

The Historian and the Legacy of Nietzsche

Interpretation

Leg' ich mich aus, so leg' ich mich hinein:
Ich kann nicht selbst mein Interprete sein
Doch wer nur steigt auf seiner eignen Bahn
Trägt auch mein Bild zu hellerm Licht hinan.

Interpreting myself, I read myself in and enter:
I cannot be my own interpreter.
But all who climb on their own way
Carry my image, too, into the breaking day.

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

“Great men are inevitably our creation, just as we are theirs.”

Ernst Bertram, *Nietzsche*

Friedrich Nietzsche's impact upon the cultural and political sensibilities of the twentieth century has been altogether extraordinary. Since the 1890s his shaping presence has been felt continuously throughout Europe, the United States, and as far as Japan.¹ This study is an attempt

1. The documentation of Nietzsche's influence began early. See Gèneviève Bianquis, *Nietzsche en France* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1929); Guy De Pourtales, *Nietzsche en Italie* (Paris: Grasset, 1929). More recent studies of his impact upon national cultures include Patrick Bridgwater, *Nietzsche in Anglosaxony: A Study of Nietzsche's Impact on English and American Literature* (Leicester: University of Leicester Press, 1972); Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *Nietzsche in Russia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986); Gonzalo Sobejano, *Nietzsche en Espana* (Madrid: Gredos, 1967); David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England 1890–1914: The Growth of a Reputation* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1970). Nietzsche's impact throughout the Hapsburg Empire is clearly evident in Laszlo Peter and Robert B. Pynsent, eds., *Intellectuals and the Future in the Hapsburg Monarchy 1890–1914* (London: Macmillan, 1988). This influence was not limited to Western spheres. In Japan as early as the 1890s, Nietzsche functioned as a modernizing force, the most influential articulator of an individualism foreign to traditional Japanese culture (Hans Joachim Becker, *Die Frühe Nietzsche-Rezeption in Japan [1893–1903]: Ein Beitrag zur Individualismusproblematik im Modernisierungsprozess* [Wiesbaden: Otto Harassowitz, 1983]).

to chronicle and analyze the nature and dynamics of that influence in Germany where it was most dense, sustained, and fateful. Forty years ago Walter Kaufmann observed that Nietzsche was so much a part of German life that a serious study of the relationship would grow into nothing less than “a cultural history of twentieth-century Germany, seen in a single, but particularly revealing, perspective.”²

What follows is an attempt to furnish such a history. It will not, however, yield any single perspective. For the challenge and significance of the Nietzschean impulse resides precisely in its pervasiveness, in its manifold and often contradictory penetration of crucial political and cultural arenas. It would, indeed, be more accurate to speak not of one but many “Nietzschean impulses” that both influenced and reflected their changing times. Through these Nietzschean refractions we hope moreover to light up some of the more important patterns and directions of an emerging, volatile political consciousness, acutely aware of crisis and searching for novel ways to overcome it.

Nietzsche’s historical legacy must be understood as a product of the dynamic interaction between the peculiar, multifaceted qualities of his thought and its appropriators. This was always a relatively open-ended, reciprocal, and creative process³ that entailed selective filtering and constant reshaping of Nietzschean thematics according to divergent perceived needs.⁴ It was a fluid heritage that both affected, and was affected by, different circles of men and women responding to the concrete and changing circumstances of the Wilhelmine Kaiserreich, World War I, the Weimar Republic, national socialism, and beyond. Through these politically interested mediations Nietzsche was turned into a persistent and vital part of the fabric of national life.

This complex process can only be grasped by examining both its

2. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, [1950] 1974), 9. Nietzsche’s influence on modern thought and his role within the various academic disciplines will be discussed only inasmuch as they affected his broader impact upon German politics, culture, and identity.

3. For a statement on the general nature of reception processes see Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, intro. Paul de Man (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

4. On the dynamic nature of Nietzsche’s reception see the comments in Massimo Ferrari Zumbini, “Untergänge und Morgenröten: Über Spengler und Nietzsche,” *Nietzsche-Studien* 5 (1976), 219. Commentators have long been aware that the representation of Nietzsche’s philosophy was intimately related to the evolving history of Nietzschean interpretation itself. See the comments on this and Nietzsche’s timeliness in Gerhard Lehmann, *Die deutsche Philosophie der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kroner, 1943), 184.

thematic and chronological dimensions. In order to give shape and structure to that larger picture we have concentrated on group patterns and organized clusters of influence. The focus shall be on institutions, movements, and broad ideational currents. Individual attitudes and relationships to Nietzsche will be discussed only insofar as they illuminate more general dimensions of the Nietzsche legacy. We have had to sacrifice some of the complexity and creative intensity characteristic of so many of these individual encounters in order to retain a synoptic perspective.⁵ Clearly, any attempt to draw a composite portrait of these multiple appropriations within their unfolding ideological and historical contexts will entail selection. Given the density of the subject and the almost overwhelming wealth of available documentation, exhaustive treatment would be impossible, even undesirable;⁶ encyclopaedic comprehensiveness would amount to little more than a cataloging exercise that would obscure rather than highlight the key connections. In this work we hope to provide the kind of suggestive analysis that touches on and illuminates the range of pertinent and representative sources.

This book is animated by the conviction that, to understand the many influences, Nietzsche's work cannot be reduced to an essence nor can it be said to possess a single and clear authoritative meaning. The cultural historian cannot claim access to a privileged grasp of the unadulterated text by which all subsequent uses should be judged.⁷ There should be no set portrait of the "authentic" Nietzsche, nor dogmatic certainty as to his original intent. Only a *Rezeptionsgeschichte* sensitive

5. Numerous encounters mentioned in this book—Thomas Mann and Nietzsche, Oswald Spengler and Nietzsche, Gottfried Benn and Nietzsche, Carl Jung and Nietzsche, etc.—have received detailed analysis elsewhere. Here we have had to console ourselves with Nietzsche's admonitions concerning the limitations of such "infamous 'and'" studies. See his "Expeditions of an Untimely Man" in *Twilight of the Idols & The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1968), 76–77. Naturally, the scope and depth of Nietzsche's impact on individuals varied enormously. For some his influence was passing, others received him rhapsodically and enduringly, still others accepted him in a more tentative, fragmentary fashion. (Throughout this book I cite readily available translations of Nietzsche's works.)

6. For a measure of the size and scope of Nietzsche's reception within Germany only up to 1918 see the indispensable bibliographic guide by Richard Frank Krummel, *Nietzsche und der deutsche Geist*, 2 vols. (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974/1983). For a multilingual but far less comprehensive listing that goes beyond 1918 see the compilation by Herbert W. Reichert and Karl Schlechta, *International Nietzsche Bibliography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).

7. "The effects or structure of a text are not reducible to its 'truth,' to the intended meaning of its author, or even its supposedly unique and identifiable signatory" (Jacques Derrida, "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," in *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography Transference Translation*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell [New York: Schocken Books, 1985]), 29.

to the open-ended, transformational nature of the Nietzsche legacy will be able to appreciate its rich complexity.

To date, rather surprisingly, no such study has appeared. Instead the major post–World War II analyses have typically adopted essentialist approaches in which the history of the Nietzsche legacy is rendered either as a record of deviations from, or as faithful representations of, a prior interpretive construction of the “real” Nietzsche. These inevitably turn out to be moralistic, static histories in the apologetic or condemnatory mode, less interested in the actual processes of influence and dissemination than in judging the various appropriations.⁸

Walter Kaufmann’s extremely influential interpretation of Nietzsche and the Nietzsche heritage is an obvious example. He begins, for instance, with what he calls the “Nietzsche legend,” constructed by those authors he holds responsible for a pernicious “misconstruction”: the belief that Nietzsche was hopelessly ambiguous, lacked a coherent philosophy, and was subject to divergent interpretations. The makers of this legend—important Nietzscheans such as Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, Stefan George and his circle, Ernst Bertram, and Karl Jaspers—are analyzed not in terms of their political intentions, institutional settings, and historical contexts but only insofar as they contributed to what Kaufmann holds to be dangerous misuses and unequivocal misinterpretations. It should come as no surprise that the Nazi–Nietzsche relationship is discussed entirely in these terms, as one of out-and-out distortion and radical abuse of the master’s essentially antipolitical project.⁹ Georg Lukacs’s definitive Marxist reading is characterized by a diametrically opposed, but similarly essentialist, point of view. He portrays Nietzsche exclusively as the irrationalist spokesman of the post-1870 reactionary bourgeoisie and as an inherently proto-Fascist thinker, father to a nazism which, given the logic and dictates of historical developments, was inexorably bound to faithfully reflect his ideas.¹⁰

The philosopher is not only free to judge and evaluate—he is obliged to do so. Cultural historians, however, must be exceedingly wary of such exercises. It is the dynamic nature of Nietzsche’s influence, the

8. To be sure, the historian must be alert to overt invention, expurgation, selective editing, and outright falsification of Nietzsche’s texts; the notorious tampering activities of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche are well known.

9. See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 4. Chapter 10 exemplifies his treatment of the Nazi question.

10. Georg Lukacs, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981).

complex diffusion and uses of his ideas, not their inherent truth, falsity, or even plausibility that must lie at the center of historical analysis. Essentialized approaches tend to obscure rather than illuminate the historical record by pressing the relevant material into a preconceived mold. Whether or not they were justified, different interests and readers *did* come up with different interpretations. The task is to map their agenda, contexts, and consequences. Nietzscheanism, in one version or another, permeated many of the more important political and cultural strains of the twentieth century. No simple rendering of such influence does justice to this story. The cultural landscape and historical texture is simply too rich, open, and differentiated to bear the weight of these essentialist and unidirectional arguments.

Historians have been similarly culpable in reducing the Nietzsche legacy to either a reactionary or progressive impulse, even in the most recent studies. Restricted constructions of Nietzsche and Nietzscheanism have been pressed into the service of interested historical theses. In his work on the persistence of the old European order through 1914, Arno J. Mayer, for instance, has claimed that the primary function of Nietzsche's thought was to act as a rhetorical and ideological prop for late nineteenth-century aristocratic interests. This view presents Nietzscheanism as "ideally suited to help the refractory elements of the ruling and governing classes" articulate their antidemocratic, illiberal, and reactionary ideas.

Mayer blithely ignores the fact that those conservative forces embodying the ancien régime were almost inevitably anti-Nietzschean, instinctively opposed to Nietzsche's anti-Christian immoralist posture, and shocked and frightened by his radical questioning of authority and tradition. These circles were aware that Nietzsche spoke of a *new* "self-creating nobility" and that he intended an aristocratic ethos quite different from that of the hereditary classes and the landed gentry.¹¹ On the few occasions that such an alliance was attempted during Nietzsche's own lifetime he registered his disapproval in no uncertain terms:

In one particular case I once did get to see all the sins that had been committed against one of my books—it was *Beyond Good and Evil*—and I could

11. Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 290; see also 275–329. Mayer does not provide notes or documentary evidence to back up such assertions. For more discussion of the relationship between Nietzscheanism and ruling elites see chapter 4. On Nietzsche's reference to the "new nobility" see "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, [1954] 1968), 315.

make a pretty report about that. Would you believe it? The *Nationalzeitung*—a Prussian newspaper . . . —I myself read, if I may say so, only the *Journal des Debats*—actually managed to understand the book as “a sign of the times,” as the real and genuine Junker philosophy for which the *Kreuzzeitung* merely lacked the courage.¹²

A suitable rendering of Nietzsche’s thought could, no doubt, have performed such an upper-class function. The empirical record demonstrates, however, that in the case of the ruling classes (with only a few notable exceptions) this simply did not pertain. By and large, traditional elites continued to regard the philosopher as a dangerous and insane subversive. When the right did seriously adopt Nietzsche it was *after* World War I during the Weimar Republic, and then it was the work of mainly radical–revolutionary elements.

In his 1983 study, R. Hinton Thomas comes rather closer to the mark when he argues that Nietzscheans were typically dissidents and radicals estranged from the established social order.¹³ Far from representing the reactionary (or even the conservative) sectors of society they were characteristically emancipationist, progressive, and moved by humanistic concerns. Socialism, anarchism, feminism, the generational revolt of the young—these were all touched by the libertarian magic of Nietzsche.

While Thomas tells an important part of the story, his one-sided focus ultimately also skews the total picture.¹⁴ Only by means of significant omissions and special pleading can the pre-1918 Nietzscheans be regarded as wholly within the emancipatory camp. In any case, the crucial point is that it was never possible to subsume the Nietzsche legacy under either a simplistic “reactionary” or “progressive” heading. This is so not only because Nietzsche himself would have scoffed at such teleological labelings which, indeed, he helped to undermine. From the beginning Nietzschean thematics appealed to a remarkably wide range of political and cultural interests. Most were radical in nature, pursuing eclectic visions of cultural transvaluation and political re-

12. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Why I Write Such Good Books,” in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), 262.

13. R. Hinton Thomas, *Nietzsche in German Politics and Society 1890–1918* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).

14. Many parts of Thomas’s *Nietzsche in German Politics* are indeed valuable and have been incorporated here. Nevertheless, his focus on progressive and “liberational” elements is too partial and insufficiently nuanced to capture the complexity of the reception process. Just to cite one important example, Thomas does not even mention Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche and her crucial activities as head of the Nietzsche Archives at Weimar. Only ideological blinkers can account for this omission.

demption. But, as we shall see, while this quest included progressive circles it also characterized more unclassifiable interests: sectors of the avant-garde, diverse wings of the life-reform movement, and most importantly those who created the twentieth-century, German, postconservative, “revolutionary right.”

It is a central contention of this book that Nietzsche and the Nietzscheans were both makers and beneficiaries of a broader iconoclastic process that cut across and obscured such predictable left and right, progressive and reactionary distinctions.¹⁵ They also challenged simple dichotomies between modern and premodern, rational and irrational. In numerous and unexpected ways the Nietzscheans combined archaic with futuristic elements.

Because previous scholarship has generally assumed that Nietzscheanism possessed a kind of inherent political personality, it has bypassed the multiple motivations and complex processes according to which divergent interests actively adopted and re-clothed Nietzsche’s ideas. Nietzscheanism, like its master, was never monochromic. Critical scavenging of Nietzsche’s works and themes led divergent European-wide audiences to fuse him with a broad range of cultural and political postures: anarchist, expressionist, feminist, futurist, nationalist, nazi, religious, sexual-libertarian, socialist, *völkisch*, and Zionist. It was, indeed, through these fusions, that both Nietzsche and Nietzscheanism became a significant force. What follows therefore is a study in the dynamics of historical mediation which analyzes the diffusion, popularization, assimilation, rejection, and prismatic transfiguration of Nietzsche within changing historical and ideological contexts.

Why in the first place did Nietzsche exert such a unique protean fascination? Why was he able to attract so many generations of appropriators? Why was he regarded as so vital a force by so many groups? While much of the fascination lies in the particular interactions and scavengings, in the specific whims and dictates of selection, and in the concrete reworkings and diverse applications, the beginnings of an answer must surely be found in aspects of the Nietzschean corpus itself. Without its vast storehouse of suggestive themes, ideas, and categories or its scintillating language and rhetoric, no subsequent “Nietzscheanisms” would have been possible.

Nietzsche’s congeniality to so many contrary tendencies and interests

15. For a different viewpoint, on the erosion of these distinctions, see Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

and capacity to elicit open-ended responses reflected a central property of his post-Hegelian thought and method: his rejection of systematizers and systems and his determination to attack problems from a plurality of perspectives. "I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them," wrote Nietzsche. "The will to a system," he added, "is a lack of integrity."¹⁶ His aphoristic style reflected his rejection of fixed systems. Indeed, Nietzsche regarded style as a barometer of inner complexity. "Considering that the multiplicity of inward states is exceptionally large in my case," he wrote, "I have many stylistic possibilities—the most multifarious art of style that has ever been at the disposal of one man."¹⁷ Nietzsche's determinedly shifting narrative point of view clearly facilitated varied appropriations.

Equally important for the understanding of the history of Nietzsche's reception is what Walter Kaufmann has described as the philosopher's "sustained celebration of creativity," his call for the "creation of new values and norms."¹⁸ This influenced the nature and modes of appropriation because here was an openness in principle, an invitation to stake one's own path; the self-determining creative act was to provide the content and fill in the contours of the vision. Kurt Rudolf Fischer's remarks about the *Übermensch* are applicable to most other Nietzschean themes and categories:

We undercut Nietzsche if we wish to determine what the "Übermensch" is. Because I think it is part of the determination of the "Übermensch" not to be determined—that we shall have to experiment, that we shall have to create. Nietzsche puts emphasis on the creativity of man and therefore we should accentuate that the conception of the "Übermensch" is *necessarily not* determined. We cannot ask whether an author has confused the issue, or has presented us with a dangerous alternative.¹⁹

This openness constituted a crucial part of the attraction and Nietzscheans of every stripe responded to the call for dynamic self-realization, for completion of the vision.²⁰

Nietzsche's most widely read text, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, did, after all, demand this in an intoxicating manner.

16. "Maxims and Arrows," in *Twilight of the Idols*, 25.

17. Nietzsche, "Why I Write Such Good Books," in *Ecce Homo*, 265.

18. Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 414; see also p. 250.

19. See Kurt Rudolf Fischer's comments in the discussion of Robert E. McGinn's "Verwandlungen von Nietzsches Übermenschen in der Literatur des Mittelmeerraumes: d'Annunzio, Marinetti, und Kazantzakis," *Nietzsche-Studien* 10/11 (1981–1982), 611.

20. Exactly this spirit is evident in Martin Buber, "Ein Wort über Nietzsche und die Lebensworte," *Die Kunst im Leben* (December 1900), 13.

What is good and evil, *no one knows yet*, unless it be he who creates. He, however, creates man's goal and gives the earth its meaning and its future. That anything at all is good and evil—that is his creation.²¹

The rhetoric may have been scintillating but most Nietzscheans after all were human, all too human. Quite unable to perform acts of this lonely, creative kind they rushed into the consoling arms of protective political and ideological frameworks. Only thus could Nietzsche be made palatable, a fact that also could be rationalized in Nietzschean terms. As one devotee put it, the master demanded some kind of interpretation and completion if one was not to stand helpless before his creative chaos.²²

Nietzsche was thus subjected to diverse forms of hermeneutic institutionalization, a process in which projection rather than creation seemed to dominate. The detailed content of generalized notions such as the *will to power*, *Dionysianism*, *transvaluation of all values*, *eternal recurrence*, and *immoralism* could and were fitted into preexisting ideological preferences.

For all that, Nietzsche's capacity to act as a projective foil also inspired a number of independently important works. These typically transformed Nietzsche into a kind of mirror image, an affirmation of the appropriator's own conceptual and political predilections. Carl Gustav Jung's fascinating marathon *Zarathustra* seminar (1934–1939) is an excellent, but by no means a lone, example.²³ Jung simultaneously fashions Nietzsche into a prescient forerunner of the notion of the collective unconscious as well as a living example of its inner workings, a confirmation of Jung's own system of analysis. Such works are compelling documents in their own right. They too must be fitted into the dynamic history of Nietzsche reception.

Nietzsche's appropriators wore selective blinders; they did not have to buy the whole Nietzsche or nothing. Readers could and did pick critically from the extraordinarily rich variety of positions and perspectives contained in his work. Some emphasized while others totally disregarded the distinctions between the early, middle, and later writings. The texts thus varied in their salience and perceived value. Nietzsche the scathing critic, the relentless unmasker of truth and custodian of culture, could be distinguished from or combined with the great defender

21. Nietzsche, "On Old and New Tablets," in *Portable Nietzsche*, 308.

22. Heinrich Berl, "Nietzsche und das Judentum," *Menorah* 10 (1932), 59–69.

23. C. G. Jung, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1934–1939*, 2 vols., ed. James L. Jarrett (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

of life against the depredations of deadening intellect. The great stylist, lyricist, and poet was variously severed from or fused with his persona as immoralist, ironist, and nihilist and his work as transvaluator and ruthless grand legislator, prophet of the future.

Admirers, opponents, and critics alike agreed that one did not simply read Nietzsche; rather, as Thomas Mann put it in 1918, one “experienced” him.²⁴ In a uniquely intense and immediate manner, Nietzsche touched upon what contemporaries regarded as the key experiential dimensions of their individual and collective identity. From the beginning, canonizers and condemners alike tended to regard him as critic and maker of a new kind of European modernity characterized by the predicament of nihilism and its transvaluative, liberating, and cataclysmic potential. Although many of his opponents portrayed him as reactionary and antimodern, the dominant perception was that Nietzsche pointed dramatically forward, embodying a force that strived to go beyond the conventions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More than any other thinker, Nietzsche was the prism through which such existential issues could be addressed and a resource through which to express its changing meanings and forms. Upon reading the philosopher, the keen observer Gerhard Hilbert wrote in 1911 that Nietzsche was a seismometer of modern Europe’s spiritual and intellectual life, a stamping ground (*Tummelplatz*) and battlefield (*Schlachtfeld*) upon which its tensions, conflicts, and possibilities were played out.²⁵ Consciously or not, wrote another devotee, “we all carry part of him within us.”²⁶

This still-prevalent symbolic load inevitably entailed political mobilization. Even those who argued that any political appropriation constituted misuse and distortion of his thought understood that the sheer

24. Thomas Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, trans. Walter D. Morris (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), 13.

25. Gerhard Hilbert, *Moderne Willensziele* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1911), 19. This was a very common theme adjusted to suit the proclivities of the particular commentator. Thus, as one Christian critic interested in reinvigorating a tired Church put it, Nietzsche’s struggle against his own era and its Christianity was “the anticipation of our own struggle; Nietzsche’s inner tension, from which his spirit sprang, is our tension” (Theodor Odenwald, *Friedrich Nietzsche und das heutige Christentum* [Giessen: Alfred Toepelmann, 1926], 17, 23). Nietzsche was a kind of incarnation, “a personality of phenomenal cultural plentitude and complexity, summing up all that is essentially European” (Thomas Mann, “Nietzsche’s Philosophy in the Light of Contemporary Events” in *Thomas Mann’s Addresses: Delivered at the Library of Congress 1942–1949* [Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1963], 69). Most recently Ernst Nolte has revived this notion of Nietzsche as a personalized battleground in his *Nietzsche und der Nietzscheanismus* (Frankfurt am Main and Berlin: Propylaen, 1990).

26. Albert Kalthoff, *Zarathustrapredigten: Reden über die sittliche Lebensauffassung Friedrich Nietzsches* (Leipzig: Eugen Diederichs, 1904), 4.

expressivist power of the texts made the temptation well-nigh irresistible. As Georges Bataille—that most “pure” of all Nietzscheans—declared, Nietzsche’s thought constituted “*without any hope of appeal, a labyrinth*, in other words, the very opposite of the *directives* that current political systems demand from their sources of inspiration.” Yet, he regretfully conceded, the master’s teachings

represent an incomparable seductive force, and consequently quite simply a “force,” that politicians are tempted to enslave, or at the very least to agree with, in order to benefit their enterprises. The teachings of Nietzsche “mobilize” the will and the aggressive instincts; it was inevitable that existing activities would try to draw into their movement these now mobile and still *unemployed* wills and instincts.²⁷

Despite Nietzsche’s own repeated warnings—“I *want* no ‘believers’; I think I am too malicious to believe in myself; I never speak to masses.—I have a terrible fear that one day I will be pronounced *holy*”²⁸—the mythicisation and political appropriation of Nietzsche was inevitable. In the real world few would be able to pay heed to Zarathustra’s admonition that “only when you have all denied me will I return to you.”²⁹

All this, however, does not on its own explain why Nietzsche became a compelling force after 1890. For this we need a more focused historical perspective. Nietzsche’s newly achieved magnetism was at first linked to his perceived relevance as a critic of Wilhelmine society and as a prophet for its overcoming. Nietzsche articulated a growing disaffection for the pieties and conventions of Wilhelmine Germany. As the century drew to a close, the Kaiserreich provided fertile ground upon which Nietzscheanism could flourish, for it generated a welter of modern protest and reform movements.³⁰

This was closely related to a broader shift in thought and disposition which marked significant areas of European life from the late nineteenth century on. Nietzsche was an important contributor to, and a major beneficiary of, this shift. The broad diffusion of his work throughout Europe was inextricably bound up with it. Indeed, the very emergence

27. Georges Bataille, “Nietzsche and the Fascists” (1937), in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 185, 187.

28. Nietzsche, “Why I Am a Destiny” in *Ecce Homo*, 326.

29. Nietzsche, “On the Gift-giving Virtue” in *Portable Nietzsche*, 190.

30. Thomas Nipperdey, “War die wilhelminische Gesellschaft eine Untertanen-Gesellschaft?” in *Nachdenken über die deutsche Geschichte* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1986), 178–179.

of Nietzscheanism—of multiple Nietzschean tendencies—at the turn of the century cannot be understood outside of this broader context. Nietzsche’s heritage was integral to its critique of civilization and ongoing quest for personal, political, and cultural recovery. His tensions, categories, and sensibility both prefigured and mirrored central elements of this postliberal mood.

This late nineteenth-century development has long been recognized as a cultural and political watershed. Historians have variously labeled this “change in the public spirit of Europe,”³¹ as the revolt against positivism and materialism, as a generational rebellion against the liberal bourgeoisie, as the era of the discovery of the unconscious, and as the age of irrationalism and neo-Romanticism. Underlying and often accompanying these tendencies was the emergence of a full-blown modernism.³² This self-conscious, though painful, rupture with the past; its fundamental questioning of established limits, authority, and tradition; and its insistence on self-creation and the subjective dimension of meaning was similarly informed by obvious Nietzschean characteristics.

In its antipositivist, antiliberal, and antibourgeois zeal, many proponents of this mood increasingly emphasized youthful dynamism and movement for its own sake and regenerative expressivism rather than fixed and reasoned content. It was a sensibility that closely replicated what Nietzsche had written in 1882 about “the explosive ones” in *The Gay Science*:

When one considers how much the energy of young men needs to explode, one is not surprised that they decide for this cause or that without being subtle or choosy. What attracts them is the sight of the zeal that surrounds a cause—as it were, the sight of the burning fuse, and not the cause itself. Subtle seducers therefore know the art of arousing expectations of an ex-

31. This is the chapter title of George Mosse’s excellent analysis of that change in his *The Culture of Western Europe: The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 3d ed. (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1988).

32. Amongst many studies investigating these tendencies see H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890–1930* (New York: Random House, 1958). Chapter 2 is entitled “The Decade of the 1890’s: The Revolt against Positivism” and chapter 4, “The Recovery of the Unconscious”; see too Gerhard Masur, *Prophets of Yesterday: Studies in European Culture 1890–1914* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1966). For the most systematic view of this period as the age of irrationalism see Lukacs, *Destruction of Reason*. Lukacs viewed irrationalism and modernism as virtually identical, and was quite unwilling to grant the least productive and creative role to the latter. For a far more sympathetic view of modernism and its relations to the overall trends of the time, see Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980); Nipperdey, “War die wilhelminische Gesellschaft,” 179.

plosion while making no effort to furnish reasons for their cause: reasons are not what wins over such powder kegs.³³

Zeev Sternhell has argued that the themes and styles of this intellectual revolution paved “the way for the [Fascist] mass politics of our own century.”³⁴ The proto-Fascist sensibility was certainly an outgrowth of the larger revolt. Yet what Sternhell calls this “vast movement of thought” cannot be simply reduced to its Fascist moment. Like Nietzsche too, its potential for emancipation and positive creativity was as marked as and as interconnected with its more destructive and irrational moments.

It would, no doubt, be an exaggeration to equate this political-cultural revolution solely with Nietzsche. There were always other forces and influences at work. Nevertheless, he was its central inspiration. For contemporaries and later historians alike, this dissenting, rebellious disposition and its search for heightened experiences transcending the banalities of everyday life seemed inconceivable without Nietzsche.

No one had more acutely articulated belief in the fructifying power of myth. The words of the prescient twenty-seven-year-old as they appeared in 1872 in *The Birth of Tragedy* were emblematic of this later generation:

Without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity; only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement. Myth alone saves all the powers of the imagination and of the Apollonian dream from their aimless wanderings.³⁵

Elastic Nietzschean categories, concerns and emphases were easily integrated into the diverse interests invested in the shift.

Nietzsche’s vitalism was moreover a seminal influence on the post-1890 *Lebensphilosophie* fad and its claims for the primacy of intuition and life over stultifying reason.³⁶ Nietzsche too had dwelled on what was to become a central and continuing fin-de-siècle European preoc-

33. Nietzsche, “The explosive ones,” in *Gay Science*, 106.

34. Zeev Sternhell, “Fascist Ideology” in Walter Laqueur, *Fascism: A Reader’s Guide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 333–334.

35. *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 135.

36. Georg Simmel was the most famous representative of this trend. See chapter 4 in Lukacs’s *Destruction of Reason* for a particular, critical view of both *Lebensphilosophie* and Simmel. See too Max Scheler, “Versuche einer Philosophie des Lebens,” *Die Weissen Blätter* 1 (1913/14), 203–233; Heinrich Rickert, *Die Philosophie des Lebens: Darstellung und Kritik der philosophischen Modeströmungen unserer Zeit*, 2d ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922), 17ff.

cupation: the perception of pervasive decadence and degeneration and the accompanying search for new sources of physical and mental health. In an age increasingly interested in eugenics, his masculine and militant prescriptions for regeneration fell upon receptive ears. The notions of a higher, rejuvenated humanity and a more authentic, living culture partly shaped the period's obsessive interest in the new man and new society.

Carl Schorske has described the aftereffects of this new consciousness as nothing less than "post-Nietzschean culture." After Nietzsche, Schorske writes:

European high culture entered a whirl of infinite innovation. . . . Into the ruthless centrifuge of change were drawn the very concepts by which cultural phenomena might be fixed in thought. . . . The many categories devised to define or govern any one of the trends in post-Nietzschean culture—irrationalism, subjectivism, abstractionism, anxiety, technologism—neither possessed the surface virtue of lending themselves to generalization nor allowed any convincing dialectical integration into the historical process as previously understood. Every search for a plausible equivalent for the twentieth century to such sweeping but heuristically indispensable categories as "the Enlightenment" seemed doomed to founder on the heterogeneity of the cultural substance it was supposed to cover.³⁷

Their considerable variety notwithstanding, we need to make an initial generalization about Nietzscheans and the nature of their Nietzscheanism. For our purposes Nietzscheans were simply those who regarded themselves as significantly influenced by Nietzsche and sought to give this influence some concrete or institutional expression. Nietzscheanism never constituted one movement reducible to a single constituency or political ideology; it was rather a loose congeries of people attached to different social milieux, political movements, and cultural-ideological agendae.

The inchoate character of Nietzscheanism was not necessarily a weakness. Its penetrative strength lay precisely in the fact that it was not a clearly demarcated ideology backed by a central political apparatus. The Nietzschean impulse became a potent protean force precisely because it was diffuse and not organized. It required no formal commitment and possessed no authorized dogma. Its capacity to selectively influence and be reconstructed by various ideological and political constructs facilitated entry into an astonishing range of institutions. In practice it did not operate as an independent entity or as a fixed ideol-

37. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, xix.

ogy but rather as an infiltrative sensibility, a system of selective representations which could be grafted on to other systems.

To be sure, there was an attempt to provide Nietzscheanism with an official home: the Nietzsche Archives under the direction of Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche. While this controversial and internally disputatious place did, as we shall see, play a part in the creation and perpetuation of the Nietzsche heritage, it never became a normative or authoritative center. Nietzscheanism became a social and political force through annexations that took place outside of its purportedly official address.

Nietzscheanism thrived in eclectic and syncretistic contexts. Because it functioned by virtue of its implantation into other preexistent structures it was not constitutive or autonomous. It thus could perform a number of crucial functions: it acted variously as an inspirational solvent, leavener, catalyst, and gadfly.

Nietzscheanism was thus publicly effective to the degree that it was structured and mediated by other forces and ideologies. There was no naked nihilism here, no pure Nietzschean dynamic but always framing processes and casuistic exercises of accommodation. Nietzschean thematics required tendentious anchoring and domestication. Suitably nationalized (or socialized or Protestantized), its dynamic was placed at the service of goals which tended either to tame its radical drive, or to selectively deploy and unleash it.

How did such casuistry work? Although there were always gleanings and references in Nietzsche's texts that could lend these annexations a semblance of plausibility, it was clear that Nietzsche was not identical with any of the political appropriations made in his name. All his appropriators were obliged to explain how Nietzsche, despite obvious contradictions or even hostility, was in effect compatible with their favored position, perhaps even its most enthusiastic representative. Placing Nietzsche within any framework entailed a filtering system in which desired elements were highlighted and embarrassing ones deleted or downplayed. More significant were the exercises that sought to distinguish the real or the deep (German, Christian, socialist) Nietzsche from the merely apparent one. Nietzsche was constantly decoded and recoded; "correct" readings made to yield the desired underlying and "authentic" meanings and messages.

This work then is about the dense and changing relations between Nietzsche and German politics and culture. It is also about the complex and interconnected modalities of irrationalism and modernism and

Nietzsche's definitive complicity in both. I shall argue that these two dispositions, so central to twentieth-century consciousness, were never simply destructive and reactionary nor emancipatory and progressive. The dangers and positive possibilities could never be neatly severed. Germany's leading irrationalist and modernist, the inveterate Nietzschean Gottfried Benn, captured this in his 1933 remark that the "*irrational* means close to creation, and capable of creation."³⁸

Nietzsche was foundational to this specific consciousness of creation as radical and experimental secular freedom; in later discourse he became the central symbol of the post-Christian, postrationalist, nihilist predicament and its correlated, profoundly destructive, and liberating possibilities. This capacity for symbolically incarnating fundamental issues marked Nietzsche's reception throughout its history. It certainly characterized those stormy pre-World War I years in which the battle over Nietzsche's entry into German life took place. It was then that the attempt to either incorporate or banish the Nietzschean presence from German culture became acute. These struggles set the stage for his fateful entrance into German history.

38. Gottfried Benn, "Answer to the Literary Emigrants," in *Primal Vision*, ed. E. B. Ashton (New York: New Directions, 1971), 48.