

The mind of a European romantic

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THE MIND OF A EUROPEAN ROMANTIC

It may come as a surprise to many that the philosopher Wilhelm Friedrich Nietzsche was a Swiss citizen for most of his life. There was nothing very "Swiss" about his philosophy! However the setting of the Alps was a powerful ferment for his ideas, as Geoffrey H. Buchler shows in the following essay.

There is an evergreen quality in the writings of some authors which makes their work defy the change of literary taste. It is not alone the "what they say" but the "how they say it", which gives them that immortal attribute. Such a writer was Nietzsche. One may not easily accept some of his philosophical ideas in this atomic age, one may not readily embrace his anti-Christian concepts, but those who care above all for a readable philosopher will return to him again and again. His style, astonishing in its vivacity, was tremendously alive and profoundly poetical. There was so much of the "Engadine" adventurer reflected in it and no matter what the subject was, it was never dull or commonplace.

From Romanticism to Existentialism

In many ways Nietzsche the late-comer to Romanticism, attempted to conquer his own romantic inclinations. Whilst at Basle the story of his intimate friendship and adoration of, and later apostasy from, Richard Wagner is legend. He similarly came to turn his back on Schumann's music, likening it to a lake full of "limonade gazeuse". The prevailing preoccupation with history, another legacy of Romanticism, also aroused his criticism since he feared that it might paralyse spontaneous cultural development. Nor had he anything but scorn for the pretensions of imbued nationalism, especially of the new German brand which he never ceased to castigate. There was even a sense in which he was justified to call himself "the last anti-political German". It is thus that, for all his protestations, Nietzsche may indeed be said to have composed the epilogue to Romanticism, an epilogue



(Radio Times)

in which both grandeur and tragedy of the movement reached symbolic heights. As far as modern German literature and thought are concerned, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that they would not be what they are if Nietzsche had never lived. Name almost any poet, any man of letters, any philosopher, who wrote in German during the 20th century and attained to stature and influence — name Rilke, Kafka, Stefan George, Thomas Mann, Ernst Jünger, Heidegger or Jaspers — and you name at the same time Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche.

Like Lord Byron, whom Nietzsche admired, the impact of his personality appeared even greater, at first, than that of his writings. A generation younger than the youngest Romantics, Nietzsche, who was born at Röcken near Leipzig in 1844, caught up with his elders amazingly early in life. When the chair of classical philology fell vacant at the University of Basle in 1868, he was appointed to the post at the unprecedented age of 24. His first book, "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music" (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Music*, 1872) dedicated to Wagner, won the composer's unreserved admiration although it was otherwise rather sceptically received. As in most of his writings uni-

versal recognition came posthumously, and the book proved to be, in the words of the great British classicist F. M. Cornford, "a work of profound insight which left the scholarship of a generation toiling in the rear".

The ramblings of an outsider

Nietzsche remained at Basle for 10 years. They were years of great mental development accompanied by a considerable deterioration in his health, which broke at last in 1879 and forced him into retirement. During his Basle period, aside from his participation as an ambulance orderly in the Franco-Prussian War (he was ineligible to take the field as a combatant since he had become a Swiss national) the publication of two more works of prime importance was achieved: "Untimely Meditations" (*Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, 1876) and the first two parts of "Human, All Too Human" (*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, 1878). Now, in 1879 there began for him a restless decade of supra-Byronic mobility with travels from place to place, through Italy, Southern France and Switzerland, interspersed with occasional journeys to Germany and relieved only by longer and recurring sojourns in Nice, Genoa and the Haute Engadine. In the latter region the village of Sils-Maria, situated between the lakes of Sils and Silvaplana not far from St. Moritz, "a wondrous mixture of the mild, the grandiose and the mysterious", as he called it, became his much loved summer residence. This was a spot abounding in agrestic charm and beauty which he visited each year until 1889, and where he could indulge in his habit of walking and meditating for hours on end.

From 1880 onwards chronology becomes a secondary question, for until his collapse in 1889 Nietzsche's life was of a remarkably uniform nature. So far as he was able, and except for brief interludes, he separated himself from the ordinary course of everyday life. His one apparently serious attempt at a love affair was a failure, and although he valued friendship as one of

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the highest virtues, he was unable to retain a true friend. With the pension from the University of Basle he was just able to support himself in a modest way and to pay for the publication of his books.

After publication of "The Dawn" (*Morgenröte*) in 1881, Nietzsche felt himself ready for a major effort and determined to write two books which would be the culmination of his work as a philosopher. The former should be in some measure a continuation of "The Dawn" and "Human, All Too Human", in a more intellectual form; and the latter should be a celebration of himself and his thought in a poem of epic scope and proportions. The former book was "The Gay Science" (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*), the latter "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" (*Also sprach Zarathustra*).

Nietzsche recalls that the first note for "Zarathustra" was made during August 1881: "I was walking one day through the woods alongside Lake Silvaplana", he writes in "Ecce Homo" (posthumously published in 1908) "and I stopped beside a mighty rock that towered up like a pyramid, not far from Surlej. It was then that the idea came to me". He goes on to say that if he calculates from that day forward to February, 1883, when the book was begun, he could conclude that the period of gestation covered 18 months which, "might suggest, at least to a Buddhist, that I am in reality a female elephant!" In seeking to describe the emotion that accompanied its composition Nietzsche writes: "Has anyone at the end of the 19th century any distinct notion of what poets of a stronger age understood by the word inspiration? The idea of revelation in the sense that something suddenly and with unspeakable certainty and purity

becomes visible, audible, something that profoundly convulses and upsets one, simply describes the fact. One is seized by an ecstasy whose fearful tension is sometimes relieved in a storm of tears, while one's steps now involuntarily rush along, now involuntarily lag . . . one no longer has any conception of what is imagery, what metaphor; everything presents itself in the readiest, the truest and simplest means of expression . . . This is my experience of inspiration. I do not doubt that I should have to go back thousands of years before I could find another who could say to me: 'It is mine as well.'"

Nietzsche's most widely acclaimed book, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", is hardly meant to be read as a philosophical treatise; for it is not systematic, contains no arguments and attempts no proof. It is the brilliant outpouring of a mould, voicing with lavish imagery its moods, its prejudices, its hatreds, its desires and its yearnings.

The fight to keep a vision

"Zarathustra" was originally planned in three parts. Part One was written at Rapallo during February, 1883; Part two at Sils-Maria in June of the same year, and part three, at Nice in January, 1884. In the transition between these three parts, Zarathustra progresses on a spiritual odyssey through the modern world, from absolute rejection to absolute acceptance. Part four was written more slowly than the preceding three; at Zurich, Mentone and Nice during the autumn and winter of 1884-5. On the whole it is composed on a lower level of inspiration than the beginning of his book, the ending being somewhat inconclusive. Of the two further sections that were to follow, nothing ever came of their hasty composition. In fact, in Part six, Zarathustra was to have met his death but in what manner Nietzsche could never definitely decide. The Zarathustra mood was over and the theme was played out.

Nietzsche then contented himself with producing elucidations and elaborations of certain ideas in his books, "Beyond Good and Evil" (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, 1886) and "Towards a Genealogy of Morals" (*Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 1887). When this was concluded, he soon set about planning a book, "The Revaluation of All Values", besides which Zarathustra would seem merely an introductory poem, but the work was never written, although, when "The Antichrist" (*Der Antichrist*, 1888) was published, as an essay of about 1,000 pages, it was described as the first part to the "Revaluation". Instead of pursuing this main task, Nietzsche returned to the attack on Wagner with his last literary labour, "Nietzsche contra Wagner" squandering further ideas in his short works, "The Twilight of the Idols" (*Götzen-*

dämmerung, 1888) and his autobiography "Ecce Homo", 1889.

From the Uebermensch to Nazism

Within a few weeks of completing this autobiography, Nietzsche became insane and spent the rest of his days, "in geistiger Umnachtung", in a condition of mental and physical paralysis, until his death in 1900. Whether it was a case of the Devil claiming his own or more probably a syphilitic infection, Nietzsche had attempted during his last months of sanity to overcome his debilities with astonishing strength. But when the superhuman task he had set himself started to get out of hand; when the mountain of notes he was preparing failed to fall into any specific order, then his will succumbed.

This anti-God, anti-Christian, pagan, writer and university lecturer was to suffer posthumously yet another blemish resulting from the many-sidedness and unmethodical approach of his writings. This was the "Nazification" of Nietzsche's "Uebermensch"; to make his ideal of a "super-race" appear as a nationalistic cause. Fortunately, and only in time, was this corruption of Nietzsche's writings seen as a total "impasse" to his glorification, which was soon to re-emerge.

Today, it seems that the repercussions of his thought will continue to be felt for a very long time to come. As such, it is improbable that any man could have accomplished the task Nietzsche set himself which was nothing less than a complete reorientation of the European mind. If the final effect of his life's work is one of failure, it is failure only by the impossible standard Nietzsche set himself. Yet on a more human plane his work is the triumph of a probing, analytical intellect; it illuminated dark corners, it shed light where there was no light before. At the same time it gives delight: an aesthetic and intellectual delight prepared from a recipe that Nietzsche alone knew. "No German has ever united so powerful an intellect with so fine a sensibility", said Heidegger of Nietzsche. Undoubtedly, amongst the many tall rocks between Sils and Surlej echoes still to this day the proof of that statement:

"O Mensch! Gib acht!

Was spricht tiefe Mitternacht?

'Ich schlief, ich schlief —

aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht:

Die Welt ist tief,

und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.

Tief ist ihr Weh.

Lust—tiefer noch als Herzeleid:

Wir spricht: Vergeh!

doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit:

will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!"

("Thus Spoke Zarathustra")