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[Introduction to] Nietzschean Narratives

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Introduction: The Philologist's Stories in the Postal Age

Friedrich Nietzsche is usually portrayed as having lived an intensely solitary and painful life; much of the pain is said to be that of loneliness itself. Indeed, Nietzsche tells us as much himself, in writings such as *Ecce Homo* or in the operatic cries of despair that appear so frequently in his letters. Even in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, however, a distinction is made between solitude and loneliness in which the former is not necessarily a deficiency but may be lived as a rich opportunity in the adventure of coming to terms with one's very own thoughts, as Zarathustra's solitude is the condition for his struggle with the thought of eternal recurrence. Whether Nietzsche himself could always distinguish his own solitary pursuits (including Zarathustra's confrontation with that "most abysmal thought") from a more mundane loneliness may be doubted. We expect, and Nietzsche documents it for us in all the usual ways, that living apart from family and friends, having no settled formal occupation, and having no fixed dwelling must produce an acute sense of loss and disconnection (if that mode of life is not simply the acting out of such a sense). Perhaps Nietzsche was the first truly homeless philosopher, imposing an exile on himself that we might contrast with Socrates' refusal (in the *Crito*) to save his life by leaving Athens.

Yet in another perspective Nietzsche's life of constant travel and writing may appear a little less strange and more in keeping with the culture of which he had become an emblem. Nietzsche was never in hiding; his solitude was never as absolute as that of Zarathustra or of the hermit he meets who lives so far from men that he has yet to hear that God is dead. Nietzsche was always hooked in to the universal systems of transportation and communication that provided what we might think of as the material foundations for being a "good European" and for posing the question "who will be the lords of the earth?" Always on the move, Nietzsche was a close student of railway timetables, seeking the most efficient routes, connections, and opportunities for occasional meetings with friends and colleagues who travelled the same circuit. His correspondence was prolific and diverse; its sheer quantity, together with the fact of its distribution to its recipients, suggests a writer energetically disseminating his work on all fronts. Much of the correspondence itself is concerned with travel (where to go, whom to see, how to get there), and with publishers (how many copies, what kind of paper, when will it appear, and will there finally be any royalties).

It would be possible to develop a portrait of Nietzsche then as the philosopher of the postal age, that is, of the era in which the universality of communication and transportation are taken for granted. In this picture we would be reminded that the mountains Nietzsche climbed were never very far from his hotel or *pension*, which was itself convenient to the railway and serviced by the postal system. Such a story might begin to bring out some of the similarities between Nietzsche and many modern academics. Both are indefatigable note-takers and writers; having little time for face-to-face contact with friends, they rely instead on letters, memos, and messages that maintain their circulation in the loop of signs.

Nietzsche sometimes seems to have asked himself what sort of writing was appropriate to the age of travel; in a long draft of a preface for *Daybreak* he explains how such writings are appropriate for busy modern men whose journeys might provide a break in their routines. The reader ought to read just a few sections at a time; the very fragmentation and discontinuity of the experience will serve as an antidote to the order enforced by the routines of career

and daily life. In such Nietzschean aphoristic strategies some readers see the marks of a much larger project of radical pluralization, a praxis of writing directed toward shaking and decentering the traditional fixed points—notably God, substance, and soul—of the philosophical and religious tradition. This postal or post-modern Nietzsche would also be exhibiting the fact that the postal system and the railway system themselves are not completely closed and efficient, so that every letter and every train may fail to arrive at its destination. Multiple interpretations of all signs and messages are always available, and this is notoriously true of Nietzsche's aphorisms which can be read as junctions in an indefinitely ramified network. Not only can varying sense be ascribed to a single aphorism but the "same" aphorism will vary depending upon whether it is a point of departure, way station, or terminus with regard to others.

In many ways Nietzsche's thought is the product of an intersection that one could hardly have anticipated between the work of philology and the nascent global network just described. That Nietzsche began his intellectual life as a *Wissenschaftler*, specifically as a scientific philologist, is often overlooked; and philology is not just an accidental point of departure for Nietzsche but a touchstone to which he often recurs, explicitly or implicitly reminding his readers that he is an "old philologist" who demands the greatest attention and perspicacity in the reading of texts. Such care is laced with suspicion, the sort of suspicion that led to the Homeric problem and to the Biblical scholarship of the young David Friedrich Strauss and to Julius Wellhausen's reading the Hebrew scriptures as a palimpsest of revisions, amalgamations of disparate texts, and forgeries. Philology was doing to the literary and cultural tradition what the postal system was doing to the presumed stable identities of work, residence, character, and the customary shared understandings of daily life. Nietzsche's philological suspicions extended from the *loci classici* (Homer, the Bible) to those narrative "texts" of philosophy, religion, and folk wisdom by which we attribute meaningful trajectories to the arts and sciences, to nations, to the development of culture itself, and on which each one of us tends to model an ideal story of the life he or she is living.

As a philologist Nietzsche is always suspicious of the claims to originality, authenticity, and exclusivity accompanying the grand stories or metanarratives that would provide a final accounting of first and last things. The task of the studies that follow is to show, however, that such suspicion does not exclude narrative strategies, styles, or views of the world from Nietzsche's work. The alternative to the traditional stories, from the Bible to Hegel, is not simply an intensive immediacy of the moment; that move would simply reconfirm the metaphysics of presence, shifting its burden back from the fully achieved and transparent ends of teleological narrative to the phenomenological deliverance of the given. From a Nietzschean perspective the metanarratives of Hegel and the turn to immediate experience in the philosophy of the early twentieth century (including, for example, Edmund Husserl and Bertrand Russell) represent different variations on a common quest for absolute certainty. Nietzsche proposes a way around and out of this oscillation by describing and exemplifying a battery of narrative forms and styles. To see that such styles are included among the many that Nietzsche claimed to deploy, we should recall his praise for the Greek attention and dedication to *surfaces*. After many years of commentary and criticism that vilify or celebrate the Nietzschean fragment or aphorism, there is a need to assert the value of a certain *superficial* reading which will recall such things as these: *The Birth of Tragedy* offers a continuous picture of Western history from earliest Greece to the cultural politics of 1870; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* tells us the story of a central figure, struggling with the great gift and terrible burden of an uncanny teaching; *The Antichrist* undertakes a rethinking of the exemplary Western narrative and a *fortiori* of narrativity as we know it; and *Ecce Homo* offers an account of the "life and work"

of the transvaluator of all values. This is but a partial catalogue of the narratives that appear on a superficial reading of Nietzsche. One might begin to expand it by mentioning *Toward a Genealogy of Morals*, which Michel Foucault has credited with founding a new approach to what has been called history; or *On the Future of Our Cultural Institutions*, Nietzsche's most conventional exercise in storytelling despite the fact that it lacks a conclusion. The superficial identification of these stories as stories should not preclude our reading them as well with the care and suspicion of the old philologist, with an eye to the laws and structures which they both assume and transgress.

The readings I will be suggesting of these texts are not innocent, and I have attempted to acknowledge at least some of my debts to Nietzsche's other readers within various traditions. The activity of reading is complicated here by the fact that Nietzsche is, we might say, always already narrativized. His texts consistently offer the reader the temptation to relate them to the enigmatic "Mr. Nietzsche," and few have avoided that seductive ploy. But even when Nietzsche's person is apparently put into the background, as in Heidegger's monumental work, the entire thematics of reading are determined by two stories. One is the magisterial account of the career of onto-theology from Plato's earliest formulation of the metaphysics of presence to its tragic denouement in what Heidegger takes to be Nietzsche's doctrine of the will to power. This larger story both is empowered by and requires a smaller scale story about Nietzsche, according to which his published works were simply a foreground to the system towards which he was working. When Heidegger was excluded from the Nietzsche Archive during the time in which Germany's coming defeat in the second world war came to seem probable, he showed much more concern for the first, because from his point of view he was being told that he could not finish his work on the track of the biggest story of all. Heidegger's anxiety indicates an uneasy conjunction of the desire to make some coherent order (often an explicitly narrative one) out of Nietzsche's writing and thought with the strategy of presenting the form of his writings as fragmentary and chaotic. The only way to render Nietzsche relatively consistent, we are implicitly told, is to go beyond the alleged accidents of the verbal text. The pursuit of a certain kind of order *requires* that there be a disorderly situation to be straightened out. In this way the philosophical interpretation of Nietzsche invokes those very ancient hermeneutical categories of form and matter which, we might recall, are put into question by the thinker himself.

We may not yet be in a position to say what the consequences of a more superficial reading of Nietzsche will be. *If* in his case there is indeed an operative principle requiring that the consistency and integrity of thought be inversely proportional to the orderliness of his writings, then we could anticipate that a high degree of the latter would lead us to view the thought as amorphous and incoherent. *In formulating such an interpretation we must take care not to confuse the thought of fragmentation or incoherence with a fragmentary or incoherent thought; if Nietzsche sees the unitary self or soul as a fiction, he may do so quite cogently. But on a still deeper interpretive level questions ought to be raised about the principle that sees philosophical thought and style as having to compete in Nietzsche's case (or in others) for the same limited amount of scarce goods, whether conceived as order, coherence, richness of implication, or significance within (or against) a tradition. It is also likely that in the wake of Nietzsche and the radical questioning of philosophical modernity by thinkers like Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida, we are not yet in a position to say what a genuinely persistent or coherent thinking is or in what forms we ought to expect it to manifest itself.*

In these readings of a few of Nietzsche's narratives, I would like to indicate some of the ways in which Nietzsche's path of thinking and writing maintains a constant vigilance with regard to the possibility and limits of narrative. The old philologist's encounter with

the postal age issues in a suspicion of some traditional narratives and their implicit teleological metaphysics; but the encounter itself generates other forms of narrative, stories that begin to make a break with those patterns. Zarathustra, for example, seems to believe that he has a message to deliver, but he soon discovers that there may be no proper recipient for his teaching (the hermit and the men of the marketplace can't understand him, and the disciples that he begins to attract seem little more than sycophants). When he finally faces the thought of eternal recurrence he discovers that he had never really understood the gift or letter that he had to deliver and that his search for an external recipient should really have been conducted within the network of partial selves or souls that constitute himself. The reversal and inversion of an expected narrative framework requires an appropriate reading, one that neither dismisses *Zarathustra* as fragmentary rhapsody nor places it prematurely within the boundaries of a literary genre that it may be challenging. In an analogous way, I will be suggesting that *The Antichrist* can be read as a rigorous exploration of the narrative function in the constitution of value and truth, and that *Ecce Homo* exhibits the ways in which telling the story of one's own life requires a motivated interplay of knowledge and ignorance of oneself. For Nietzsche, narratives are among the hinges or junctures by which thought circulates from classical ontological formulations to engaging with the abyss, the chaotic, and the sheerly perspectival. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche called for the appearance of "philosophers of the perilous perhaps," thinkers who would think on the edges or peripheries of thought. In his revaluation of the narrative mode, with all of its ancient traditions and baggage, Nietzsche himself takes a step into those perilous margins.