

"Festina lente"
("Make haste slowly")
– Erasmus/Aldus

Among philosophical writers, or thinkers of any kind, there are few whose impact could rival that of Friedrich Nietzsche on the course of the humanities during the last several decades. Nietzsche is nearly everywhere, or so it seems—to the point that it is not at all unreasonable to ask, with a recent commentator, "Where Is the Anti-Nietzsche?"¹ This is a puzzling state of affairs. Nietzsche hardly saw himself as the founder of a school, and even the idea of "influence" seems anomalous in light of a body of work that contains very little in the way of a fixed set of views. An orthodoxy seems nonetheless to have emerged from the work of the most unorthodox of thinkers.

The Nietzsche who has become *de rigueur* is a figure who is more often invoked than cited, and more often cited than read. When read, Nietzsche's texts are typically mined for their philosophical views. (A number of studies on Nietzsche and literature published beginning in the 1980s seem to have done little to change this state of affairs.²) This is further puzzling, since Nietzsche himself spoke explicitly about how his works ought to be approached. Some of the remarks in question occur at the conclusion of the Preface to *Morgenröthe*. This is where Nietzsche famously demands to be read *slowly*, explaining that slow reading may prove especially difficult in an age of haste and hard work:

Gerade damit aber ist sie [die Philologie] heute nöthiger als je, gerade dadurch zieht sie und bezaubert sie uns am stärksten, mitten in einem Zeitalter der "Arbeit", will sagen: der Hast, der unanständigen und schwitzenden Eilfertigkeit, das mit Allem gleich "fertig werden" will, auch mit jedem alten und neuen Buche: – sie selbst wird nicht so leicht irgend womit fertig, sie lehrt *gut* lesen, das heisst langsam, tief, rück- und vorsichtig, mit Hintergedanken, mit offen gelassenen Thüren, mit zarten Fingern und Augen lesen... Meine geduldigen Freunde, dies Buch wünscht sich nur vollkommene Leser und Philologen: *lernt* mich gut lesen!"³

But it is far from given that the kind of reading Nietzsche has in mind can ever fully be accomplished. After all, Nietzsche himself recognized that he was demanding "perfect readers and philologists." "*Lernt* mich gut lesen," he says; but reading Nietzsche in the way he demands requires a skill we may never be able to master to perfection.

¹ See Malcolm Bull, "Where is the Anti-Nietzsche," NLR, 3, May-June, 2000, <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2249>, reprinted in Reading Nietzsche (Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities and University of California Press, 2009); and Bull, "Negative Ecologies," also in Reading Nietzsche.

² See for example Sara Kofman, Nietzsche et la Métaphore, (Paris: Galilée, 1983), Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche, Life as Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), and Henry Staten, Nietzsche's Voice (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

³ All references are from Nietzsche, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, (Henceforth NW) ed. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999), with citations by volume and page. Here, NW, 3, p. 17.

What is the "slow reading" Nietzsche imagines? Literary criticism has long known the practice of something called "close reading." Its protocols are familiar to anyone trained in literary studies during the decades following the Second World War. Even as literature later opened itself to various forms of "theory" and came to recognize the workings of history within the text, the ideals of close reading remained very much intact. To slow down enough to devote close attention to what is said (and to how it is said), to attend to the nuances of voice and form, to listen, and to give oneself over to the qualities that are particular to a given work, rather than to proceed with "perspiring haste" in order to "get everything done" with a text, requires equal measures of discipline and patience. To read in this way is a practice and not a science, and least of all a science of knowledge. It is, moreover, a practice that demands a posture of respect vis-à-vis the text. By contrast, the search for assertions that can be put to immediate use, including immediate political use, would seem to require reading with undue haste.

To read closely requires that one allow oneself to be guided by the text, that one agree to follow its lead, rather than to lead it. Is this what slow reading would also require? Perhaps. The practices do share one common set of roots. Nietzsche was himself trained as a philologist and was appointed professor of Greek philology at the University of Basel in 1869, three years before his first book (*Die Geburt der Tragödie*) appeared. But he advocates "slow reading" as a way of explaining the manner in which one particular book, *Morgenröthe*, was fashioned; from that account he extrapolates an idea about how a "perfect reader" might approach his work. Slow reading is meant to mirror Nietzsche's writing, and ultimately to mirror Nietzsche himself. Like many of Nietzsche's works, and especially those of the period between 1878 and 1882, *Morgenröthe* was fashioned from a series of notes. The book consists of polished and edited versions of passages that Nietzsche wrote down on walks in Riva, Venice, Marienbad, and Genoa.⁴ In a very late passage ("Zwischenrede") he remarks that *Morgenröthe* was designed for dipping into, not for reading straight through; it requires errant *reading*, "ein Buch, wie dieses, ist nicht zum Durchlesen und Vorlesen, sondern zum Aufschlagen, namentlich im Spazierengehen und auf Reisen, man muss den Kopf hinein- und immer wieder hinausstecken können und nichts Gewohntes um sich finden."⁵ The text is arranged as a series of fragments, each of which is announced by a heading; but these headings (e.g., "Wir sind Vornehmer," "Das dritte Auge," "Slave und Idealist") hardly conform to a single paradigm.

To whom does Nietzsche address himself in these remarks? Is it the "patient friends" ("meine geduldigen Freunde") he mentions in section 2 of the Preface? Perhaps, except that this remark may be taken simply as acknowledging the fact that he has been slow to publish the book. More revealing is Nietzsche's admission that no reader may be able to follow him, insofar as he is a "subterranean (*unterirdischer*) man" who rejects disciples even as he asks to be read slowly. Even while soliciting the reader he poses as a solitary soul.

In der That, meine geduldigen Freunde, ich will es euch sagen, was ich da unten wollte, hier in dieser späten Vorrede, welche leicht hätte ein Nachruf, eine Leichenrede werden können: denn ich bin zurück gekommen und – ich bin davon gekommen. Glaubt ja nicht, dass ich euch zu

⁴ See the very helpful introduction by Michael Tanner to the translation by R. J. Hollingdale, *Daybreak*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 5.

⁵ *Morgenröthe*, NW, 3, p. 274.

dem gleichen Wagnisse auffordern werde! Oder auch nur zur gleichen Einsamkeit! Denn wer auf solchen eignen Wegen geht, begegnet Niemandem: das bringen die "eigenen Wege" mit sich.⁶

One is reminded of the fact that *Also sprach Zarathustra* was written to be "ein Buch für Alle und Keinen."

How then to read Nietzsche "slowly" while also proceeding on one's own path? The answer may of course depend on the specific text in question. Nietzsche's corpus comprises at least three different types of texts, each one of which poses a distinct set of reading challenges. All of them together place substantial obstacles in the way of anyone who would hope to hasten them towards an "authoritative" set of views. (I say this in full light of the fact that Nietzsche often speaks in a voice that sounds remarkably authoritative – all too authoritative, one might say.) *Morgenröthe* exemplifies the works that Nietzsche crafted in journal form, works that originated as notes or thought-experiments, written in the first instance for Nietzsche himself. The fragments that comprise *Der Wille zur Macht* are perhaps the pre-eminent example of this type of work. It is often said that *Der Wille zur Macht* is an assemblage of remarks and not a book in the conventional sense, but the more important fact is that these remarks were written and revised, in the first instance and maybe in the last, for Nietzsche's own philosophical ear. He writes and listens to the sound of what he says, then thinks, reacts, revises, and writes more. The headings of *Morgenröthe* and *Der Wille zur Macht* are rather like prompts or instigations, not a series of well-formed categories or summaries of any particular line of thought. How to read anything that Nietzsche says in these fragments, if not in a correspondingly fragmentary way? In the Preface to *Morgenröthe* (which was written, like nearly all prefaces, after the fact), Nietzsche asks us to wander without immediate intent or purpose. Yet no reader, it seems, will be able to absorb what these texts seem to demand – reading slowly and errantly – and still have these fragments "make sense."

Not all of Nietzsche's works are of this sort. There are essays, such as the early *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, that seem to articulate their views in a more or less conventional form. So too the short polemical pieces published in *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, including "Schopenhauer als Erzieher," "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben," and "David Strauss der Bekenner und der Schriftsteller." It would seem tempting to take *Die Geburt der Tragödie* as straightforward account of the entanglement of the "Dionysian" and "Apollonian" impulses, and of their subsequent suppression by philosophy. But Nietzsche's immense admiration for Richard Wagner in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* fuels an enthusiasm that leads him well beyond analysis. Indeed, it would not be unfair to say that Nietzsche wrote *Die Geburt der Tragödie* under kind of a Wagnerian "spell." Nietzsche himself recognized this much in his subsequent repudiation of the work. The relationship between Apollonian and Dionysian elements as formulated in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* is on one level a reflection of the interplay between force and form. But the book was also the starting point of a Titanic struggle with Wagner, and in order to overcome the power of Wagner's presence over the work Nietzsche ultimately found himself needing to reject it wholesale ("Nietzsche Contra Wagner"). The experience taught Nietzsche something powerful about the dynamics of influence; it was key to the development of his own stance as a writer who reserves the highest place among the circle of his readers for truly creative spirits.

⁶ *Morgenröthe*, NW, 3, pp. 11-12.

The essays published right after *Die Geburt der Tragödie* already begin to explore new rhetorical registers. In *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* there is ironic praise for Schopenhauer's "cheerfulness," which Nietzsche likens to Montaigne's. By contrast, the essay on David Strauss is peppered with satire and criticism, sometimes to the point of insult and abuse; and there are frequent remarks on the philistinism of the Germans in "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben." No doubt Nietzsche had good reason to denounce much of what he saw around him. But the aggressive tone of these remarks serves more than as a severe indictment of his targets: the tone borders on the indecorous, and Nietzsche knew that the book was likely to seem unwelcome and out of joint with the times ("unzeitgemässe"). His own sense of torment provides one justification for the book's tone. But this is a torment he scarcely wished to relinquish. *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* bear the marks of a writer who has learned to listen to himself, and who seems to relish the sound of his own voice as it engages in the movements of parry and thrust. Wary of the dangers of auto-affection, the essays stage a verbal drama of enticement and recoil that is especially hazardous to any reader who might try to move through them too fast.

Ich habe mich bestrebt, eine Empfindung zu schildern, die mich oft genug gequält hat; ich räche mich an ihr, indem ich sie der Oeffentlichkeit preisgebe. Vielleicht wird irgend Jemand durch eine solche Schilderung veranlasst, mir zu erklären, dass er diese Empfindung zwar auch kenne, aber dass ich sie nicht rein und ursprünglich genug empfunden und durchaus nicht mit der gebührenden Sicherheit und Reife der Erfahrung ausgesprochen habe. So vielleicht der Eine oder der Andere; die Meisten aber werden mir sagen, dass es eine ganz verkehrte, unnatürliche, abscheuliche und schlechterdings unerlaubte Empfindung sei, ja dass ich mich mit derselben der so mächtigen historischen Zeitrichtung unwürdig gezeigt habe, wie sie bekanntlich seit zwei Menschenaltern unter den Deutschen namentlich zu bemerken ist.⁷

We, who imagine ourselves to be good readers (i.e. slow readers, or at least close readers), can easily be tempted to identify with Nietzsche against the "Germans" of his age. But whoever would identify with Nietzsche in such a way will inevitably run afoul of a rhetoric that ends by attacking anyone who would not become an artist-creator in his or her own right:

Wenn der grosse Denker die Menschen verachtet, so verachtet er ihre Faulheit: denn ihrethalben erscheinen sie als Fabrikwaare, als gleichgültig, des Verkehrs und der Belehrung unwürdig. Der Mensch, welcher nicht zur Masse gehören will, braucht nur aufzuhören, gegen sich bequem zu sein; er folge seinem Gewissen, welches ihm zuruft: "sei du selbst! Das bist du alles nicht, was du jetzt thust, meinst, begehrest."⁸

This is not so much a rhetoric of authenticity or rugged individualism as it is a form of goading. It blossoms into flowers of cheer and vitriol in the notebook fragments that comprise *Der Wille zur Macht* (1883-1888). Some offer straightforward indictments: "*Das Patronat der Tugend*,. — Habsucht, Herrschsucht, Faulheit, Einfalt, Furcht: alle haben ein Interesse an der Sache der Tugend: darum steht sie so fest (323)."⁹ Examples could be multiplied at length. Together with the claims of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* and *Zur Genealogie der Moral* there is enough in these works

⁷ *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, NW, 1, p. 246.

⁸ *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, NW, 1, p. 338.

⁹ Excerpts from the Nachlass, with associated section numbers in *Der Wille zur Macht*, from the 1954 München edition are drawn from the online source at <http://zeno.org>.

to allow for a formulation of Nietzsche's "teaching" on morality and nihilism. The heart of that teaching would lie in Nietzsche's assertions that morality stands in the way of existence and was invented mainly as an antidote against nihilism.¹⁰ "Morality" builds its faith upon a fictitious view of the world ("Der Glaube an die Vernunft-Kategorien ist die Ursache des Nihilismus, – wir haben den Wert der Welt an Kategorien gemessen, welche sich auf eine rein fingierte Welt beziehen" [12b]). Nietzsche, by contrast speaks the truth.

But how? Who except a seer would claim to have rent the fiction of the world, and how can a seer communicate what he knows? This is an especially great challenge given the thoroughness of Nietzsche's suspicion of the many alliances, implicit or explicit, between virtue and the fantasy of God's voice.

(Man bedurfte Gottes, als einer unbedingten Sanktion, welche keine Instanz über sich hat, als eines "kategorischen Imperators" –: oder, sofern man an die Autorität der Vernunft glaubt, man brauchte eine Einheits-Metaphysik, vermöge deren dies logisch war. Gesetzt nun, der Glaube an Gott ist dahin: so stellt sich die Frage von neuem: "wer redet?" – Meine Antwort, nicht aus der Metaphysik, sondern der Tier-Physiologie genommen: *der Herden-Instinkt redet*. Er will Herr sein: daher sein "du sollst!" – er will den einzelnen nur im Sinne des Ganzen, zum besten des Ganzen gelten lassen, er haßt die Sich-Loslösenden, – er wendet den Haß aller einzelnen gegen ihn [275].)

All the works that deal with nihilism struggle with the question of voice: who speaks, to and for whom, and how? Not surprisingly, perhaps, the voice of the notebook fragments comprising *Der Wille zur Macht* edges toward extremes even as it rails against ignorance and excess. One fragment, written in 1887 and revised the following year, reads: "Die *Kleine-Leute-Moralität* als Maß der Dinge: das ist die ekelhafteste Entartung, welche die Kultur bisher aufzuweisen hat. *Und diese Art Ideal* als 'Gott' hängenbleibend über der Menschheit!!" (200). But there are political and psychological consequences that follow from opposition to what Nietzsche here says: to believe that there are no differences in power would be to identify with the herd; to posit that everyone can be equally reintegrated into some "whole" undermines the very basis of human striving. Moreover, in Nietzsche's views the herd hates those who detach themselves from it, and turns the hatred of all others against those who do so. No doubt Nietzsche himself felt this detachment in good measure, and cultivated it as well. The Notebooks do at one point offer its own solution to the problem of communication. It is not one that an ordinary writer can easily embrace. "Im *Verhältnis zur Musik* ist alle Mitteilung durch *Worte* von schamloser Art; das Wort verdünnt und verdummt; das Wort entpersönlicht; das Wort macht das Ungemeine gemein" (810). But we do not know which music (except that it will not be Wagner), and there is no way of telling who will know how to listen.

What we do know is that the appropriation of Nietzsche by intellectuals intending to work in the service of radical democracy has also put those intellectuals on the spot. It is not uncommon to find oneself applauding Nietzsche's critique of morality while having to pick through the minefield of his remarks, approving what he might say about metaphysics, for example, while carefully denouncing what he says on such topics as women and rank ordering. Nietzsche's critique of power has been appropriated in a more seamless and less dangerous form, via Foucault. Some have posited that Nietzsche forces us to confront the undemocratic impulses that make democracy

¹⁰ "In summa: Moral war das große Gegenmittel gegen den praktischen und theoretischen Nihilismus" (4).

possible (as opposed to just necessary).¹¹ Nietzsche may still seem compelling to those groups that have felt themselves betrayed by what Žižek calls the modern "liberal-egalitarian framework of human rights"¹² – not least because the institutions charged with making good on the integrative promises of democracy have continued to mask democracy's incomplete inclusion of, e.g., women, gays, and people of color. But the "Nietzschean" alternative to democracy seems at least as problematic as this version of democracy itself – *if*, that is, we regard Nietzsche as offering a theoretical stance or set of ethical imperatives that can be put to political use. Framed in those terms, there is no reasonable way in which Nietzsche can be wrestled into line with democratic views nor any obvious way in which democracy can be bent to a Nietzschean stance.

The third type of work I have in mind, epitomized by *Also sprach Zarathustra*, shifts this question to the relations between poetry and democracy. *Zarathustra* is neither a compilation of fragments nor an essay, but a poetic rhapsody. (To speak in musical terms, one might describe it as a "fantasia.") It is a composition in which Nietzsche speaks not in wordless tones but through metaphors and images, in poetic and prophetic tones, by means of an alter-ego. It requires reading on at least two levels at once. On one level, *Zarathustra* says nothing less than the "truth": Zarathustra the character, at least, says what he means and means what he says. ("Meine Brüder im Kriege! Ich liebe euch von Grund aus, ich bin und war Euresgleichen. Und ich bin auch euer bester Feind. So lasst mich denn euch die Wahrheit sagen!"¹³). But as poet and as prophet Zarathustra also speaks indirectly, in figures and in tropes whose meanings lie concealed. This is especially the case in Part III of the book, where the imagery grows uncommonly thick and dense. As a Greek philologist, Nietzsche would have been well aware of the ancient narrative strategy that requires concealment, or intentional secrecy, as a condition of the truth.¹⁴ One is reminded of what the dwarf says in "Vom Gesicht und Räthsel": "Alles Gerade lügt, murmelte verächtlich der Zwerg. Alle Wahrheit ist krumm, die Zeit selber ist ein Kreis."¹⁵ But what does Nietzsche's poetic way of speaking mean for attempts to enlist him in the project of "radical" cultural and political critique? Can the result possibly be democratic? Can any poetry be?

We do of course know examples of democratic poetry, at least in the American context, ranging from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to Lagnston Hughes' National Poetry Project. Their respective aims were to speak for the multitudes (Whitman) and to put the voice poetry back in the mouth of the people (Hughes). But the rhetorical principles that underlie civic discourse in democratic societies – the free and equal exchange of ideas, above all – seem to stand opposed to anything like the poetry that speaks to the few; there is scarcely room in modern democracy for the poets of the *trobar clus* or for hieratic speech. The victory of the *demos* was achieved in a secular context, as a victory of the many over the few. Reflecting on Malcolm Bull's essays, one might well recognize how reading "like a loser" can help salvage Nietzsche for the sake of a new moral ecology. But the further question is what kind of poetry it can salvage for democracy, and this is in the end what

¹¹ See for example Wendy Brown, *Politics out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹² See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 102.

¹³ Also sprach Zarathustra, NW, 4, p. 58.

¹⁴ Nietzsche echoes the Biblical parable that engages this very tradition of intentional secrecy when he writes "Wer Ohren hat, der höre. (Also sprach Zarathustra, NW, 4, p. 230). See Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). There are, in addition, a series of open secrets in the book, such as the identification in Part IV of Richard Wagner as the sorcerer and of Schopenhauer as the "gloomy prophet."

¹⁵ Also sprach Zarathustra, NW, 4, p. 200.

radical intellectuals would need in order to do much with Nietzsche's political views. Let us pursue this question one step further. The implicit politics of *Zarathustra* is a new Athenian universalism. It seeks to overcome all the former, failed attempts to fuse the ideals of Athens and Jerusalem into one. We know that the result will be unrecognizable as a form of modern democracy, and will likewise not resemble any form of democracy that conforms to the visions of radical intellectuals. Indeed, the Nietzsche that seems to be so desired by contemporary intellectuals is by his own admission homeless in modern Europe.¹⁶ He may nonetheless provide a source of significant *resistance* for modern Europeans and their American fellow-travelers. As Laurence Lampert has argued, "[Nietzsche] remains who he is despite attempts by friends and enemies alike to make him into something he is not."¹⁷ But Nietzsche often portrayed himself as something he was not; his masks were a condition of speaking the truth. He did not present himself as a political thinker, and as a "philosopher" he fashioned himself as a poet, i.e., as someone who speaks in a series of voices, in figures and in tones that range from the heights of the solemn to comical extremes. Whoever enters a work like *Zarathustra* in a literal frame of mind is bound to be overwhelmed by the text.

We know that it would take a poet or a seer (or a madman) to intone the truth from the mountain heights or the depths of a cave. But Zarathustra's call is for a new order of poetry as much as it is a call for anything else: "Ich wurde der Dichter müde, der alten und der neuen: Oberflächliche sind sie mir Alle und seichte Meere. Sie dachten nicht genug in die Tiefe: darum sank ihr Gefühl nicht bis zu Gründen" (NW, 4, p. 165). What we do *not* know is whether Zarathustra has access to a special type of knowledge, or whether he simply claims knowledge that we all might have, just veiled in a special kind of discourse. Suppose for a moment that the latter were true, and that Zarathustra's heightened views – his views from the heights – were in fact a reflection of some basic truths? Suppose, further, we were to take everything Zarathustra says as true, but not true here, or now. (Zarathustra himself recognizes that "Ich bin von Heute und Ehedem... aber Etwas ist in mir, das ist von Morgen und Übermorgen und Einstmals," NW, 4, p. 165). What then of reading Nietzsche's poetry for democracy's sake? Might we re-imagine the polis along these lines, recognizing that it is not meant for here or now, but for elsewhere, or another time? The result is unlikely to resemble democracy in any form we have known it yet – to which should also be added Nietzsche's cautionary remark that we ought to proceed slowly and not with overhasty zeal.

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¹⁶ See Die fröhliche Wissenschaft, section 377, "Wir Heimatlosen."

¹⁷ Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 428.