote most of the books that ultimately secured his fame. His wanderings came to an end in January, 1889, in Turin, when he suffered a mental and physical collapse which, according to a popular but much disputed anecdote, was occasioned by witnessing the flogging of a horse. In any case, Nietzsche never recovered, and he was cared for by his mother, and then his sister, until his death in 1900.

Much has been omitted from this brief outline, primarily for lack of space. But some 'omissions' were due to the content in question being mythical, fabricated or unsubstantiated. Some are insignificant: there is now some dispute about whether Nietzsche died of syphilis.⁴ Others are more troubling. Nietzsche was not, of course, a National Socialist. Nor, though this is harder to measure, could he helpfully be termed a 'proto-National Socialist', a label which better fits his sister's husband, whose views he most certainly opposed. Nietzsche scholars may wish that such denials were unnecessary, but they have probably, nonetheless, found themselves having to make them on occasion. On the other hand, there is considerable conceptual space between 'not a proto-Nazi' and 'someone whose views a twenty first-century, Western reader is likely to find comforting and familiar'. Nietzsche usually occupies this space, as can be seen by many of his remarks about Jews, women, racial and national differences, the natural necessity of violence and exploitation, and the advantages of non-voluntary sterilisation of the 'sick', together with his hostility to equality, liberalism and democracy. He stood out, at least in his anti-egalitarianism, to reviewers in his own day. Part of his appeal, no doubt, lies in his willingness at least to try out shocking or horrifying ideas. Whatever we make of Nietzsche's remarks, as with other historical figures, we must have more categories available to us than 'Nazi/not-Nazi', 'anti-Semite/anti-anti-Semite', 'far-sighted

/foolish' or 'to be attacked/defended at all costs'. Nietzsche wrote a great deal about Germany, for example, but there is context and considerable nuance to these writings, as Raymond Geuss's chapter, 'Nietzsche's Germans', explains.

Other omissions should be highlighted, not because they are myths and legends, but rather because they may be surprising. Nietzsche did not have anything resembling a formal philosophical education. There is no doubt that he read extensively in philosophy and in other fields. But it should be borne in mind, first of all, that he lacked first-hand knowledge of many of the 'great' philosophers of the past, including some of those to whom he refers. Second, he read a great deal of 'minor' or 'local' philosophy (as it now seems to us), works by authors whose names have been long forgotten beyond highly specialised circles, but whose influence was nonetheless significant. Third, there is the question of what Nietzsche was *doing* with the texts that he read. Andreas Urs Sommer's chapter is devoted to what Nietzsche did and did not read, as well as the related questions of how he used his sources, and of the kinds of evidence which are available to the modern scholar.⁵

WORKS

This summary follows the convention of dividing Nietzsche's published works into early (1869–76), middle (1878–82) and late (1883–8). His unpublished work is treated separately. The summary does not include Nietzsche's non-philosophical publications, such as his early philological articles.

Early

The Birth of Tragedy (1872) is, all at once, a theory of Greek tragedy, a cultural history of Europe from before Homer to the present day, a direct intervention into various questions in contemporary aesthetics, a play on and development of Schopenhauerian metaphysics, and an attempt to answer the (then) very pressing question: is life worth living? Paul Daniels's chapter examines the text in more detail.

6 TOM STERN

The first of the *Untimely Meditations* was nominally an attack on a book, then very popular, by David Friedrich Strauss: *The Old Faith and the New*. Strauss had made his name with the publication of a critical-historical analysis of the New Testament, which Nietzsche had read and admired. But the new book took a complacent, patriotic tone, both to the new German Reich and to the march of scientific progress. Nietzsche's savage response is often read for the indications it gives of a Nietzschean vision of culture. The second meditation, 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life', treats, at its simplest, the general human problem (as Nietzsche sees it) of knowing that we have a past. This knowledge threatens to have a sluggish effect on us, which has until now been overcome by means of various falsifying, distorting or misleading approaches to the representation of the past – basically, tools which can be applied when necessary. These distorting but vital tools are called 'monumental' (the admiration of great figures), 'antiquarian' (a parochialism which makes the individual feel part of something larger) and 'critical' (roughly, hatchet-jobs on those aspects of the past to which we display too great a reverence). They are undermined by the modern, scholarly and supposedly *undistorted* approach to the past. As the title indicates, the ethical orientation of this essay is that what is useful for 'life' is good – a framework which owes an enormous debt to Nietzsche's Schopenhauerian intellectual context, but which departs from Schopenhauer's exact views, since Schopenhauer praises that which *opposes* life. The balance between using and opposing Schopenhauer is one that Nietzsche tests further in the third meditation, 'Schopenhauer as Educator'. Schopenhauer is presented as a kind of ethical exemplar, of the utmost significance for Nietzsche's (and our) personal and socio-cultural upbringing. This approach, not accidentally, has the effect of moving Schopenhauer's specific philosophical views into the shade. The essay stands as Nietzsche's most sustained examination of the notion of selfhood and self-development. The final meditation, 'Richard Wagner in Bayreuth', presents Wagner, similarly, as an artistic exemplar.

Middle

The 'middle' period typically includes: *Human, All Too Human* (1878), *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* (1879) and *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (1880) (all three of which were later grouped under the title *Human, All Too Human*); *Daybreak* (1881); *The Gay Science* (1882). During this period, Nietzsche also published some poems ('Idylls from Messina', 1882). (To GS was added, in 1887, a fifth part, which is counted as part of the later works, and he added a revised version of the 'Idylls from Messina' as an appendix.) These books establish the aphoristic style for which Nietzsche became famous: relatively short, numbered remarks, often though not always grouped by theme, which implicitly ask how, if at all, they should be related to each other by the reader. Typically, the middle works no longer praise Schopenhauer and Wagner. This does not mean, of course, that their influence was any the less, nor does it mean that the earlier works were unqualified in their agreement or adulation.

Nietzsche's middle works are not homogenous. *Human, All Too Human*, and in particular its 1878 part, stands out from the rest: in it, Nietzsche praises the scientific or scholarly attitude more highly, and more consistently, than he does elsewhere. The point is not so much that the results of scientific enquiry are profound, but that an appreciation of the *difficulty* of gaining scientific and, by implication, *any* knowledge, must be appreciated by a readership who (Nietzsche thinks) are too inclined to be seduced by the large but empty promise of grand metaphysical systems or works of art. His praise for the 'scientific' (or scholarly) mentality is more or less directly opposed to his criticism of it in the second meditation: this extends to the hope that, when more widespread, science will provide social and cultural benefits. This text also suggests an explicit commitment to causal determinism, which stands out in comparison with later works, even if, as Michael Forster's chapter notes, Nietzsche's underlying view may have remained very similar. *Daybreak* is significant, first of all, for marking the beginning of a sustained and explicit critique of

8 TOM STERN

‘morality’ and, second, for providing a number of important discussions of psychology, including what Nietzsche calls our ‘drives’. Read against *Human, All Too Human* in particular, *The Gay Science* finds a more positive role for art, illusion and falsehood, and it is correspondingly more suspicious of science and scholarship. It contains many of the passages which concern self-creation or self-development, and which generally advocate for the adoption of an aesthetic or artistic approach to ourselves and our world. Finally, Nietzsche, in the fourth part, introduces for the first time the notions of *amor fati* (the love of fate) and the eternal recurrence, which are central to his advocacy of the ‘affirmation of life’ – probably the closest thing he has to a core, ethical commitment. This is the subject of my essay, ‘Nietzsche’s Ethics of Affirmation’.

Late

At the end of the fourth part of *The Gay Science*, and immediately after the introduction of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche introduces the character of Zarathustra. This marks the transition to a phase of his life devoted to a completely new kind of work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–5), ostensibly a piece of fiction, which draws on and parodies the style and tropes of various religious and mystical texts. The book tells the story of Zarathustra – another name for Zoroaster – moving through a mythical landscape, making speeches and conversing with humans and other creatures. One important though elusive image is that of the *Übermensch* (variously translated ‘Overman’, ‘Superhuman’ or ‘Superman’), who is initially presented as Zarathustra’s and therefore perhaps also Nietzsche’s ideal. Although prominent in the Prologue, the *Übermensch* gets less explicit attention after that, and receives scarcely a mention in the texts that follow *Zarathustra*. The same cannot be said for a second notion of key importance, the ‘will to power’, which first appears (in published form) in *Zarathustra*. The nature and status of this concept is addressed directly in this volume by Lawrence Hatab, while Robert Pippin looks at its presentation in *Beyond Good and Evil*. *Zarathustra*

also takes up the idea of the eternal recurrence: indeed, part of the conception of *Zarathustra* appears to be that the protagonist comes to terms with eternal recurrence during the course of the narrative – which may suggest, in turn, that his initial proclamations about the *Übermensch* are made in ignorance of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche always spoke with reverence for *Zarathustra*. Other books, written earlier and later, are not infrequently described as glossaries for, commentaries on, or introductions to this book. Dirk Johnson's chapter examines the text in more detail.

After completing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche wrote six books (along with the fifth part of *The Gay Science*, as already mentioned): *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), *The Case of Wagner* (1888), *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), *The Antichrist* (1888), *Ecce Homo* (1888).⁶ He also collected a selection of (previously published) writings about Wagner, which appeared as *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* (1888) and the poems, *Dionysus-Dithyrambs* (1888). In 1886, he wrote a series of prefaces to his previous books, partly in an attempt to improve their sales, in some cases writing the preface without a copy of the book to hand. While the prefaces usually praise the books, he wrote privately to a friend saying that he couldn't stand them.

It is extremely difficult to present a coherent picture of *Beyond Good and Evil*. The first part, 'On the Prejudices of Philosophers', contains many of his most famous, and most perplexing, remarks about truth. The book has been taken as a key for understanding Nietzsche's philosophical project – but in very different ways. It contains many of the passages about the 'mask' and 'masked' philosophy, seen, by some interpreters, as indicative of how Nietzsche would like to be read: as playful, experimental, free, not committed to any particular claim, perhaps as deceitful or deceptive. On the other hand, it is also noted for its apparent description of Nietzsche's 'task' as one of 'translat[ing] man back into nature' – that is, as getting rid of various moralising fictions about what we are and how we act, in favour of telling it like it is. His immediate example is the

replacement of self-serving moralising terms which praise the truth-seeker (his 'honesty', 'love of truth') with terms which, Nietzsche says, describe what is really going on: namely, a kind of self-directed cruelty (BGE 229–230). As we shall see, one's understanding of the relationship between these two elements – the free, experimental Nietzsche, and the one who describes man in natural terms – can pervade one's understanding of his philosophical project as a whole. *Beyond Good and Evil* also floats the idea of a distinction between 'master morality' and 'slave morality', immediately adding that mixtures of the two are often found in the same culture and even in the same person. At its very simplest, his idea is that 'master morality' says that acting in a way that masters approve of is good, whereas 'slave morality' says that acting in a way that slaves approve of is good, and that these produce very different verdicts on the same behaviours. Hence, inspiring fear in others is 'good' if you are a master who wants others to be afraid of him (so master morality prizes it), but not 'good' if you are a slave, who would rather not have a fear-inspiring master (so slave morality condemns it). On Nietzsche's analysis, contemporary Europe is overwhelmingly and problematically 'slavely'.

This difference between 'master' and 'slave' moralities, much developed, takes centre stage in the first of the three essays which comprise *On the Genealogy of Morality*, probably Nietzsche's most influential book in academic philosophical circles. The *Genealogy* presents itself both as a history of how we ended up with the morality that we have (a project which requires him to specify what he takes that morality to be), and as a critique of that morality. In addition to 'master' and 'slave' moralities, the historical account connects various other strands. In the first essay, Nietzsche argues that the concept of free will becomes both plausible and appealing to the 'slaves'. This forms part of a larger critique of free will, which is the subject of Michael Forster's chapter. In the second essay, Nietzsche attempts to show how and why we prioritise those religious outlooks which characterise our relation to the divine as one of a defaulting debtor. He posits, amongst other things, an in-built need, in settled, socialised