



Nietzsche, Philosopher of the Perilous Perhaps

Rebekah Peery

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NIETZSCHE

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THE PERILOUS PERHAPS

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FOREWORD

It was a subject of interest and of serious, if limited, consideration by a few thinkers before him, as well as several others after him — “it” referring to “power” and “him” referring to the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. For him, writing in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it increasingly became the dominant principle, or concern, of his entire body of critical thought. He finally opened wide the door, and dared others to enter. He expected, anticipated, that in the future his followers, or at least some of them, would ultimately explore and further extend what he had begun.

Nietzsche understood well the dangers of daring to exercise his own enormous powers in investigating, and attempting to understand, what is probably the most complex phenomenon in man’s world — *power*. He, no doubt, would recognize and proclaim the dangers of not daring to risk the dangers of such a task.

Influenced significantly by certain of the Pre-Socratics, Nietzsche was searching for a single unifying explanatory principle of the natural universe, one which would expressly allow the focus to be on human creatures. What he discovered was power. In my view, of all previous or present attempts, Nietzsche’s thinking, and rethinking of power offers by far the most fertile ground for carrying the investigation forward. He

was surely the architect, one might say the genius, who supplied the infrastructure for future developers.

Nietzsche realized early in his career that his major intellectual creative endeavor actually was, or would be, a destructive endeavor also. He made clear that his energies and abilities had ultimately been directed toward exposing the corrupting nature and power of Christianity in Western culture. In fact, he was matching his power against that of this religion. In his view, the devastating effects of the cultural force of Christianity were evident, spreading and growing. He believed that he was engaging in his own version of an apocalyptic, cosmic struggle, and that his involvement was, in his words, his “destiny.”

Nietzsche was sufficiently wise and clever to realize also that this enterprise would be difficult, complicated, and especially hazardous. His perception of the significance of the threat that he was posing to the structural foundation of his own Western culture, and his keen awareness of the perilous position in which he was choosing to place himself, resulted in the necessity of disguise and of protection. His “deep thinking” required a “mask,” or “masks.” He would need to encourage misunderstanding, at least for a time. Perhaps until his life was finished, his intentions had to be concealed, made indistinct or imperceptible. His challenge was of such magnitude that it carried him far beyond atheism, infidelity, heresy, or blasphemy. My book “unmasks” Nietzsche as he surreptitiously and cleverly proceeded to expose the destructive power of Christianity on Western culture.

In addition to his choosing the use of a mask, or masks — with the suggestion that “contrariety might be the only proper disguise” — Nietzsche reminds us that he is particularly fond of conundrums, riddles, and puzzles. Concealed by his mask, his problems and solutions become puzzles and responses — interpretations, conjectures, guesses, experiments — further concealing and complicating access to the meaning of his threat.

The first part of the book develops a new interpretation of Nietzsche’s devastating assault on Christianity, as he was constantly reminded of the difficulties posed by the mask and puzzles. Although the subject of my interpretation is Christianity, I focus, or refocus, attention on sexuality, or what I refer to as “gender-consciousness.” Nietz-

sche's discussions of male and female, woman and man, the feminine and masculine, are not peripheral or incidental, but rather are central to his ultimate savage critique of Christianity. What might be called "sexual politics," meaning "the use of intrigue and stratagem to achieve a position of power," according to Nietzsche, had its origin with the arrival of Christianity, and had continued to be sustained, reinforced, and enhanced for two thousand years.

My reconsideration of Nietzsche's treatment of Christianity revealed the necessity of rethinking the importance of language, of power, and of values. I was drawn to the prospects of new or different ways of understanding these issues — not language, power, or values in the abstract, but as fundamental ever-present issues in the human culture.

Of no small significance is the issue of timing. Nietzsche clearly believed that he, his thinking, and his writing were "untimely," that perhaps he was among those who are "born posthumously." The transformations taking place within European culture in the latter part of the nineteenth century were seemingly abrupt, radical, and momentous. For him, these changes were evidence of the continuing deterioration and degradation of Western culture. Having been building for centuries, the source of this deterioration was identified with Christianity, especially its values, specifically its moral values. Nietzsche's "long perspective," his prescience, led him to his sense of urgency regarding the future, of the inevitability of a developing crisis. He spoke of "convulsions," "earthquakes," a crescendo of critical proportions. I might add the metaphor of "hurricane." He saw seeds, signs, warning signals — gaining in momentum, more intense and widespread, irreversible, heading inevitably toward some kind of catastrophe. His understanding of the changes occurring was based on his own experiences. Martin Heidegger said that Nietzsche felt the need "to scream."

What I suggest in this book is that we need to bring Friedrich Nietzsche back into the contemporary dialogue, to see and hear him with new and fresh ears and eyes, to listen again. Regardless of his tremendous influence and the continuing generation of critical interpretations of his writings, the use and misuse of his ideas, there remains a yet unrecognized and unexamined wealth of insights. It is time to bring Nietzsche into the rapidly growing turbulence characterizing

so much of the contemporary discussions regarding religion, sexuality, power, values, and more. In my book I bring a new interpretation that weaves together the many strands that shaped his final assault on Christianity.

Nietzsche's interests in religion and power seem to have evolved simultaneously. This reciprocal relation between these two ideas meant that each was drawing on, and creating, energy and further understanding of both. This dynamic generated, and revealed the significance of, many of his other important ideas.

Nietzsche's focus on Christianity was one, as has been noted, of immediacy, of urgency, and the first part of my book is recognizing this imperative. The exercising of his energy and ability in exposing the dangers of religion revealed, at the same time, the more comprehensive nature of power. The second part of the book is intending to analyze and interpret the primary elements of the infrastructure enabling us to go further in understanding the phenomenon of power. One might call these the "postulates of power." All of these major ideas were developing together, "sprouting new shoots," overlapping, demanding to be recognized.

Just this brief reminder regarding Nietzsche's thinking. It was, and is, considered as revolutionary. As a "scientific philosopher," he radically interpreted all of the major areas of traditional philosophy — epistemology, or ideas regarding knowledge and the methods for securing it; ethics, or questions concerning the nature and sources of value, rightness, duty, and related matters; and metaphysics, or speculative inquiry concerning philosophical matters which are beyond the range of empirical inquiry. All of these underwent transformations of such magnitude that philosophical inquiry would never be the same. Nor would many of the newly emerging sciences or the arts. The cultural jolts are continuing to be felt.

As a classical philologist also, Nietzsche's studies familiarized him with the words of historians, philosophers, poets, and dramatists. His interests and research focused especially on the so-called "Pre-Socratics," and later extended back to mythological literature, as we will see. But here is the place to be reminded of three of the Pre-Socratics who appeared to catch his fancy, and more than his fancy. What he heard

from these earliest philosophers must surely have aroused his curiosity and fascination in such a way, and to such an extent, as to be germinal in the development of his own philosophy.

Such a very few words of these earliest philosophers remain extant that they are usually referred to as “fragments.” Here are a few. Empedocles claimed that the universe is eternal; that it consists of four elements — air, earth, fire, and water — in constantly changing patterns, these alternating between two forces, Love and Strife.

The ideas of Democritus, as we have them, are slightly more complex. He advanced the idea of change, or motion, requiring space which he thought of as a “void.” The essential, defining nature of the world was “atoms in motion in a void.” He thought about the smallest, indivisible material particles of which the universe is composed. Inherent properties of atoms, he speculated, were size, shape, and solidity. As to any other qualities, Democritus held that they were subjective, relative to the experiencing organism. Interestingly, he is attributed with the admonition, “The wise man limits his ambition according to his ability.”

The third of these early philosophers of nature, the one who appears to have captivated Nietzsche’s imagination most, was Heraclitus. According to Heraclitus, the universe is best understood as what he called “Logos,” meaning something like the controlling principle of the universe, and translated variously as word, order, discourse, pattern, rationale, reason, and more. The Logos, or Word, is revealed as opposites, pairs which are unified by interdependence, but which exist in a state of constant strife. His reference symbolically to fire carried the meaning that everything in the universe is involved in an eternal process of change and exchange.

About a sixth of the extant fragments of Heraclitus deal with “opposites.” They show four senses in which opposites are familiar. Considering the enormous influence of this thinking on Nietzsche, these are worth noting before we consider his own ways of developing them. First, Heraclitus wrote, “Over those who step into the same river, different and again different waters flow.” Or, “Beginning and end are common on the circumference of a circle.” Apparent paradoxes? Heraclitus was calling attention to one special sense of opposites — same and dif-

ferent. Second is polar opposition. “They would not know the name of Justice if the things [injustices] did not exist.” “Sickness makes health pleasant and good; hunger, satiety; weariness, rest.” Third is another kind of polar opposition that consists in the regular succession by one thing of its opposite, so that if one perished, so would the other. “The cold things get hot, hot gets cold, wet gets dry, parched gets damp.” Or, the alternation between night and day, or sun and moon, and numerous others. Fourth, many oppositions are “subjective,” dependent on the point of view, the nature, or the interests of the observer. “Swine rejoice in filth.” “Sea is the cleanest and the dirtiest water: for fish it is drinkable, but for men it is undrinkable and poisonous.” “The way up and down is one and the same,” reflecting whether one lives in the valley or on the hill.

It is important to note that Heraclitus was not denying the existence of opposition. On the contrary, oppositions do exist, they do oppose; and the conflict of opposites is the basic fact of existence — according to Heraclitus. In his interpretation, not material “stuff,” or substance, was most fundamental about the universe, but rather the continuing process of change. He added that failure to understand this “Logos,” or rationale, was the source of all evil.

Eternal motion, change, process, and especially Heraclitus’ emphasis on the notion of opposition — all became essential elements in Nietzsche’s thinking. But Heraclitus had made thinking itself the process — the continuing process, involving constant change and exchange. And of course, speaking and writing, the “stuff” in this case being words.

In spite of his skepticism and often satirical comments concerning the classical philosophers — Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle — Nietzsche recognized the significance of their application of the ideas which these earlier three philosophers had made. They were continuing, and extending, the dialectical process of opposites to man, rather than the earlier focus on natural processes. Socrates introduced the ideas of questions and answers, the continuing change and exchange of views that might lead to further knowledge, to more understanding. The power residing in this approach was apparent.

Plato, of course, took the focus on words — on questions and answers, on conversation, on the process of thinking, on motion involved in change and exchange of ideas — to the level of his famous Dialogues. Aristotle took his own turn toward thinking, and the use of many words, into comprehensive, lengthy analysis and interpretation.

Nietzsche, as philosopher and philologist, as cultural critic and historian, became fully aware of the significance and power of ideas and words, in the constant and continuing motion and conflict of speaking. He recognized and celebrated his own increasing energy and ability in using words, in expressing power. And we now recognize and celebrate, and are awed by that power.

This book is separated into three parts. The first part investigates Nietzsche's exercise and expression of power as he confronted the power of Christianity. This conflict was the major one in which he observed and learned, becoming wiser regarding the complexities of the nature and dynamics of power. It had the urgency of a "command performance" for him.

The second part of the book engages in the task of examining and extending our understanding of the phenomenon of power, with fully acclaiming the creative genius of Nietzsche in giving us the elements upon which to build.

The third part of the book changes the focus back to Nietzsche, considering four different perspectives. We look at him as "the experimenter," "the contrarian," "the historian," and "the revolutionary."

PART ONE

CHAPTER I. DANGERS, PUZZLES, AND MASKS

In the October 8, 2006 issue of *The New York Times Book Review*, these words appear:

Friedrich Nietzsche may be the most exciting philosopher — ever! Not just because he is obviously so smart. Not just because he writes so beautifully. Not just because of his peculiar ideas and themes and topics. But because Nietzsche forces us to think and rethink more than anyone else in the modern Western tradition.

Nietzsche provokes us. He teases us. He seduces us. Nietzsche changes lives. And it is this lonely, frantic, self-styled prophet who flips the switch into the tumultuous 20th century.

A “scientific” philosopher, yes. But also a classical philologist, a physiological psychologist, a poet, a cultural historian and critic, and more. But perhaps most, a *thinker*. About himself, Nietzsche says he is not a saint, not a prophet, not an improver-of-mankind, not a preacher, not a moral monster, not a fanatic — but yes, perhaps, a buffoon, and certainly an experimenter. And an immoralist. And, of course, a disciple of the philosopher Dionysos. Not to overlook Heraclitus, the philosopher of change and opposition.

There is more. Nietzsche was aware that he was an “untimely” man with “untimely” thoughts and words. “Thoughts out of season.” He wrote:

Every deep thinker fears being understood more than he fears being misunderstood. His vanity may suffer from the latter, but his heart, his fellow-feeling suffers from the former. (BGE, 230)

And he adds, “You see, I do my best to be understood with difficulty.” Nietzsche leaves little doubt as to his desire, his need, to conceal his thoughts and words, perhaps to be understood at some later “timely” time. As he said, “Some are born posthumously.” He believed the unbelievable, thought the unthinkable, spoke and wrote the unspeakable. He was aware of himself and his words as dangerous. A friend, Peter Gast, commenting to Nietzsche concerning the title of one of Nietzsche’s last books, *Twilight of the Idols*, wrote:

[Y]ou have driven your artillery on the highest mountain, you have such guns as have never yet existed, and you need only shoot blindly to inspire terror all around. . . . (PN, 464)

Nietzsche himself wrote, “The Germans invented gunpowder — all credit to them! But they made up for it by inventing the printing press.” Nietzsche’s words were dynamite. In *Twilight of the Idols* he wrote:

Great men, like great ages, are explosives in which a tremendous force is stored up; their precondition is always historically and physiologically, that for a long time much has been gathered, stored up, saved up, and conserved for them — that there has been no explosion for a long time. Once the tension in the man has become too great, then the most accidental stimulus suffices to summon into the world the “genius,” the “deed,” the great destiny. What does the environment matter, then, or the age, or the “spirit of the age,” or “public opinion”? (PN, 547)

And what about the “genius”?

There are two types of genius: one which above all impregnates and wants to impregnate; another which likes to be impregnated and gives birth. . . . These two types seek each other like man and wife, but they also misunderstand each other — like man and wife. (BGE, 184)

In what were some of his last words to himself, about himself, and to his perhaps future disciples and interpreters, in his book *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche wrote:

I know my fate. One day there will be associated with my name the recollection of something frightful — of a crisis like no other before on earth, of the profoundest collision of conscience, of a decision evoked *against* everything that until then had been believed in, demanded, sanctified. I am not a man. I am dynamite. — . . . I was the first to *discover* the truth, in that I was the first

to sense — smell the lie as lie. . . . My genius is in my nostrils. . . . For when truth steps into battle with the lie of millennia we shall have convulsions, an earthquake spasm, a transposition of valley and mountain such as has never been dreamed of. The concept politics has then become completely absorbed into a war of spirits, all the power-structures of the old society have been blown into the air — they one and all reposed on the lie: there will be wars such as there have never yet been on earth. Only after me will there be grand politics on earth. (EH, 126, 127)

He had become aware that he was a “time-bomb.” “Living dangerously,” which for Nietzsche meant thinking and writing dangerously, meant at the same time, that he needed to develop a *style* suitable to meet his requirements that he be misunderstood and also understood. There is little doubt that his unique style contributes as much to the undiminished power of his words to excite, provoke, tease and perplex as to the possibility of understanding the extraordinary explosive nature of his thoughts. As he remarked, “I don’t think thoughts, thoughts think me.” So, in the early pages of his *Beyond Good and Evil*, he teasingly wrote:

Everything deep loves masks; the deepest things have a veritable hatred of image and likeness. Might not *contrariety* be the only proper disguise to clothe the modesty of a god? A question worth asking. It would be surprising if some mystic hadn’t at some time ventured upon it. There are events of such delicate nature that one would do well to bury them in gruffness and make them unrecognizable. . . . Such a concealed one, who instinctively uses speech for silence and withholding, and whose excuses for not communicating are inexhaustible, *wants* and encourages a mask of himself to wander about in the hearts and minds of his friends. And if he doesn’t want it, one day his eyes will be opened to the fact that the mask is there anyway, and that it is good so. Every deep thinker needs a mask; even more, around every deep thinker a mask constantly grows, thanks to the continually wrong, i.e., superficial, interpretations of his every word, his every step, his every sign of life. — (BGE, 46, 47)

Perhaps Nietzsche is reaffirming the importance of the notion of the Pre-Socratics that the world is primarily characterized by the interplay of opposite forces. Perhaps recalling Aristotle’s “law of contradiction.” Or even the use of Aquinas’ “on the contrary.” In any case, *contrariety* suggests something contrary, or of opposite nature, character, direction or position. Opposite, contrary, or reverse imply that two things differ from each other in such a way as to indicate a definite kind of *rela-*

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