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Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts (Book Review)

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Kemal, Salim, Ivan Gaskell, and Daniel W. Conway, eds. *Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, xv+ 351 pp., 6 b & w illus., \$69.95 cloth.

Kostka, Alexandre and Ivan Wohlfarth, eds. *Nietzsche and "An Architecture of Our Minds"*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999, xi+ 363 pp., 70 b & w illus., \$45.00 paper.

Nietzsche's force as a catalyst for artistic production, critical thinking about the arts, and philosophical reflection on matters aesthetic continues undimmed; such is the impression that one gets from these two new collections of essays and from other recent publications on the thinker who claimed in *The Birth of Tragedy* that the world can be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon. The contributions to these books vary considerably in subject and quality, but there is much in both that will be required reading for those with interests in Nietzsche and his presence in the arts of the twentieth century. The essays fall into several general types: some are concerned to give a philosophical reading of Nietzsche's general thoughts on art or to explore the position of the aesthetic and artistic in his thinking; others offer more specialized readings of his ideas concerning such topics as architecture, literary genre, and tragedy; a few employ Nietzschean concepts and categories to give critical readings of specific works or forms of art that the philosopher himself did not consider; and, finally, there are a good number of the "Nietzsche and ..." type that investigate the uses and abuses of the writer by painters, architects, critics, and cultural theorists. While there are more essays of the first type in the collection by Kemal et al. (henceforth Kemal) and more of the last in the volume edited by Kostka and Wohlfarth (henceforth Kostka), there are some of each variety in both books.

In the Kemal collection, there are two quite challenging essays by Randall Havas and Aaron Ridley that offer careful, revisionary, and controversial readings of Nietzsche on "aesthetic justification" (Havas) and "aesthetic ideals" (Ridley). Havas returns to *The Birth of Tragedy* to re-examine the conflict Nietzsche sees between Socrates and the tragic worldview. In "Socratism and the Question of Aesthetic Justification," he claims that Nietzsche was challenging Socrates not by opposing aesthetic justification to the claims of reason; rather, he was arguing that from within a culture, specifically the tragic one of the Greeks, it makes no sense to ask for an exterior justification of the sort that Socrates demanded. For Havas, Nietzsche's talk of becoming what one is refers not to making oneself into a perfectly formed work of art (as Alexander Nehamas suggests) but to acknowledging and accepting ourselves as the creatures of culture that we have become. In "What Is the Meaning of Aesthetic Ideals?" Ridley turns to the later chronological pole of Nietzsche's authorship, *On the Genealogy of Morality*; the last essay of that book is identical with Ridley's, except that the latter has substituted "aesthetic" for "ascetic." There the philosopher asks why it is that art, the most life-affirming of activities, nevertheless often adopts an ascetic ideology or framework (as in Christian art, notoriously Wagner's *Parsifal*). Despite art's weakness in adopting the perspective of its ascetic enemy, it is nevertheless celebrated as the great antagonist of science, itself a refined and disguised form of asceticism. Ridley makes a coherent and plausible case that Nietzsche distinguishes between weak artists (those who embody a "slave revolt in aesthetics") and stronger ones, who recognize that their art lies in a process of self-shaping rather than in public and enduring works. This makes Nietzsche's talk of the artistry of those who create states and religions consistent, and it gives a privileged place to the "true" artist who can laugh at himself or herself; consequently, an active, performed comedy becomes a supremely Nietzschean

form of art. A similar point is made, with a rather different vocabulary and set of concerns, by Fiona Jenkins in "Performative Identity: Nietzsche on the Force of Art and Language." Art emerges as a "truthful" activity just insofar as it does not claim to be an intelligible representation of a stable reality but openly functions as a "purely dissimulatory power." A subtext of this essay is a confrontation between Nietzsche and philosophers such as Habermas, who think of mutual understanding as the goal of expressive behavior. Nietzsche is fruitfully seen as outlining a pre-emptive "critique of communicative rationality and its normative construction of a social order" (p. 231). Notice that this pushes Nietzschean art rather far from the context of a relatively coherent culture, which is the crucial concept of Havas's essay.

Martha Nussbaum writes a typically clear and useful essay on "The Transfigurations of Intoxication: Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Dionysus." It is the only essay in either collection that investigates the importance of Schopenhauer for Nietzsche, and the significance of the later philosopher's response to the earlier one. It does so admirably, emphasizing the way in which Nietzsche could, in his terms, transvalue the restless, embodied will of Schopenhauer by seeing it in the frenzied dance of the Dionysian chorus. While Nussbaum offers a fresh reading of this theme, the topic is not as neglected in Nietzsche scholarship as she implies. Claudia Crawford thinks of Nietzsche himself as a Dionysian artist in "Nietzsche's Dionysian Arts: Dance, Song, and Silence." With a strong emphasis on the language and imagery of Thus Spoke Zoroaster, she suggests a key to reading Nietzsche that involves discerning a number of levels of the activities of her title. It is a significant contribution to the ongoing project of giving a nuanced and sensitive reading of Nietzsche as philosopher-artist in a way that recognizes both dimensions of his work and their combination; it might be seen as a further and more lyrical articulation of Jenkins's rather analytical account of performativity insofar as it demonstrates something about the nature of Nietzsche's performance. Daniel Conway develops an allied theme, offering a suggestive analysis of Nietzsche's conception of the philosopher in "Love's Labor's Lost: The Philosopher's *Versucherkunst*." Emphasizing the various senses of experiment, temptation, and seduction wrapped up in this German word, Conway sees Nietzsche as a thinker of eros, concerned to articulate the possibility of exceptional figures-philosophers, artists, or saints-who are strong enough to squander their strength and resources in legislating (literally or metaphorically) for the rest of us. He makes a case that this is ultimately a political activity; and whereas this brief summary may awaken distressing resonances of some of the century's horrendous political appropriations of Nietzsche, Conway's reading should actually help in giving a fresh analysis of these themes that shows how they can be made intelligible without implicating them in such disasters.

The Kostka volume is based on a conference on Nietzsche and architecture sponsored by the Getty Foundation and shows a number of signs of its origin. Although Kostka and Wohlfarth are listed as editors, the introduction by a third hand, Tilmann Buddensieg, states that "the legacy of Nietzsche is an elusive presence that exists on every possible level of comprehension and of incomprehension" (p. 6). This sentence does capture the variety of topics and the range of treatment to be found in the collection. Buddensieg also offers a brief explanation of why, in a book devoted to Nietzsche and architecture, there are no essays dealing with Nietzsche's possible influence on the state architecture of the dictatorships. The answer is that Nietzsche always "sides with the artistic individual" against state or people. But this is a rather hasty conclusion, for in some of the excerpts quoted in the book, Nietzsche praises such things as the art of the Romans, who built for eternity, and for whom the individuality of the artist was, presumably, of minor concern. Moreover, since many of the essays deal with rather fanciful and idiosyncratic

appropriations of Nietzsche by a wide variety of artists and architects, it is not clear what would render fascist or Nazi uses of Nietzsche less relevant than these. A more striking omission is the absence of any attention to what Nietzsche says about the architecture of the Greek theater in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is probably his most extended treatment of an architectural work; there are passages on the Greek temple in *Human, All Too Human* that might also have been considered in this connection.

Given these limits, the book has many values. Included as an appendix is a set of excerpts from Nietzsche's writing that speak of architecture, either literally or figuratively. These were gathered, we are informed, by using the edition of Nietzsche's works now available on CD Rom. Reading these quotations together, one is struck both by the wonders and the oddness of this instant research tool. It does become apparent that Nietzsche, like a number of other thinkers, employed metaphors or figures from architecture in an intensive fashion. He also had a number of things to say about actual styles of building, as in the aphorism from which the Kostka book takes its title, in which Nietzsche says, "If we desired and dared an architecture according to the nature of our soul (we are too cowardly for it!) -our model would have to be the labyrinth!" (Daybreak, no. 169). Nevertheless, this method of assembling quotations can lead to ignoring context and might encourage an associative way of reading. Such procedures seem to have worked well for the painters and architects who read Nietzsche in the earlier part of the century, and who are discussed here in terms of what they gathered from their reading: Klimt, de Chirico, some of the Dadaists, Van de Velde, Behrens, Le Corbusier, and others. The list itself is impressive. The artists used and assimilated Nietzsche in a variety of ways, often thinking that they were illustrating his ideas (Klimt) or translating his approach to meaning into a different medium (de Chirico). Any of these essays will be informative for the historian of art, architecture, or modernism, but one with a philosophical interest in Nietzsche will simply see, once more, his amazing ability to provoke a diverse spectrum of interpretations. The essays by Tilmann Buddensieg and Fritz Neumeyer provide informed surveys of the way in which Nietzsche's thought insinuated itself in modern architectural theory and practice. A number of essays do establish a more theoretical position. Claudia Brodsky Lacour, in "Architecture in the Discourse of Modern Philosophy: Descartes to Nietzsche," usefully traces that tradition, suggesting that to figure thinking as architecture or architectonic is to envision "a world that would contain the possibility of thinking, rather than one our thought contains" (p. 29). In "Nietzsche's Labyrinths: Variations on an Ancient Theme," Karsten Harries comments on the volume's signature quotation, linking the labyrinth and modern music as forms of descent into the self. Readers of Nietzsche know that the figure of the labyrinth appears repeatedly in his work, winding through it, we might say, in labyrinthine fashion. In the Kemal book, Adrian de! Caro also tackles some of the associated myths and images in an essay on Dionysus and Ariadne that touches on the esoteric side of Nietzsche. In Kostka's collection, there is a more specifically architectural meditation on the labyrinth by Anthony Vidler in his essay "The Mask and the Labyrinth: Nietzsche and the Uncanny Space of Decadence." Vidler argues that Nietzsche's thought is motivated by a change in orientation from the question of ornament to that of space, growing out of his thought on Greek theater and Wagnerian opera. Like Harries, he points to the inwardness of the labyrinth that becomes an instrument that throws the body back "on its own raw physiological and psychological states" (p. 61). The longest and most ambitious essay of the collection is Irving Wohlfarth's "Construction Has the Role of the Subconscious': Phantasmagorias of the Master Builder (with Constant Reference to Giedion, Weber, Nietzsche, Ibsen, and Benjamin)." The quotation is from Walter Benjamin, and one of the riches of this

essay that defies summary is its exploration of such themes as the way in which Benjamin and Nietzsche experienced and theorized the transformation of spatial forms in the modern city and its buildings and the forms by which Nietzsche and Ibsen represent the search for a home in the alienating circumstances of modernity.

Within these two sets of essays there will be something to stimulate almost anyone who has been intrigued by one of the many paths in the Nietzschean labyrinth.

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