

NIHILISM AND NAPOLEON: NIETZSCHE'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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As of today there is no treatment of Nietzsche's philosophy of history. Many have spoken of the singularity of Nietzsche's insights into history and culture, but no one, not even Heidegger, has reconstructed from the essays and aphorisms his overview of world history.

Nietzsche had made in the late 1880's plans for an extensive treatment of this topic. He had hardly begun when his career was cut off. In contrast to Spengler after him or Hegel before, he completed only a vague outline in what has been edited after his breakdown as the *Will to Power*.

This was unfortunate. No other philosopher in the modern era, including Hegel, had taken as a major issue cultural decadence. For the first time in philosophical literature, dates and places defined the meaning of tragedy, music, morals, feelings, sensations, prejudices, gestures, and language. And for the first time, the question was set forth: What is to survive the decay of the West?

This feel for history belongs to a century that was discovering pre-history through archeological digs, classical studies, and philology. The tremendous unearthing of the past was, however, seriously marred by Darwinian-Spencerian progress notions. Nietzsche had to proclaim the opposite: not progress, but disintegration was the proper thread of human history. Such a perspective was central to his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy*. It remained one of his fundamental intuitions. In his

masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he held that nihilism is the direction of history and the future of the West.¹ In the *Will to Power*, he said:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism. This history can be related even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade.

(WP, p. 3)

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to consider the on-going debate over the status of the *Will To Power*. R. S. Hollingdale has introduced in his *Nietzsche* very good biographic reasons for understanding that much of this incomplete work are thoughts Nietzsche rejected as unworthy of publication.² Walter Kaufmann, using other reasons, concluded the same in his *Nietzsche*.³ Both scholars believe all ideas in the *Will to Power* which are compatible with those found in the publication during Nietzsche's lifetime serve as further explanation of his philosophy, while those not found in the published works are to be taken as ideas Nietzsche entertained for a while, but then cast off as unrepresentative of his final thoughts. According to Hollingdale's research, these unrepresentative notions belong to the massive, disconnected notes and scribbles Nietzsche himself ordered destroyed before his collapse in early January 1889.⁴ For the sake of reconstructing the main outlines of his philosophy of history, we are going to draw heavily from ideas which make their appearance only in the *Will to Power* or in the *Nachlaß* of the Schlechta edition. We are assuming that ideas not incorporated into the published works are not necessarily unworthy of Nietzsche. We believe that much of the unpublished materials of the 1880's is more powerful in

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in *Werke*, Ed. Karl Schlechta, 3 vols. (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1980), II, 375. All references are from this edition except for the quotations in the body of this paper which are from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power* (WP) translated by Walter Kaufmann and R.S. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1969).

² R.S. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), pp. 26-72.

³ Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 424-58.

⁴ Hollingdale, p. 298.

speculation than the published essays and that many of his insights could not find a proper place for themselves in the published essays. Far from being explanatory footnotes, the *Will to Power*, however arranged and organized, moves toward the conclusion: all problems of the modern era resolve themselves into problems of history or time. The published works have the same implication, but in the *Will to Power* it is the final conclusion of everything. The corollary is: the sinking of Western Culture is not to be arrested, but to be accepted as an unavoidable fate, and even affirmed as a great destiny to be lived through. *Amor fati* remains the hallmark of sanity and strength, but in the disconnected *Will to Power*, "fate" means no longer the chaotic nature of things from which Zarathustra had deciphered the Eternal Return.⁵ This is to say, "fate" is not a concept which will transform the mentality of men, but events in one-directional time. Only in the *Will to Power* do we find the equating of fate and nihilism: the progressive ruin of high cultured man is the meaning of the cosmopolitan West and world history in general. From this a new idea of the Great Man or *Übermensch* emerges: a strong type will live through this awful disintegration: "Whoever gets away is as strong as the devil" (WP, p. 80).

No better example illustrates our contention than Nietzsche's definition of nihilism in the *Will to Power*, "All is in vain," the same as Ecclesiastes 1:2, *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas*. Two forms of this deep disappointment come down through world history. In the East, Nietzsche said, it appears as passive renunciation of worldly life with Buddhism as best expression. In the West, it is active destruction of culture and nature:

Nihilism does not contemplate the "in vain!" nor is it merely the belief that everything deserves to perish: one helps to destroy. —This is, if you will, illogical; but the nihilist does not believe that one needs to be logical. —It is the condition of strong spirits and wills, and these do not find it possible to stop with the No of "judgements": their nature demands the No of the deed. The reduction to nothing by judgement is seconded by the reduction to nothing by hand.

(WP, p. 18)

Heretofore, Nietzschean scholars like Kaufmann, Hollingdale, and Heller have followed the *Ecce Homo* account in thinking that the third

⁵ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, II, 466.

and fourth parts of *Zarathustra* stand as the high peak of Nietzschean originality and distinctiveness. The doctrine of Eternal Recurrence is taken as the solution to growing Western nihilism.⁶ But it is now time to question this traditional interpretation of Nietzsche and even of Nietzsche's own explicit statements on his earlier works.⁷ The quotation just cited already indicates that the *Will to Power* is going beyond *Zarathustra*. To make a distinction between East and West, and to understand nihilism as a function thereof, is already an implicit denial of *Zarathustra's* Eternal Return. That Western nihilism must express itself through action, in open destruction of physical reality, means that human history is a function of unconscious forms, not of concepts. This is not the place to discuss the deep contradiction that the Eternal Recurrence brings into Nietzsche's philosophy. Suffice it to say: the *Eternal Recurrence* is an answer to the old metaphysical Why of things; the incomplete *Will to Power*, the Where and When of things. *Zarathustra* presents contemplative knowledge and vision as the means for the strong to overcome modern decadence, while the *Will to Power* postulates action as the means. The former is doctrinal, the latter anti-doctrinal. Zarathustra does not demand of his disciples the expenditure of energy. The *Will to Power* does.

Closely connected with nihilism as Western or Eastern in form is the idea of willing as a form of factual reality—a form having a birth date and place of origin. It is generally recognized that Nietzsche's "will", unlike Schopenhauer's, signifies *aspects* of reality, and *not* reality. But the best of Nietzschean scholarship has not sufficiently recognized that this means again a distinction between events and a concept. In other words the *aspects* are alone real, factual, and significant, and the "will" is a concept not existing except as a principle of thinking.

This means that Nietzsche, rightly understood, cannot be a Nominalist, Cognitivist, nor Realist. In fact, the significance of his philosophy can only be ascertained by its fundamental non-association with any school of thought. Hence any study, like Danto's or Nehemia's, that tries to make sense of Nietzsche's anti-theoretical insights in terms of methods grounded in reflective understanding will be unsatisfactory. To approach

⁶ Cf. Erich Heller, *The Importance of Nietzsche*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 13f.

⁷ Cf. *Human, All too Human*, I, 464.

everything as a facet of history and time is to deny the validity of any theory and all theoretical methods.

Thus "willing" means in all Nietzsche's work the Yea-assertion of the lonely spirit in an ever-hostile environment. It means *Defiance* or *In spite of*. But it exists only in the flow of history as Dionysian-Apollonian conflict in Classical Antiquity or the heathen kernel of Lutheran Protestantism, or any configuration of the tragic feel for things in a universe of time.

Now, in the *Will to Power* Nietzsche became the first to argue that an individual or a nation can only understand the direction of its willing through an overview of its history. He said of himself:

It is only late that one musters the courage for what one really knows. That I have hitherto been a thorough-going nihilist, I have admitted to myself only recently: the energy and radicalism which I advanced as a nihilist deceived me about this fact. When one moves toward a goal it seems impossible that "goal-lessness as such" is the principle of our faith.

(WP, p. 18)

This unusual confession describes the cosmopolitan West as well: "Disintegration characterizes this time, and thus uncertainty: nothing stands firmly on its feet or on a hard faith; one lives for tomorrow, as the day after tomorrow is dubious" (WP, p. 40). Unlike Medieval or Renaissance times, modernity does not build for coming centuries.⁸

Despite all rhetoric to the contrary, the West and the Westernized nations are willing nihilism. Nietzsche's speculation on past, present, and future history centers on "willing nothing". The contradiction is evident: to will is to assert a future; to destroy is to have no future. It is too superficial to conceive of world history as a dialectic of the In vain and the In Spite of. Historical sense forced Nietzsche to accept both as moments of an organic unity. In the *Will to Power*, one can actually detect hesitation about this: "I sought a new center" (WP, p. 224). But destruction is the principle of the future and of life: "We have to be destroyers." Nietzsche's overall insight into history is thus:

Every major growth is accompanied by a tremendous crumbling and passing away: suffering, the symptoms of decline *belong* in the times of

⁸ Cf. *Human, All too Human*, I, 464.

tremendous advances; every fruitful and powerful movement of humanity has also created at the same time a nihilistic movement. It could be the sign of a crucial and most essential growth, of the transition to new conditions of existence, that the most extreme form of pessimism, genuine *nihilism*, would come into the world. *This I have comprehended.*

(WP, p. 69)

Nietzsche made the same point when characterizing time and movement:

To distinguish in every movement (1) that it is in part exhaustion from a preceding movement (satiety from it, the malice of weakness towards it, sickness); (2) that it is in part newly awakened, a long slumbering, accumulated energy—joyous, exuberant, violent: health.

(WP, p. 523)

This postulation of time, movement, and life as simultaneous build-up and break-down makes history completely illogical, something more akin to a dream or a nightmare wherein one suffers or inflicts untold cruelty. Such a notion both critics and friends of Nietzsche have entertained as hypothesis, but have always rejected because at bottom it means the flow of things is distantly related to uncontrollable madness. Blackham states clearly the standard criticism:

One can look down into the bottom of an abyss refusing the possibility of nihilism (as an irresolvable conflict between human valuations and cosmic facts) and try to show that it is not the truth; but if one is determined to will and to live the possibility of nihilism, then one no longer has any independent standpoint under one's feet.⁹

This criticism really means that we cannot suppose history, ourselves, or the world to be senseless because our minds make everything out to be valuable or sensible. Such criticism derives from the perspectives of previous ages. It does not take much today to recognize that history, as a study or as reality, cannot be approached, let alone governed by the critical clarity of mathematics or mechanics. To study history is to look at an abyss, to live history is to fall through it.

⁹ K. Blackham, *Six Existential Thinkers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 41.

Nietzsche was the first to accept without question that dreams or myths dwell at the core of every individual, race, culture, and civilization. All through his published works he assumed that fanciful visions—and not concepts, doctrines, nor programs—are responsible for dividing one people or one era from another. In the *Will to Power* this natural historical bent led to the understanding that vague “hereditary” images, obscure ideas of a semi-conscious myth, or primitive perceptions articulating tradition, prejudices, and customs are responsible for what is destroyed and what is set forth as a future.¹⁰

To realize that the *Will to Power* contains a unique philosophy of history, and is not just notes for the published work, we have to choose an example from the pages of history in order to understand the cogency of the two principles so far discussed: (1) creating-to-destroy and destroying-to-create, and (2) images of an unconscious or semi-conscious myth as the generators of world history.

Goethe was for Nietzsche the best representation of an attitude that soars above advancing nihilism. However, since the very name “Goethe” evokes for most just poesy, let us pick from Nietzsche's list Napoleon as a representative of a higher type, that is, a type whose mythical images destroy to create, and of whom Nietzsche said:

The higher species is lacking, i.e. those whose inexhaustible fertility and power keep up the faith in man. One should recall what one owes to Napoleon: almost all of the higher hopes of this century.

(WP, p. 19)

That Napoleon left every European state, army, and political party in the shape he envisioned for them, that his campaigns left the foundations for political events of the rest of this century and the next, that we all think about international policies today in the manner Napoleon first conceived of them—all this does not account for his greatness in Nietzsche's eyes. These accomplishments were actualized through the magic of raising “higher hopes”. Not Napoleon *per se*, but Napoleon as a symbol, an image awakening dormant impulses across the borders of Europe, even in non-Western nations, made an order of things which

¹⁰ *Posthumous Work*, III, 644f. Cf. *On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense*, III, 319f. and *Science and Wisdom*, III, 335 and 347. For English readers see WP, pp. 43, 285, 358, and 365.

has already proven to outlast all the planning of the heads of states in both world wars.

Napoleon once remarked that civilization was his enemy. Nietzsche translated this to mean: culture has civilization as its nemesis:

The high points of culture and civilization do not coincide: one should not be deceived about the abysmal antagonism of culture and civilization.

(WP,75)

Spenglerian readers will think of *The Decline of the West*, but "culture" means not periodic growth over eight centuries. For Nietzsche, it is an unpredictable discharge that synthesizes and dissolves both past and present to carve out a future. "Civilization" means: Stop! Nothing more! —Its spirit cuts off the past and present.

Before we can entertain why Nietzsche would think that a man like Napoleon represented an image which could shape events for a century or more, we have to understand how civilized man, on Nietzsche's showing, presents no image whatsoever, but instead the very absurd belief that time can be arrested. The distinguishing mark of a civilized man is his unquestioned assumption that *Truth* is more real than the movement from youth to senility, or more real than chance —the two forms of historical time.¹¹ As a phenomenon of the brain, *Truth* means a causal relation between facts is more real than the facts. Not events, but causal laws governing events, not individual entities, but universal abstractions are reality to civilized consciousness.¹² The old church father, monk, or mystic inside a temple complex insisted on the sovereignty of truth over time as much as today's bureaucrat or literary atheist. But the former were, despite their conscious efforts, under the spell of myths, and consequently were creative. The latter have achieved nihilistic skepticism: there are no gods, and no God, no beauty and no art, no reason for happiness nor pride—there is even no Truth: nothing is worthwhile, least of all the history that has brought us to this point. Truth—the denial of history and time—is the destroyer of all culture, even scientific culture.¹³

¹¹ Cf. *Posthumous Work*, III, 804.

¹² Cf. *Posthumous Work*, III, 476 and 490.

¹³ *Posthumous Work*, III, 774 and 985.

In contrast, a man like Napoleon does not perceive events causally. To communicate he thinks as everyone else, but he assumes events essentially in the forms of time, either as destiny or as accident. In this respect he is closer to very primitive man than to highly civilized man. In Nietzsche's language, facts and situations are not sensed *sub specie aeterna*, but *sub specie mutabili*, that is, not as abstractions, but opportunity for action—for what can and what cannot be achieved. Napoleon represents the kind that does not respond to events: he did not look, wait, and then react. Rather any one moment offered itself as possible enhancement of a vaguely perceived future.

From the beginning to the end, the 1799 *coup d'état* of 18 Fructidor, the 1799 of 18 Brumaire, the 1815 return from Elba and Waterloo—this sequence is only comprehensible from the feeling of "now or never", a feeling for the unique and non-repeatable, which is a sense for when and where the next federation of power is to gather.

Even in Nietzsche's first major credit, *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is clear that the novel directions of culture break through frozen civilization when temporality shoves out of the way the mode of life grounded in causal awareness. And in the same, it is taken for granted that this happens when a mythical dream cryptically inspires humanity to run dangerous risks.¹⁴ In *Zarathustra* and the two subsequent works the message is: for an "image not to remain as image" but to continue to flow into action, all the demands of truth-and-falsity, right-and-wrong, cause-and-effect have to be subordinated or eliminated.¹⁵ In the *Will to Power*, world history becomes finalized as a conflict of the mythical side of the mind with the non-mythical. Unlike Hegel's philosophy of history, war, terror, and evil are not derivatives of the clash of mythical ideas. They are derivatives of the will-to-form and will-to-formlessness.

Nietzsche described the myths of Classical Greece, but not the Napoleonic myth. For the sake of content, let us say that at least in part Napoleon symbolized the reemergence of Charlemagne and Louis XIV, that is the French idea that makes science, state, administrative bureaucracy, ecclesiastical groups, clubs, royal dynasty, art, and courtly manners dependent upon the patronage and the grace of a single man. This or something like this generates the movements that eventually brought the West to where it is now. The *Will to Power* is emphatic when it says that

¹⁴ Cf. *The Birth of Tragedy*, I, 125ff.

¹⁵ *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, II, 379.

such unclear ideas and images are the real factors of history.¹⁶ Clear and distinct ideas are never the criteria of real life. On the contrary, the more vague the more powerful. A great man, a man of a higher type, to use Nietzschean language, is a man of destiny, time, and future, which means a man who, despite profound misunderstanding of himself, is driven forward not by the illumination of causal consciousness, but by dark cravings. "Will to future" and "myth" mean the same thing.

With this we can explain the quotation that some critics have taken as a sign of Nietzsche's coming insanity:

The Revolution made Napoleon possible: that is its justification. For the sake of a similar prize one would have to desire the anarchical collapse of our entire civilization. Napoleon made nationalism possible: that is its excuse.

(WP, p. 469)

Hollingdale defends Nietzsche by saying he rejected such "experimental" notions in the end and would not have them published. Kaufmann argues that such "hyperbolic formulations" are made to prove more significant principles.¹⁷ But we are going to accept the statement at face value, and in line with what has been presented here, interpret it accordingly.

The anarchy of Paris in 1798 offered the opportunity to transform a nation despiritualized by utopian schemes into a megapolitan empire. Napoleon represented the first moment, the most vital moment, in the rise of Western imperialism when France was metamorphosized from an aristocratic-agrarian nation into an instrument to organize urban societies in West Europe. Unlike any of the figures following in France and other Western nations, each bringing out their own idea of world organization, Napoleon's seizure of power did not bring on deep pessimism. Rather it uplifted the West in a way never since repeated. The "Napoleonic myth", whatever its final meaning, made the hands in the factories move fast and the soldiers on all the battlefields brave.

Thus, a great man is not great because he can move a herd of people. An essential item in Nietzsche's undeveloped philosophy of history

¹⁶ *Posthumous Work*, II, 860. For English readers see WP, p. 285.

¹⁷ Hollingdale, p. 271 and Kaufmann, pp. 314-16.

is the claim that princes, statesmen, geniuses, and generals are *not* levers and causes of great movements:

The "higher nature" of the great man lies in being different in incommunicability, in distances of rank, not in an effect of any kind, even if he made the whole globe tremble.

(WP, p. 968)

Dante, Beethoven, and Goethe did not strive to make others feel, think, and act in some preconceived manner. Likewise, the sweeping changes Napoleon introduced were more than anything else a collaboration of destiny and accident. He evoked an idea unconsciously shared by the Europe of 1790-1815.

The charge of immature hero worship by Santayana and others has no validity as far as the *Will to Power* is concerned. Nietzsche would include Napoleon when he said: "Almost every man is decadent for half his life" (WP, p. 460). In the *Gesammelte Werke* of the Musarion edition, we read Nietzsche saying: "For Napoleon was like such a paper eagle. When one removed the lights from behind him, he was only miserable paper and was put into a nook."¹⁸

The same point applies to critics who link Napoleon to Hitler and Stalin. The latter made the globe tremble, but they were not of a "higher nature", meaning: they did not proceed in their horror from an unconscious, incommunicable idea; and therefore, from a Nietzschean perspective, their position in the flow of events is not as long-lasting as is customarily believed. World history produces giants and dwarfs, but it is not generated by them.

Against Nietzsche, it can be said: ends do not justify means—great man or not, Napoleon was terrible. On this, the *Will to Power* says:

Such men as Napoleon must come again and again and again and confirm the belief in autocracy of the individual: but he himself was corrupted by the means he had to employ and lost noblesse of character. If he had had to prevail among a different kind of man he could have employed other means; and it would thus not seem to be a necessity for a Caesar to become bad.

(WP, p. 531)

¹⁸ Quoted in Kaufmann, p. 314.

In other words, for a great end, the end justifies the means. But the question of morality is irrelevant. A philosophy of actual history must hold that "morality does not exist" (WP, p. 152). A dream forming and governing events over centuries is neither true nor false, neither good nor evil, i.e. open to causal analysis. And Truth is not a dream. Nietzsche scratched down a remark on this issue from Stendhal's *Vie de Napoléon*: "An almost instinctive faith with me that every powerful man lies when he speaks and the more when he writes" (WP, p. 293). This is to say, a "great man" invents. To destroy-to-create ultimately signifies: better a great error than a small truth, better great failure than small success. To will coming centuries has nothing to do in the long run with achieving success in the next year, decade, or generation. To will the future means: "In spite of a victory or catastrophe, I will make a mark." Only this attitude is the sign of healthy instincts.

There is one final twist to all this:

A high culture can stand only upon a broad base, upon a strong and healthy consolidated mediocrity.

(WP, p. 462)

To arrive at the In vain when critical consciousness finds most everything in its scope insignificant, a great deal of mediocrity must level the vertical order of previous culture. After myth-making eras, the *tedium vitae* always sets in. But with a long passage into boredom, mythical demands are again felt in the struggle for man. Too much security and repetition are conditions for overthrowing everything if necessary to live sublimely.

It appears from our analysis that Nietzsche's grandiose perspective of history is a spiral of two separate strands: nihilism and greatness, causality and time, decadence and sublimity, trivial details and latent dreams. They move around each other and grow out of each other. The predominance of one indicates an eventual assertion of the other. This, we believe, is the meaning of another fragment: "shifting of the center of gravity, of every great growth, who bears it, why it must now be tremendous" (WP, p. 544).

This leads us to think that such a view is moving to the ultimate conclusion: man is an impossibility. Though never said in so many words, it is as though the In vain of things is an imperceptible acknowledgement of man as tragic—and all things as tragic. Man wants to live,

but he cannot. The strange myths that drive cultured eras to their heights are an acceptance of this fate. The one moment yields to despair, the other builds on it. For only in the overall no-win situation of things can man realize magnificence.

No doubt all this challenges both Nietzsche's friends and his detractors. So far Nietzschean scholarship has relied too heavily upon previous philosophy to interpret his philosophy. The result has been virtual blindness to the vital meaning of the *Will to Power*. If one is to take this work on its own showing, one has to go beyond literature. One has to have a profound acquaintance with history. Hard as it is for many to accept, Napoleon is more real than any truth, logical form, or ethical theory. To comprehend reality as history is to present philosophical learning with its greatest challenge. If this challenge is not met, then our philosophical learning is as good as dead.

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