

Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts

edited by

SALIM KEMAL

University of Dundee

IVAN GASKELL

Harvard University Art Museums

and

DANIEL W. CONWAY

The Pennsylvania State University



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Nietzsche and art

SALIM KEMAL, IVAN GASKELL, and DANIEL W. CONWAY

What spoke here – as was admitted, not without suspicion – was something like a mystical, almost maenadic soul that stammered with difficulty, a feat of the will, as in a strange tongue, almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself. It should have *sung*, this “new soul” – and not spoken! What I had to say then – too bad that I did not dare to say it as a poet: perhaps I had the ability.

ASC 3

Thus spoke Nietzsche in 1886, in a retrospective preface to his major work in aesthetics, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). As the plaintive tone of this passage suggests, he apparently envisioned for *The Birth of Tragedy* a complex set of aesthetic aims. In addition to excavating the origins of Attic tragedy in the Dionysian spirit of music, *The Birth of Tragedy* also might have communicated through song the lyrical voice of its poetical author. His 1886 preface thus confirms the irreducibly dual nature of his thought. He is simultaneously an artist *and* a philosopher. Indeed, any attempt to disown either of these generative impulses will invariably end, as in the case of *The Birth of Tragedy*, in stammering and distortion.

Unlike most philosophers, in fact, Nietzsche enjoyed a uniquely dual relationship to art. He not only theorized about aesthetics, but also harbored artistic aspirations that were buoyed (and occasionally matched) by his native talents. While he is known today to artists primarily for his original contributions to the study of tragedy and music, he also enjoyed a modest reputation as a poet and composer. Although the enduring merit of his artistic productions remains dubious (to say the least), his experience of himself as an artist was undeniably formative for his philosophical career. In the midst of his review of the “good books” he has penned, he consequently pauses in his *faux* autobiography to correct a single miscast note in the

score of his unappreciated *Hymn to Life*, allowing that “perhaps my music, too, attains greatness at this point” (*EH* “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” 1).

Nietzsche’s work as a philosopher was so closely bound up with his aspirations to art that he regularly advertised (and criticized) his writings as if they were musical compositions. By way of explaining why he writes such good books, for example, he directs our attention to the “most multifarious art of style that has ever been at the disposal of one man” (*EH* “Why I Write Such Good Books” 4). Of his *Zarathustra*, which he elsewhere describes as a “poetical work,”¹ he writes, “[N]obody was ever in a position to squander more new, unheard-of artistic devices that had actually been created for this purpose” (*EH* “Why I Write Such Good Books” 4). As these citations indicate, Nietzsche understood his impulses toward art and philosophy as inextricably united within him. This unity in turn furnished the governing frame for his parallel investigations into the nature of philosophy and art.

Owing to this uniquely dual relationship to art, Nietzsche’s contributions to aesthetics are unusually rich and complex, unmatched perhaps in the history of philosophy. More so than any other philosopher, he understands art as the basic transformative impulse known to human experience. Artists are physiologically defined, he insists, by their natural, involuntary capacity to transform the world around them:

A man in this state transforms things until they mirror his power – until they are reflections of his perfection. This *having to* transform into perfection is – art. Even everything that he is not yet, becomes for him an occasion of joy in himself; in art man enjoys himself as perfection.

(*TI* “Expeditions of an Untimely Man” 4).

From his earliest recorded musings and reflections, moreover, he bears witness to the transformative power of art in his own life. His personal experiences of rebirth and transfiguration lead him to seek the meaning of existence itself in a quasi-religious mode of aesthetic attunement or appreciation. His subsequent inquiries into the nature of art and aesthetics all emerge from his basic conviction that art can (and should) contribute to the formulation of an “aesthetic justification” of life itself.

While his earliest philosophical writings were primarily concerned to impress art into the service of personal transformation, Nietzsche soon became convinced that the nomothetic power of art

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could be harnessed for the benefit and enhancement of entire communities, tribes, peoples, and nations. He consequently extended the scope of his investigations to comprise the ethical and political dimensions of human existence, ultimately proposing art itself as the unacknowledged catalyst of social change, growth, and transfiguration:

What does all art do? does it not praise? glorify? choose? prefer? With all this it strengthens or weakens certain valuations . . . Art is the great stimulus to life: how could one understand it as purposeless, as aimless, as *l'art pour l'art*?
(*TI* "Expeditions of an Untimely Man" 24).

Through various philosophical experiments, Nietzsche attempted to translate his personal experience of aesthetic transformation into moral, social, and political terms. Hence his enduring interest in the defining aesthetic issues of the mature, post-Zarathustran period of his career: the redemptive value of art; the genius as a kind of artist; strategies and regimens of self-creation; art as a model of soulcraft and statecraft; the prophylactic and recuperative powers of myth; the physiology of aesthetics; and so on.

Nietzsche's dual relationship to art largely accounts for his ongoing role in shaping contemporary reflection on the relation between philosophy and art. He examines the ways in which they mutually inform one another as early as his notes on "The Last Philosopher" or "The Philosopher: Reflections on the Struggle between Art and Knowledge." He furthermore wants to explain our conceiving of the world, the activity of our philosophizing about it, in terms borrowed from the process of constructing art. He develops this idea through his essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" and, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, wants to replace the traditional discursive work of philosophy with a justification of "existence and the world as an aesthetic phenomenon."

This conception of art and philosophy has a number of implications. By recognizing that we actively contribute to the construction of the order and meaning we "discover" in the world, Nietzsche intends, we should liberate ourselves from submission to the authority claimed for themselves by the purveyors of eternal and unchanging values. By exposing the lack of such values, rejecting their bogus authority, and then justifying the order and meaning of objects and events aesthetically, Nietzsche shows how we constitute and, so, can transfigure our relations to ourselves and events.

In this process Nietzsche may seem to "aestheticize" politics,

making the legitimation of order depend on some aesthetic justification. The precise nature of this aestheticized politics will depend, of course, on the meaning he gives to aesthetic value; yet his conception of aesthetic value changes as he develops his understanding of the artistic nature of philosophy. Whereas he had formerly seen it as a matter of beauty, he now sees aesthetic and other values, including the order we valorize as knowledge, in terms of a feeling for life that allows him to seek an “aesthetic necessity” for beauty as well as the other values he transforms. His aestheticization of politics can more properly be seen as a politicization of values. It includes a genealogy of aesthetic values through which we identify the underlying relations of power that give meaning to values.

These interconnections raise at least two sets of issues: first, they call for a critical examination of Nietzsche’s account of aesthetics in terms of the debts he owes to other thinkers and the heritage his thought yields for the practice of the arts; second, they invite a consideration of his conception of the transformative power of aesthetic activity and its fusion of personal and political values. And to follow the imbrication of philosophy with art in aesthetic values, this volume begins with papers by Ernst Behler, Martha C. Nussbaum, Adrian Del Caro, Randall Havas, and Aaron Ridley. They demonstrate that Nietzsche’s seemingly idiosyncratic interest in aestheticizing politics, in the sense explained above, is neither an aberration of his later thought, nor a gratuitous corollary to his basic orientation to art. Rather, as these authors reveal, the social and political ramifications of art are present in Nietzsche’s philosophy of art from the very beginning.

This discussion begins with Ernst Behler on “Nietzsche’s Conception of Irony.” Rehearsing central features of the political uses and abuses of irony in Western philosophy, Behler marks out the transformative possibilities opened by this trope, and attributes Nietzsche’s irony to his understanding of the unique crisis that philosophers in late modernity must confront. Faced with the death of a true classicism (as exemplified in the figure of the hyper-rational Socrates), Nietzsche resorts to irony as the closest approximation available to late modernity of the tragic art of Greek antiquity. Behler also traces Nietzsche’s affirmation of irony to his theory of language, which constitutes a condition of the possibility (and perhaps the necessity) of irony. If all linguistic utterances are irreducibly figural in nature, then any attempt to describe the “reality” of social and

political existence obliges the philosopher to adopt a posture of ironic distance. But Nietzsche's multifarious deployments of irony are perhaps best explained by his love of masks, Behler concludes, the mask functioning not merely as a rhetorical device, but as the precondition of the "art of living" that he recommends to his fellow "free spirits."

In "The Transfigurations of Intoxication: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Dionysus," Martha C. Nussbaum develops other aspects of Nietzsche's work by examining his contribution to the conception of tragedy. Her investigation offers new insights into both the language of *The Birth of Tragedy* and the philosophical motivations for its author's account of sexual desire, love, and the body. Although Nietzsche was certainly wrong about Euripides, Nussbaum maintains, his account of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* nevertheless sheds clarifying light on the nature of tragedy. Her essay focuses on two closely interwoven topics that are crucial to Nietzsche's portrait of Dionysus and the Dionysian. First, she explores the tragic hero's relationship to what is arbitrary and mysterious and unjust in life, and the related Nietzschean picture of tragic learning and the spectator. Second, she investigates Nietzsche's remarkable account of the ways in which the intoxication of passion transfigures the self, producing a being who is fictional and yet also real, transformed and transforming, an object of art and an artist, "an ass in magnanimity and innocence," an actor, a god – in short, a lover. This power of love, as Nietzsche sees it, is the energy that generates all delicate and all noble art.

By taking as his point of departure the return of Dionysus in the concluding aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil*, in "Nietzschean Self-Transformation and the Transformation of the Dionysian" Adrian Del Caro continues this investigation into the transformative powers of Dionysian art. In that important transitional text, Nietzsche boldly characterizes himself as "the last disciple and initiate of the god Dionysus," launching the late Dionysian period of his philosophizing, in which the artistic deity so prominent in the evolution of Greek tragedy adopts mysterious, modern qualities not seen in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Del Caro details Nietzsche's transformation of this figure from an artistic deity into a so-called "philosopher god," exploring the contradiction that arises when Nietzsche proclaims in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that all gods are dead. This interpretive task requires Del Caro to: review the early artistic Dionysian; appraise the newly emerging Dionysian in the form and

content of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; critically evaluate the Dionysus–Ariadne nexus with respect to Nietzsche’s “labyrinthine man”; analyse the transformed Dionysus and the perceived absence of the feminine in the new anti-romantic aesthetic; and finally, to examine the interrelation between Nietzsche’s own intellectual transformation and his transformation of the Dionysian. In his conclusion, Del Caro demonstrates that Nietzsche employed a highly sophisticated symbology to convey his new philosophy, one based on a selective Dionysus stripped of certain attributes and infused with others in a willful act of creative philosophizing.

In the next chapter, “Socratism and the Question of Aesthetic Justification,” Randall Havas contends that so-called “aestheticist” readings of Nietzsche are often premised upon some version of the idea that truth is “made” and not discovered. This picture encourages us to think that Nietzsche wished us in some way to acknowledge the absence of the sorts of reasons Socrates sought – to face up to the contingency of our interpretations of the world. But the idea of truth as a human invention is sharply at odds with the spirit of Nietzsche’s critique of Socratism. His attack on the Socratic demand for discursive justification is not meant to undermine our sense that good reasons might be discovered for our favored interpretation of the world, but rather to undercut radically the very idea that we have an interpretation of the world that stands in need of justification at all. Nietzsche means, in other words, to reject the very idea that human beings stand in anything like a “relationship” to the world. Havas defends this interpretation by means of a close reading of Nietzsche’s attack on Socratism in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and he explores the consequences of this interpretation for our understanding of the notion of aesthetic justification as it appears in Nietzsche’s early work. He thus argues that Nietzsche’s attack on the demand for discursive justifications presupposes a particular understanding of culture on the model of a “linguistic community.” To make sense of aesthetic justification, therefore, the reader must understand Nietzsche’s reasons for denying the possibility of a discursive, or Socratic, justification of life.

Aaron Ridley continues this line of investigation in his chapter, “What is the Meaning of Aesthetic Ideals?,” in which he undertakes an interpretation of the competing aesthetics at work in the *Genealogy of Morals*. Despite its relative indifference to art and artists, Ridley maintains, the *Genealogy* in fact attests to an affirmation of the aesthetic, even (and especially) by way of its marginalization of

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standard questions of art. Focusing on Nietzsche's account of the formative, aesthetic activity of the founding of states, Ridley outlines the conditions under which artists might create works of art (contrary to the "official" aesthetic of the *Genealogy*) with a *good* conscience. This "unofficial" aesthetic of the *Genealogy* thus limns the typology of human souls that underlies Nietzsche's more famous typology of artists and artworks. Artists who create with a good conscience first and foremost fashion their ownmost souls into objects of beauty; their subsequent public works of art are simply external emanations of the superabundance that defines (and burnishes) their souls. Despite its oblique articulation of this "unofficial" aesthetic, however, the *Genealogy* is not, and could not be, an example of the counter-art that its "unofficial" aesthetic attempts to enshrine. Owing to Nietzsche's inadequate familiarity with the counter-art he wished to promote, Ridley concludes, the *Genealogy* can do no more than gesture vaguely toward the artists of the soul who create themselves anew in good conscience.

Nietzsche's deep investment in the redemptive and transformative power of art, central aspects of which these chapters have explored, determines his treatment of particular arts – a treatment evident not only in his own (modest) artistic accomplishments, but also in his influence on practicing artists. The chapters in the second part of this volume, by Stephen Bann, Timothy W. Hiles and John Carvalho, take up the theme of Nietzsche's understanding of, and influence on, particular arts and artistic traditions. These reveal both the genius and the limitations of his investment in the nomothetic capacity of art.

In his essay "The Splitting of Historical Consciousness," Stephen Bann finds in Nietzsche's unique attunement to the problem of historical consciousness a solution to a problem of representation in the tradition of French romanticism. Drawing on the categories Nietzsche sets out in the *Untimely Meditation* on history, Bann charts the shifting relations to the past that are suggested by "monumental," "antiquarian," and "critical" approaches to history. These relations in turn suggest a novel way of understanding the development and succession of representational forms. To explain the difficulties in providing an adequate representation of the past, Bann analyzes *Sully Showing His Grandson the Monument Containing the Heart of Henri IV at La Flèche*, a large historical painting exhibited in 1819 by Marie-Philippe Coupin de la Couperie.

Although intended to convey a “monumental” attitude to history, this painting was perceived as bearing an “antiquarian” relation to the past. Bann thus concludes that this painting faithfully (if unwittingly) enacts the “splitting of historical consciousness” that Nietzsche so expertly theorized.

Nietzsche’s influence on contemporary art is the topic of Timothy W. Hiles’ essay, “Gustav Klimt’s *Beethoven Frieze*, Truth, and *The Birth of Tragedy*.” According to Hiles, the *Beethoven Frieze* contains Klimt’s most profound and literal statement of the Wagnerian and, more directly, early Nietzschean credo concerning the utopian vision of the arts as humanity’s salvation. Like Nietzsche, Klimt understood the artist as a conveyer of truth, and his *Beethoven Frieze* correlates to Nietzsche’s optimistic notion of the ability of the artist to uncover the primal unity (or will) of humankind. Klimt’s frieze thus conveys not only a Nietzschean conception of the transformative properties of art, but also, Hiles concludes, a Nietzschean account of the decadence of humankind applied to *fin de siècle* Vienna.

Nietzsche’s influence on Dionysian modes of art is explored by Professor John Carvalho, in his chapter “Improvisations, on Nietzsche, on Jazz.” Carvalho submits that Nietzsche consistently characterizes philosophers of the “higher type” on the model of artists driven to resolve the competing claims of the form-giving principle and divine inspiration, or Apollo and Dionysus. Carvalho furthermore proposes that Nietzsche captures the implications of this model in his exhortation that we “become who we are,” whereby he calls for an affirmative will to self-creation. Taking issue with several influential “formalist” interpretations of Nietzschean self-creation, Carvalho rejects the common view of philosophers fashioning their lives into works of art by giving form to the excess of the drives, traits, impulses, and desires that they are. He maintains instead that Nietzsche’s philosophy more typically emphasizes music, excessive and incontinent music, much like the music of improvised modern jazz. Carvalho thus proposes the formative impulses in jazz – as captured, for example, in Ornette Coleman’s conception of improvising without memory – as suggesting a more fluid, more Dionysian model for the self-formation of the subject that Nietzsche’s pronouncements on the “will to power,” the will to “become who we are,” seek to demonstrate. Carvalho consequently seeks to present this somewhat more complex frame inscribed by the “lines of flight” of improvised modern jazz for interpreting Nietzsche

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on subject formation and the “will to power.” Read on this score, Carvalho concludes, the tension between Apollo and Dionysus in Nietzsche’s philosophy more aptly aspires to a “higher type.”

Nietzsche’s emphasis on the nomothetic power of art gives rise to his explorations of the moral, social, and political ramifications of artistic transformation. As we have seen, his dynamic, transformative conception of art leads him to “aestheticize” politics in a particular way. He also identifies statecraft as a form of *poiesis*, and he seeks to construct a mixed mode of moral, political, and aesthetic justifications. The transformative power of art, he argues, furnishes the native vitality of any thriving people or community. In his earlier works he proposes that the task of politics is to establish the conditions under which great individuals might “create” themselves as works of art, which would in turn inspire others to attempt similar acts of self-creation. His later work bears more complicated resonances, acknowledging the limits imposed on aesthetic self-creation by the advance of decadence in late modernity, the spread of European nihilism, the collapse of macro-political institutions, and the death of God. The chapters in the last part of the book, by Fiona Jenkins, Henry Staten, Salim Kemal, Daniel W. Conway, and Claudia Crawford, explore this interrelation between social and political values and transfigurative art. While these authors do not pretend to arrive at a definitive resolution of the complex issues raised here, their collective efforts clearly set the ground for future debate.

Fiona Jenkins begins the discussion of artistic transformation in her chapter “Performative Identity. Nietzsche on the Force of Art and Language.” As her point of entry into the problem of the “production” of selfhood and agency, Jenkins investigates the complex normative-aesthetic project announced in Nietzsche’s subtitle to *Ecce homo*: “how one becomes what one is.” Although this beguiling slogan is often summoned as evidence of the voluntaristic excesses of Nietzsche’s aestheticism, Jenkins demonstrates that his intention is in fact diametrically opposed to the notion that one might create oneself anew by dint of an act of will. Contrary to popular interpretation, Jenkins believes, Nietzsche does *not* entrust to art the twin tasks of dismantling the ego and de-centering the self. Rather, the causal relationship is in fact reversed: a genuinely aesthetic response to existence is possible only on the condition of a prior loss of self-possession. One “becomes what one is,” Jenkins concludes, not by subordinating art to the demands of morality, but

by allowing one's embeddedness in life to shape one's self. This embeddedness in turn enables the aesthetic response to existence that Nietzsche so famously prizes.

In "Dionysus Lost and Found: Literary Genres in the Political Thought of Nietzsche and Lukács," Henry Staten investigates some crucial features of the tensions resident within Nietzsche's general treatment of art. Although Nietzsche is arguably the single greatest influence on the "liberationist" strain of postmodern thought, his praise of hierarchical social distinctions and his admiration for violent nobility – both of which display what Staten calls Nietzsche's "tyrannophilia" – are also impossible to ignore. Rather than attempt to domesticate Nietzsche's tyrannophilia, Staten instead investigates the possibility of a "communication of energy" within the economy of Nietzsche's texts between his tyrannophilia on the one hand and the most profound and sublime elements of his teaching on the other. Tracing the complexity of Nietzsche's politics to a basic ambiguity in his treatment of tragedy, Staten documents the common matrix from which Nietzsche's aristocratic-authoritarian and democratic-liberationist tendencies both derive. Citing the significant confluence between Nietzsche's reflections on literary heroism and those of Georg Lukács, Staten suggests that a Dionysian revulsion from "mere individuality" may ultimately unite the twin registers of Nietzsche's thought. This basic enmity for the ordinary individual, Staten concludes, may mark one of the most significant limitations of Nietzsche's attempt to provide an aesthetic justification of political regimes and practices.

In "Nietzsche's Politics of Aesthetic Genius," Salim Kemal develops that escape from 'mere individuality.' He analyzes the conception of the relation between subjects subtended by Nietzsche's early conception of genius and art. Following a close textual analysis of such early writings as *The Birth of Tragedy* and "The Greek State," he explores the implications that Nietzsche's later rejection of the "artists' metaphysics" has for the conception of artistic creativity and the relation between subjects. The chapter argues that Nietzsche's later work supports a liberatory and progressive account of "the aesthetic necessity of beauty" that could unite power and genius with justice.

While Kemal's chapter investigates the political context of aesthetic practices, in "Love's Labor's Lost: The Philosopher's *Versu-cherkunst*," Daniel W. Conway investigates the political and aesthetic roles played in Nietzsche's thought by a particular instan-

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tiation of human genius: the philosopher. According to Nietzsche, the dying cultures of late modernity must rely exclusively for their continued sustenance on the self-transfiguratory labors of their resident philosophers. This political reliance is possible, Conway hypothesizes, only because the genuine philosopher is always also an artist, whose *Versucherkunst*, or art of experimentation/temptation, nourishes the ethical life of any thriving community. By dint of their signature practices of self-experimentation, philosophers create themselves as artworks of surpassing beauty, and so as objects of *erôs*. The consecratory properties of *erôs* in turn establish the micro-communities that alone can flourish in the twilight of the idols. Amid the rubble of failed reforms and bankrupt political institutions, Nietzsche entrusts to the philosopher the task of safeguarding the aimless will of humankind, in order that some exemplary human beings might survive the advanced decay of late modernity. Conway thus concludes that for Nietzsche, the philosopher's *Versucherkunst* serves as the basis for the fragile communities that arise within the political micro-sphere, simultaneously satisfying the demands of the ascetic ideal while continuing to preside over the catalysis of culture.

Claudia Crawford pursues a similar line of investigation in her exploration of the complex physiological processes involved in aesthetic transformation. Her chapter, "Nietzsche's Dionysian Arts: Dance, Song, and Silence," argues that Nietzsche's ethical/political agenda reflects his wish to lift the Apollonian veil of consciousness, in order that (some of) his readers might be transformed into the joyous, healthy overhuman types who are typically associated with the "worship" of Dionysus. Toward this end, Nietzsche not only recommends the transformative arts of dance, song, laughter, and the cry, but also provides exemplary performances of these arts. On Crawford's interpretation, Nietzsche thus recommends the transformative power of art by actually conducting his readers through a rite of initiation into the mysteries of Dionysus. Nietzsche's art is consequently distinguished by its unique goal: to serve and promote the "earth mysticism" celebrated by the votaries of Dionysus.

The chapters in this part deal with overlapping and competing conceptions of the complex relations between aesthetics, politics, and art as transformation. They rely on different senses of "aesthetics" and "politics" and therefore of "art." At present the boundaries of political and aesthetic thought are continually shifting. As

the concepts are interpreted and reinterpreted, no account of their interrelation, of the transformations they propose, will be entirely convincing until we go beyond mere interpretation by setting up practices to suit our capacity for self-transformation. The particular senses of art and politics, their implications, may then become clear as we see how particular conceptions of self-transformation affect us. And in forming these institutions, Nietzsche's contrast between being and becoming is germane. As the traditional distinctions between right and left dissolve, we need to search for a new vocabulary adequate to our situation at the turning of the millennium. It was not so long ago that there was a conflict between left and right Nietzscheans; then people sought to explore the relation of aesthetics to morality and politics, only to find themselves paralyzed before the claim to transformative power made by Nazism. It would be precipitous to think that the conditions for fascism and Nazism, even in its more subtle contemporary forms, were so thoroughly defeated that the reprehensible elements of Nietzsche's transformative thought, that the Nazis easily laid claim to, can be dismissed as excessive or hysterical or can be accommodated without doing ourselves much injury. If the boundaries between left and right are breaking down in part at least as a result of Nietzsche's influence, it is important to remember that Nietzsche's work is not entirely innocent; we cannot rely on him alone: the problems of how we should live well persist, voiceless until we speak them, and we need to assess Nietzsche's contribution to this end.

Notes

Sadly, Professor Ernst Behler died in September 1997. We are very pleased to include his contribution in this book.

- 1 Letter of February 10, 1883 to Overbeck. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe in 8 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter/Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986), vol. VI, §373, p. 326.