

A Critical Essay on Nietzsche

Victor Serge

1917

Contents

1. A Philosopher of Violence and Authority	3
2. The Two Moralities	6
3. Nietzsche, Good German Imperialist	8
4. The Rebel: His Influence	11
5. Dionysus – Conclusion	15

1. A Philosopher of Violence and Authority

Dead are all the gods: now do we desire the Superman to live. The State is the death of people. Companions, the creator seeketh not corpses – and not herds or believers either. Humanity's goal can only be reached with the most elevated types. – *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

It is through these words that this creator became dear to us. We singled him out from among the heroes of life, legend, and dreams, for in conceiving human existence as an endless ascent to a future of freedom and grandeur he showed us the way. Some chose him as teacher, saying that the poet who created Zarathustra could not have served any other ideal than anarchism. An oeuvre based on a love of life viewed as being beyond beliefs, and revealed through the thought of a bold free investigator in whom vibrates such free and liberating thoughts, could not serve another cause.

But is this so? Nietzsche often spoke differently than Zarathustra, in whom we thought we had found a guide. His oeuvre has many facets. Viewed as a whole, it is, because of one of its dominant ideas, essentially the antithesis of the anarchist ideal; it is also the only oeuvre that dared to rise up before us, strong and clear, constructing another ideal, another desire, and containing a subtle, strong, persuasive and at times brilliant argumentation.

Nietzsche was a philosopher of authority and violence who undertook to affirm them without any restraint, promising them an unlimited future.

In truth he was and, since his thought lives, is our sole and unique enemy. For our old world is used to opposing to us professors, judges, soldiers, or orators rather than men, ideas, or reasons.

Few oeuvres are as multifaceted as his. It is paradoxical, profound, as heavy as it is light, sprinkled with laughter, invocations, invectives, great shouts and confidential whisperings. It disconcerts us by its excess of life. It might thus seem reckless to want to show some of these essential traits. Is it not the product of an entire existence and a tireless intellectual labor?

Nevertheless, I will speak of it without timidity, following the example of this most energetic of free investigators. But I will resist facilities of language, for such shall be my truth, sought with the sole desire to understand and to ceaselessly progress toward greater clear-sightedness. If I don't know how to guide myself, who will guide me? I thus have the courage to criticize in keeping with my convictions and to propose my results to my fellow-travelers, without vain pride, simply with good will.

I certainly do not pretend to present in these notes a complete critical study of his philosophy. I will leave to the side several important points of the multifaceted ideology he left to us. I will limit myself to presenting the frequently forgotten apostle of an authoritarian and vigorous ideal of life, one not without a certain beauty, but profoundly barbarous and an enemy of the progress for which we are fighting.

Nietzsche's oeuvre has misled us because its dualism. Because of his temperament it contains two antagonistic yet complementary aspects. We usually only see one, the most obvious one, the only one that suits us in the absolute. Nietzsche is a demolisher and a builder. We love in him the destroyer, the man who denies moral dogmatism, the disbeliever, the disrespectful man, the great nihilist armed with a fervent word. We don't take account of the fact that he destroys in order to make room for an ideal probably quite distinct from ours. If he seeks to smash the tablets of current values, it's not in order to substitute for them a new order founded on the free development of every human personality, where the only law will be consciousness's inner law finally sublimated and made glorious by a free life but rather to rejuvenate the old order, which

he believes in and wants to be eternal. For he adores the brute force that crushes the vanquished, the decisive gesture of the mighty, the harsh struggle of man against man, the result of which is the slavery of some, and what some dare call the culture of others.

His passion for authoritarian affirmation, for victory and conquest, is so strong that he even sees it as the distinctive mark of life at its highest. The rest is only decadence, twilight, descent into corruption, the penchant for death of the weak.

A philosophy is always founded on a powerful sentiment that inspires and dominates it: it can only be the summit of an ideological structure. In Nietzsche this dominant sentiment is an absolute love of life, perhaps to a certain extent in reaction to the pessimism of Schopenhauer and Hartman.

Let us attempt to broadly outline his ideas. Painful, fallacious, weaved of illusions and errors, life is. It is beauty, splendor, force, incessant creation, miracle, and pleasure, pleasure above all. And even in suffering, for every life seems to be eternally forced to scream, there is an element of inexpressible pleasure. There exists a way of suffering that is noble. When one has acquired consciousness of this fact, one fervently consents to every effort, even if it is a torture. It is necessary to love life in its endlessly increased and refined power and to expand it with every step, utilizing all our strength in service to it. Here we find ourselves before Nietzsche's dominant idea: "The greatest force must be placed at the service of the most intense life."

This is what is called his "philosophical reform." Until now, Jules de Gaultier writes, philosophy could be defined as the "indignation of the truth." Nietzsche no longer accepts it as it is. In what way is the truth important? Does the truth exist? "The falsity of an idea for us is not an objection to this idea. We seek to know in what way this idea accelerates and preserves life." The new philosopher is the fervent man who creates new values, who gives life meaning, an original meaning. He is the adventurer who knows how to joyfully accept the heroic adventure that is life. This love of life imprinted a positive prejudice on those who were strong and lived abundantly. And Nietzsche admires them all in the same way. The Greeks, both athletes and artists; the Vikings; the humanists and condottieri of the Renaissance; the Huguenots of the sixteenth century: these are the ones he selects from the pages of history who marked life with their will. Above them all rises, situated outside his century like an outsized force, the gigantic statue of Napoleon, "the noble ideal par excellence ... synthesis of the inhuman and the superhuman."

At this point it is difficult to distinguish between what brings us close to and what separates us from the great philosopher. If anarchism can be defined as "the combat for the most intense life" we are in agreement with him concerning the love of life, the source of all rebellions, the goal of all labors. And we, too, admire force, that is, creative, restorative, transformative, perpetually blooming energy. We have attempted to create new values: individual autonomy, originality, the absolute right of conscience, spontaneous solidarity, morality without dogmas or delusions. In a word, to replace the tyrannical abstractions the past imposes on us as so many obligations or social contracts with a new reality: human individuality simply asserted. And it is thus that, by being beyond the strength of the petty men of the base present, this ideal could also be called the superman, since man is too often an animal.

Except, I don't readily subscribe to his praise of Napoleon. Like all of us, I know the grandeur and value of strength. But Nietzsche doesn't seem to understand the evolution it has undergone. He often confused energy and violence, which is only its most savage manifestation. There exists another force aside from that of the conquerors of lands and wealth, another force than that of arms, other values than those of the victory of one man over his kind. Force has grown. In the

past it manifested itself in the club and the axe; tomorrow it will be through thought and will. Its victory will dominate the old human beast, so often liberated by works of violence. This will be the victory of man over nature and his own nature. Our “noble ideal par excellence” is the humble and purified man who overcomes the ancestral instincts of the bestial struggle because he desires another struggle, one that demands no less courage or strength, but which is more worthy of him. One needs more courage to smash a sword than to use it; to be free and libertarian than to be an oppressor.

“I teach you the superman,” he wrote, “because humanity can only pursue one goal; the creation of a superior man of superior culture.” The means at our disposal to do this are struggle and effort. For the individual, this means being harsh with oneself and with others in order to surpass oneself. To be sure, whoever doesn’t know how to be as harsh as needed will not know how to be good. For society, slavery is needed.

The superior man is born into a differentiation that benefits from the efforts of all, conducted for the profit of some. In order for one Pascal to think it is necessary that the majority of human creatures live the existence of beasts of burden, working the land, living without hope. This is the natural state of the mediocre, who are the most numerous. Let them serve! Their sufferings matter little, since thanks to their harsh labors virile and refined aristocracies are able to live, cultivating their lovely customs, the arts, the pleasures of war and intellectual research: “dominant races and inferior races.”

Nietzsche attempts to demonstrate the positive and scientific aspect of this idea of progress based on the servitude of the mediocre masses. In order to answer him we shall review the facts. Without any hesitation we can say that we find as much true mediocrity among the established aristocracies as we find potential among the masses. Progress gains nothing if it is necessary to sacrifice for the development of one superior man the existence of another or of others, who could also think and labor nobly. In summary, we maintain this: it is society that will bring together the best living conditions for all men, which will offer the superior man the best terrain for cultivation. The environment created by the antagonism between the aristocrats and the servile masses is unhealthy. The intellectual and moral deformation of the dominant is as profound as that of the dominated. The free man is the only true man, oh, philosopher! The superman, if he had to live attached to the chains of command, which are as heavy as those of obedience, would be truly “too human.” And there would then begin anew the lusterless history of the Caesars, who count for so little compared to an Epictetus.

Why did the creator stop at this artistic conception of force? One asks this, one is saddened by this when, after having followed his victorious critique and admired the passionate drive of a powerful mind in quest of the impossible, he arrives at this repetition of man’s most ancient errors, i.e., the cult of violence and authority, from which the new, superior men increasingly distance themselves with each passing day.

The latter are found outside social classes and despite them. They constitute, in fact, an aristocracy constituted of nobler minds and hearts. Some have raised themselves from the lower depths, and these are not the least great among them. But all are unanimous in recognizing no supremacy other than that which has as its sole source the intellectual and moral value of individuals.

2. The Two Moralities

Nietzsche attempted to demonstrate that in humanity ethics followed a dual evolution. Morality has two opposed origins and is born among the dominant and the slaves. There are two moralities, one noble and the other servile, for there are two human species, the one that rules and the other that obeys.

From a positive point of view, any appreciation of this genealogy of morals reveals that the dominant idea is justice. It is up to the investigator to determine which of today values, for the progress of the species, has the tendencies derived from the two original moralities, which have long been combined with the customs and opinions of our ancient civilization.

I wouldn't say that Nietzsche carried this investigation to its proper conclusion. Ultimately, his hot-headed temperament adopts a prejudice. He places his language on the scale, which weighs as heavily as a sword. Woe on the defeated! He sings the praise of the noble morality and at the same time curses the ancestral aspirations of the slaves who invented goodness, freedom, equality, piety, and peace. Feminization, weakness of souls, refuge of the weak. In truth, never has so profound a contempt – or so strong a diatribe – been thrown in the face of the “ideologues.” Christianity, liberalism, socialism, anarchy, libertarian ideals, dreams of a humanity freed from the ugliness and suffering of oppression, petty ideas affirmed in the past by Jewish slaves and later by the uncouth Germans – the Reformation – later still by the French, rotted by Christian morality and sentimentality – the French Revolution – and today by the universal rule of the mediocre. These are the worst symptoms of decadence, the “twilight of man.”

The new philosopher has only to associate himself with the men of decadence to accelerate his decomposition. The quicker this happens, morally and socially, the quicker life can be reconstructed on the rubble of the old world. If there is something that brings us close to Nietzsche it would be this point of view. Beyond the base “modern ideas” that must triumph, then immediately decompose, and finally cede their place to our eternal noble ideal, which will signal the resurrection of the vital forces of humanity, he nevertheless glimpses another ideal. Until today every elevation of the human type has been the work of an aristocratic society, and this will always be so: it is the labor of a society that has faith in long periods of time, in hierarchy, in the accentuation of differences between man and man and which needs slavery in one sense or another ... The Gay Science.

It is not for me to refute the affirmations contained in this incantation. Nietzsche defends them with subtlety, stubbornly, resorting to a dialectic developed at the school of the German sophists, with all the fervor of passionate conviction. This is the way that he defends the authority bitterly fought against and dismembered by most thinkers. This problem of authority and freedom can be resolved by sociology. Élisée Reclus, Herbert Spencer, and Tylor, to name only the best of them, have concluded from the examination of the facts that the “human plant” can only grow in fresh air, under the sun. It will only possess all its potential beauty and produce its most beautiful fruits the day the shadows that imprison it dissipate.

The main error of this individualism of oppression is that it restores the ancient idea of freedom and great acts, which maintained that the exercise of authority increases the possibilities of pleasure and useful effort. This is only true in a restrictive sense, for the benefits that the dominant derive from the labor of slaves is certainly not worth the profound abdication of their best energies. The personality of the oppressor only asserts itself by deforming itself, and this professional deformation leads frequently to monstrous aberrations. Generally, the apparent victory

in the realm of positive acts is hardly worth the inner defeat, the irreparable disaster into which the highest aspirations of the heart and mind fall. No man is as subject to slavery as he who owns slaves. He can neither flee nor free himself but rather must guard and defend his wealth, lose himself in servile labors. He can neither contemplate, nor love, nor dream, nor think, nor work freely. He is imprisoned by his interests. These necessities of daily combat, victorious or not, slowly but surely kill what is best in man.

And yet, "all light is within you." Doesn't Christ say that "having gained the world, he lost his soul"? I criticize the authoritarian individualism of Nietzsche for not having taken subjectivism into account. The individualist asserts himself through his own internal worth; through the domination of the self; through the cult of impartial reasoning; through generosity, disinterest, and the idealism that are the characteristics of higher egoism; and through the intense effort of fervent and judicious will, all of which is much closer to true nobility.

The ancient nobility, a result of victory, sometimes engendered beautiful types of humanity.

The French *seigneur* of the seventeenth century was so cultured, so courageous, so rich in honors, so full of abnegation for his king, so imbued with his superiority over the villein, that for him all human solidarity stopped at the borders of his caste. The *gentilhomme* was without any doubt the most civilized man the poor human species could produce at that moment of history. Later, the conditions for the realization of noble individuality completely changed. It would be mad to want to go back several centuries. The villeins, the *gentilshommes*, the nobles, these three estates have disappeared. The combats over money and for ideas as well as the works of the intelligence have created new conditions for existence. There are no more classes but rather distinctions. The supreme virtue is no longer authority but originality, independence, and the disdain of power.

The new nobilities, unlike the ancient ones, escape any stratification. They come from the immense anonymous mass and return there. For man there is no difference between servile races and proud races, such as we find among dogs between hunting races and guard races.

The noble man, the superior man of tomorrow will be a complete man: a clear intelligence, a heart capable of emotion, a virile energy. Neither toward himself nor toward others will he commit the crimes of obeying and commanding. He will be the guide, the example, the wise man, the hero, never the man with the whip. This new ideal is not only ours. The history of our civilization reveals the slow climb of the human herd toward the heights where this ideal will be born, subject to laws as certain and ineluctable as those that rule the fall of bodies. Our societies, despite the periods of regression to barbarism they pass through – such as our era – go from despotism to freedom, from the rule of the garrote and the sword to the rule of inner law, from the hierarchy of classes to individualism. Nothing can stop this evolution, which is connected to the same process as cosmic life. This, in any case, is what certain great minds concluded who Nietzsche detested.

Though we agree that Nietzsche's argument is strong and extremely seductive, in reality it rests on a prejudice. This intellectual had a brutal passion for active, exteriorized, and positive energies. We see in him the love of physical effort, of battle, as they were felt by our ancestors in the sixteenth century, for whom he demonstrates an unreserved admiration.

But from a philosophical point of view the passionate argument sins by excess, and even more when the attempt is made to give it a scientific appearance.

Nietzsche did not take into account that portion of the vitality and beauty of the revolutionary energies that have been active throughout the world since the beginning of last century. He acted as if the persecuted, the indomitable, the rebels, the idealists, and the desperate, in struggle against the old social order, hadn't testified to their existence among the lower classes, "the race of slaves," and as if they didn't have intellectual and moral resources as great as those of the more favored classes.

From the sole fact that it has given rise to revolts, to ideological ferment, to many attempts at realizing its goals, to socialism and anarchism, the revolutionary idea has asserted itself as a force for transformation that should not be deprecated. And Nietzsche, who admires all forms of force, didn't know how to do it justice. Nor did he know how to adapt his thought to the results of modern sociological investigations. He opposes simple assertions to the work of economists, psychologists, and sociologists, reconstituting step by step the stages of past progress in order to anticipate future progress. "The servitude of the greatest number is the condition for the progress of civilization": this is one of his preferred theses, one contradicted by scientific investigation. It is not because of servitude but despite it that man's forward march toward well-being has continued. One of the main factors of progress is precisely the ceaseless effort of the individual to free himself from what is imposed on him. We can even add that the very existence of injustice in society – which in itself already constitutes a disequilibrium – creates a danger for culture. A civilization that only belongs to some, whose best fruits only belong only to a minority, can be weakened or destroyed by the semibarbarian it has failed to value. The cities of antiquity decayed not only under the blows of the invader, but even more because of the indifference of the enslaved masses who didn't care to defend it. What did it matter to the million slaves of the seven hills that Alaric sacked the temples of marble, which had no value in their eyes?

Contrary to the Nietzschean postulate, the truth is that any elevation of the human type is the result of a liberation; that every culture is the fruit of many victorious activities against what is imposed on us, and that societies founded on violence and iniquity decay through violence and iniquity.

3. Nietzsche, Good German Imperialist

Current events cast a new light on the world of ideas. In this unhealthy glow we encounter appearances we didn't know of and which we didn't taken into account. And if stubborn wills, rights, and higher reasons don't weaken, illusions, on the contrary, vanish completely. We rule over the world from the valley. How many masks have fallen in the presence of those who know us; how many ideas denied, profaned, deformed, disguised without our having expected it, and how many faces veiled! And even the dead, whose labors seemed completed, are transformed. And after all this I catch a glimpse a new Nietzsche, the real one, the one who was a good German imperialist despite himself. "Since we see the black dawn break in the heavens of the mightiest" according to the beautiful verse of Victor Hugo; since the tables of the law upon which were inscribed the definitions of good and evil were smashed and only violence matters, the thinker who wrote *Dawn*, who wanted to situate the effort to live "beyond good and evil," the great amoralist appears to us to be a precursor. He preceded the existing imperialist Germany down the road that leads to the rubble of a civilization.

A contemporary German and a German imperialist: this is what Nietzsche appears to have been to his very marrow. From his Germanic and Protestant origins come his active temperament, his sense of realities, his passionate vigor so different from the insouciance of a French skeptic like Renan or Anatole France, or the reflexive Positivism of English free-thinkers, like Bain, Spencer and Stuart Mill. Son of a Protestant pastor, he certainly owes to his profound Christian culture his ability to so pertinently understand the questions of morality and to free himself from accepted opinions. The author of *The Anti-Christ*, during the most tragic hours of his solitary existence, signed his letters "the Crucified" and gave one of his books a title whose cruel significance comes from an episode of evangelical history, *Ecce Homo*. From this we can judge to what extent his early Christian education contributed to forming his prodigious personality. I would like to point out that there does not exist today in any Latin country any religious group comparable in the seriousness of its faith, its customs, and its freedom of thought to German and English Protestantism.

At the very moment Nietzsche was writing, other thinkers in France and England pursued the same goal, inspired by the same scientific concept of the universe, applying, like him, the recent notions of determinism to the study of the most complex phenomena of human life. Spencer, who Nietzsche railed against in one of his most unjust pages, produced an enormous book on this matter. And to show the contrast between the temperament of the modern German imperialist and that of his rivals, we will cite Taine, who was also implacably logical, dedicating his entire life to the cult of thought, loving life with all his soul of a poet, and in life loving Force; and Guyau who, studying ethics, founded anarchist morality in a definitive work, "Essay on a Morality Without Obligation or Sanction"; and finally, Carlyle, "that semi-comic provocateur, that deceiver lacking in taste," according to Nietzsche, who, like him and a little before him, adored the creator of new values. Taine and Guyau, with their French method, their sovereign philosophical spirit, the harmony of their thought and language, formulated the same ideas but without violence, without impetuosity, and without the basis for life being modified in any way. It appears that Carlyle, animated by the flame of the descendants of the believers in inner light, also remained outside active life without realizing that every idea "is a force aiming to realize itself." Nietzsche's warrior temperament was necessary in order for determinism, atavism, and amorality to succeed in being new reasons for action, new "reasons to live" in daily reality. In order to realize how different their characters were it is enough to open a book of Nietzsche's and compare one of his pages with one of Taine's. For example: "Write with blood and you will learn that the blood is spirit," said Zarathustra. His creator truly writes with his blood. He put his own life into this pulsating, swirling style, as feverish as it is intense, intoxicating, sprinkled with shouts and invective, filled with brilliant images, unique.

Let us point out here that this faculty of being impassioned by ideas, which is so rare among the humanists of today, coexists in Nietzsche with an extraordinary aptitude for abstract speculation. What is more, in our old Europe only the Germanic races seem to have inherited from the ancient Hindus the gift of metaphysical investigation. Only they have dared to dig down into the depths of the problems of Essence, of Primary Causes and Final Causes. From Leibniz to Nietzsche they have given the world several generations of philosophers and metaphysicians bold enough to attempt to understand the universe. France produced Auguste Comte, England Spencer, Germany Hegel and today Haeckel, the most metaphysical of the scientifics. Nietzsche belongs to that great school as a disciple of Schopenhauer. Through this intellectual paternity he

remains united to the prodigious Sophists, to the abstractors of quintessence, to the creators of cosmogonies that were Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, and Hartman. Only his fundamental prejudice is contrary to that of his old master. He wants not the extinction of the will to live through the renunciations of the sage but rather the exaltation of the will to power through the activity of the destroyer and the creator. He doesn't want to flee but rather to accept with joy the noble pain of living.

What characterizes the current German intellectual elite is a cult of intelligence and brute force, while for other peoples, especially among the Latins, culture is synonymous with refinement, the renunciation of violence, and the predominance of spiritual values. The contemporary German imperialist is deeply in love with knowledge, is a poet and a speculative spirit, but places intelligence in the service of brute force. He seems to view victorious violence as the total realization of force. Perhaps we can define the most general law of his thought, that which provides all the others with their original structure, in this way: a cult of intelligence and a cult of force. From this flows imperialism, social organization, castes, honors, the aptitude for obeying and leading, the absence of moral scruples, the disdain for ideas, especially modern ideas, i.e., the Napoleonic contempt of ideologues. What remains of the concept of justice when the cannons boom?

If we were to judge the facts currently developing in a sequence in which no link has escaped our gaze, from the Bismarckian wars right up to the ongoing new destruction we would see that they are nothing but the translation of concepts that Nietzsche prophetically expressed when he wrote: "The hour returns, ever reborn, the hour in which the masses are disposed to sacrifice their lives, their fortune, their consciences, their virtue in order to procure that superior joy and to rule, a victorious and tyrannically arbitrary nation, over other nations. ("On Grand Politics," in *The Dawn*).

"We have entered the age of classical war, the scientific and at the same time popular war, of war made great through the methods, talents and discipline employed. All the coming centuries will look with envy and awe on this age of perfection."

"We stateless persons, 'good Europeans,' reflect on the need for a new order as well as a new slavery."

"... because believe me, the secret to harvesting the most fertile of existences and the greatest joy is living dangerously. Be thieves and conquerors if you can't be dominators and possessors, you who seek knowledge." (*The Gay Science*)

Or when he exulted with the same fervor that must have guided the bad shepherds of the military nation: "You say that it is the good cause that sanctifies even war. I say to you, it is a good war that sanctifies every cause." (*Zarathustra*)

These aphorisms written twenty years ago take on a singular significance when we place them in parallel with the following ones:

The great sage Ostwald, who created energetics, wrote: "Germany wants to organize Europe ... Here everything tends to draw a maximum of output from society ... The stage of organization is a more elevated stage of civilization ..." "Culture is a spiritual organization of the world" that doesn't exclude bloody savagery. "It is above morality, reason, society ..." (Quotes taken from Romain Rolland in his book *Above the Fray*).

As we can already see, the spiritual son of Goethe, Hegel, Heine, and Schopenhauer, Nietzsche is manifestly of the race of Bismarck and Hindenburg, the race of predators.

Between his vision of the future and ours there is an abyss impossible to fill. Two ideals remain present in our poor destroyed humanity: imperialism and libertarianism. One asserts itself through fratricide, through victory by the knife and fire, oppression, the perpetual crucifixion of another species; the other points out a new path, the only one that can lead humanity toward a healthy perfection without bestiality; toward victories that aren't tarnished by descent into the dregs, blood, falsehood, mad hatred and blindness.

These ideals support the struggle in all nations and, without any doubt, in all hearts. There is a libertarian Nietzsche, a libertarian Germany just as there is an imperialist England, France, and America. The two sensibilities, one inherited from an immemorial past of ancestral tortures and the other given rise to by the instinct for well-being, the lever for all progress, take turns predominating in any ethnic or national group. Contemporary Germany, in its most general tendencies and in Nietzsche's oeuvre, is the expression of conscious imperialism at its highest degree of development

We must remember the brilliant, rebellious idealism of the Germany of Schiller, of the admirable paganism of Goethe, of the invincible nihilist logic of Stirner, of the socialism of Lasalle and Marx, of Wagner's revolutionism; we must remember all this in order to know the *power of ideas*, we who have no other strength than that of the idea! The maleficent cult of violence has turned Germany into the horde we now see. Other ideas, other wills already active will regenerate it when it will finally understand that the liberation of the human animal, even though he is armed with science and logic, is not a means of access to the superhuman but rather a return to the prognathous anthropoid, the sub-man of the caves.

4. The Rebel: His Influence

I presented the imperialist Nietzsche who, through the realization of the superhuman, succeeds only in remaining "too human" and too actual in these troubled times. But every personality is multiple. It would be more correct to say that in each of us there are diverse potential or active personalities that successively dominate, making us adopt divergent or contradictory attitudes. It is thus that under the pressure of exceptional circumstances unexpected characteristics reveal themselves, incoherent and logical, paradoxical and necessary.

All of Man is in every man, and the greater the vitality of an individual the more he must reconcile his inmost contradictions. The passionate authoritarian, feeling himself hemmed in on all sides, bothered by the thousand obstacles of society, which is made up of countless interests that are linked to each other and opposed to the development of predatory Man, suffering to see himself surrounded by mediocre creatures, by rotten institutions, by pettiness and misery, even this authoritarian rebels. This is the *impossibility to live* against which every man of thought and will, even if he is our enemy, must immediately raise his voice in protest. The entire difference between his act and ours resides in the awareness of motives and ends. He who wants to go freely toward the future with his brothers must rebel in the name of the shared suffering of which his is but an infinitesimal part. He who wants to be a Dominator and isn't able to become one must rebel against the obstacles that restrain his strength. Nietzsche was one of the latter, and magnificently so. A pamphleteer not simply of those who rise up against the tyrant of the moment, but of those who mark an entire society with the seal of their sarcastic contempt. He was satirical in the manner of Juvenal, of Aristophanes, or, closer to us, of Rivarol, who he appreciated;

he was critical, and ironic, a sower of paradoxes and ideas that shook people out of their torpor. For rebellion opened the horizon for him, and it was this that in a strange way occasionally drew him closer to us! Contradictory and paroxysmic, it is difficult when speaking of him not to imitate him, so disconcerting are the various aspects of his oeuvre. Is it true that it was the apostle of violence who, when writing of the way to reach true peace, said that a day will come when the most powerful people will willingly break its swords? "Sooner die than hate and fear, and sooner die twice than to allow oneself to be hated or feared. It is necessary that one day this exalted maxim become that of every established society." (*Dawn*)

Nietzsche glimpsed all the freedom, all the possibilities of life that were offered to the man of the future; to he who will come well after us, after the chains have fallen. At a moment of great serenity, when the imperious voices of primitive instincts became still within him, he understood which direction beauty leads us in order to pass through the darkness of today. And he asserted this in clear terms. I will quote but one of his most critical pages. Here is how he describes militarism.

A drag upon culture. – When we are told that here men have no time for productive occupations, because military manoeuvres and processions take up their days, and the rest of the population must feed and clothe them, their dress, however, being striking, often gay and full of absurdities; that there only a few distinguished qualities are recognized, individuals resemble each other more than elsewhere, or at any rate are treated as equals, yet obedience is exacted and yielded without reasoning, for men command and make no attempt to convince; that here punishments are few, but these few cruel and likely to become the final and most terrible; that there treason ranks as the capital offence, and even the criticism of evils is only ventured on by the most audacious; that there, again, human life is cheap, and ambition often takes the form of setting life in danger – when we hear all this, we at once say, "This is a picture of a barbarous society that rests on a hazardous footing." One man perhaps will add, "It is a portrait of Sparta." But another will become meditative and declare that this is a description of our modern military system, as it exists in the midst of our altogether different culture and society, a living anachronism, the picture, as above said, of a community resting on a hazardous footing; a posthumous work of the past, which can only act as a drag upon the wheels of the present. – Yet at times even a drag upon culture is vitally necessary – that is to say, when culture is advancing too rapidly downhill or (as perhaps in this case) *uphill*. ("The Wanderer and His Shadow," in *Human, All Too Human*)

With glee he wrote: "We stateless individuals, good Europeans ..." On the credit side of his grand concepts we must place that of the European, son not of a nation or a race, and even less of a society founded on egoism, the sum of petty aims – a state – but rather of all the races that have mixed together their customs, their blood, and their sap on the ancient land of Europe in order to produce the complex generations of today, heirs, in truth, of all human effort. And how indigent, according to this author, are all the petty ambitious fatherlands! We understand Zarathustra when he says: "What of fatherland! *Thither* striveth our helm where our *children's land* is!"

"Follow your path and let the peoples and nations follow the dark paths in which no hope shines."

He placed thrones in the mire and was horrified by both the public square and the politicians who are its buzzing flies. He ridiculed moralists, whose virtues resemble the poppy seeds that "procure a good night's sleep."

“I am Zarathustra the impious who says; who is more impious than I that I may enjoy his teachings?”

One shouldn't find it strange to see him express in this way ideas that usually appear to be contradictory. The origin of his errors – and I think that is the word that that must be used – can be found in the very origin of the power that made him a great poet, a pamphleteer, and a new philosopher: the extraordinary intensity of his cerebral life, which raised an instinctive hypersthetic vitality to awareness. Having attempted almost everything, he could also understand everything and explain almost everything. And being too self-willed, loving excessively the fact of feeling himself live intensely, he didn't consent to bow before the logical systematizations of thought that end by imprisoning us. It's better to appear inconsistent. The essential thing is not to impose, in addition to the current admiration of men, a new dogmatism but rather that we awaken them, since they are asleep in the bed of old beliefs. We must make them live and, above all, they should be made able to live intensely on their own, to contemplate, to understand, to create.

This, without a shadow of a doubt, was his idea as well as ours, and I believe that we should regret not that he was frequently paradoxical or inconsistent, but that he was only *apparently* so.

A higher logic guided him. In him the rebel and the bold investigator never ceased obeying the injunctions of the philosopher of authority and violence. States, fatherlands, armies, churches, the family, morality, modern ideas, decrepit authorities undermined by the decadents who want goodness, justice, equality, and peace because they cause degeneration: these people wear out the springs of great acts. They are diminished men, and since in this society humanism grows by making the healthy forms of impious and bellicose life retreat, it is necessary to speed up the collapse of this world in free fall.

“Man must be the best of predators.”

“Smash, smash the good and the just.”

We have already seen the weaknesses and errors at the heart of this thesis. He believed in it with all his soul and always explained and defended it as a passionate dialectician, and *this* was the reason for his revolts.

There is an interesting study to be done of the affinity of contraries and their psychological influences. People have not always been fair to Nietzsche. All things considered, he expressed himself quite clearly and brutally. One must truly work at it to see in him something other than a rebel and a critic. How then can one explain, other than by the affinity of contraries, his immense influence on groups with diametrically imposed mentalities? A good German imperialist, he found many disciples in France. An authoritarian aristocrat, he was so appreciated by the anarchists that it seems there are some who call themselves Nietzscheans.

I will hazard two explanations: I love his overflowing vitality, contagious to all who approach it: such is the prestige of his life. We are all tired of colorless philosophies, verbiage, worn out words, hypocritical expressions, teachings lacking in sincerity and passion. It all ends up lost in obscurity. Oh the dull ideas that vegetate in this bloodless life, the official speeches, the poor little lies, the minuscule ideas of Lilliputians. One wants to cover one's ears and shout, “Enough!” Sleep is better than this decadence of the soul. Welcome, let him enter, the man – from wherever he might come – who loves and hates, whose sincere speech says to us: “*I desire! Make room or I'll clear the road despite you.*”

This man, even though he is our enemy, sets an example and brings us something of great value: his truth, a precious truth.

The second explanation would be this: knowing our various insufficiencies we all aspire to perfect ourselves. And so we are attracted to precisely those who have qualities the opposite of our own. Being gentle, we love the violent; being rational, we deliberately seek the instinctive; sentimental, the rough please us. This is the call of forces other than those we hear within us, and we continually head toward unknown potentialities.

Let us return to the facts. Whatever the cause, Nietzsche's influence in the Latin world and in libertarian circles was great. Naturally, his teachings were deformed. It can be said of his disciples that they never understood him very well. "Every truthful word, if it is heard by too many men, is transformed into a lie because of those who are superficial, the calculating, the charlatans," wrote another individualist, our anarchist Han Ryner. Since there was nothing but truth in Nietzsche's word, we note that it was misunderstood and systematically deformed by some in order to render it anarchist, and by others to justify through arguments extracted from his works, their bourgeois spirit, their ambition, and their vulgar egoism that he would have disdained as the most grotesque of things too grotesquely human.

But this is the luck of all teachings. Petty things pass, but the oeuvre remains. The seeds that Nietzsche spread also fell on better lands, where they proliferated. They produced a vast intellectual movement. I won't have the temerity to carry out a complete examination, but instead will only mention certain names that testify to Nietzscheism's importance in French culture. There is absolutely no question that his influence was enormous, particularly during the contemporary era, and perhaps in France more than elsewhere.

Henri Albert and Lichtenberger have with great care translated his thought in order to make its most subtle nuances felt. Daniel Halévy dedicated a biography to him that was as pious as it was complete. Jules de Gaultier, one of the most original speculative minds of our time, commented on him and explicated his thought in several valuable works. Georges Palante, sociologist and critic, was largely inspired by his work, along with Dr. Élie Faure in his studies of art, and Georges Sorel in his works of sociology, among them *Reflections on Violence*.

In the anarchist world only the individualist tendency has felt this influence, and this very profoundly. And yet my impression is that generally there was a misunderstanding due to the ignorance of the entirety of Nietzsche's ideas. Certain Russian anarchists qualified themselves as Nietzscheans. In the United States the newspaper *Nihil* represented this tendency. To various degrees we find the same influence in the work of Libero Tancredi in Italy, in the review *El Unico* published in Panama, in *l'anarchie* in Paris and in the French individualist organ *Par-delà la Mêlée*.

But is this influence a good one? I don't dare answer in the affirmative. The workers who form the majority of our groups generally don't have sufficient education to confront the energetic seduction of the passionate imperialist with a critical spirit. It often occurs that they don't understand him or that they follow him immediately, almost blindly. And following him means abandoning us. It also happens, and this is perhaps worse, that in wanting to follow his ideal of the superman, so disproportionate in relation to the forces fighting against a terribly mediocre reality, a kind of childish pride seizes hold of our comrade and isolates him in a sterile and limited "cult of the self."

Despite these reservations, one can't help but see in him an initiator. He causes us to think and to live. And for those who, thanks to the development of their critical spirit, know how to remain faithful to themselves, there are so many fertile riches in his oeuvre.

Applied to social problems his philosophy all in all is not very original. It is nothing but Social Darwinism expressed with a singular quality of thought and style. And what was sometimes called by this name is nothing but a well-worn theory proper to the old society, in which man exploits his fellow man, a concept Darwin never formulated, quite the contrary.

"Man is wolf to man," Hobbes said in the seventeenth century. It has been repeated in our time by transposing to the social realm the principle of the struggle for life and natural selection – the survival of the fittest – and by the idea that the inequalities and miseries produced by the unavoidable and beneficent natural laws were the conditions for all forms of progress. Kropotkin wrote his decisive book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* in order to contest this thesis, supported in England by Huxley. Here is his demonstration: It is not through internecine struggle that species progress, but through association in the struggle against nature. Darwin himself wrote: "There is no struggle between individuals of the same species, except in cases of penury or sexual competition." And even in the latter case the struggle often assumes aspects of emulation that exclude any recourse to violence, because it is useless and deceptive. Wolves, tigers, and sharks only devour each in cases where hunger has them in its grip, because if this were to happen they would disappear from the face of the earth to make room for other species more capable of fraternity and peace.

If man was able to leave his cave, where he would pass the night for fear of beasts, it is because men mutually daily assisted each other over the course of many centuries. It is for this same reason that civilization survived stupidly criminal wars and progress was able to resume. Fratricidal struggles periodically devastate humanity. Tomorrow the latter will come out of the current tragedy ill, impoverished, convalescent, and sluggish, but assembling the men who will take up life again; take up the good and healthy struggle to make themselves better and happier. The immense crime that is currently being committed will not testify against the law of mutual aid, like madness against reason. Imperialism remains refuted by the facts, and this should not be forgotten, whatever the prestige in our eyes of the poet who defends it.

5. Dionysus – Conclusion

Men have always loved symbols. When they conceive the grandeur and the potential beauty of their lives they love to imagine perfect forms that are so alive that they immediately surpass mediocre reality. This ceaselessly renewed creation of their eternal divinities occurs in the most clear-sighted individuals. How can one not incarnate in dream images love, joy, hope, the victory of living, and life itself with its many sidereal, terrestrial, human riches? But the people who "abound in allegories," in the highest symbols, in poets erect immaculate and primitive statues that express man's ideal in a simple fashion. Nietzsche constructed his own, ancient but rejuvenated by the gift of his fervently modern spirit and called it, in Greek, Dionysus.

The greatest of all lovers of life had to choose among the ancient gods, who will never completely die, for below mystical lies and deformations they incarnate aspects of nature in human, though heroic, figures. We might say that he had to choose the one among them who was the

personification of the healthy joy in existing. In opposition to the cults that disdained and condemned physical life, Dionysus exalted it without impoverishing it, with nobility and harmony. We can imagine him as a mocking athlete who, in one of those gardens where Epicurus invited his young friends, surrounded by naked young women, poets, and sages, raises a cup of tasty wine through a ray of sunlight. And this wine of Dionysus is the juice of all the fruits of the earth, the pleasure offered to all, which it is necessary to wholeheartedly accept. Dionysus taught the beauty of carnal love, of footraces and wrestling, of dancing and singing, of epic adventure and silent meditation. Be complete, live fully, don't be afraid to suffer in order to enjoy completely and you will be like Dionysus, the man-god who laughs and gives without measure, free under the liberated skies.

The beautiful, victorious human beast, intelligent, destined for the original springs of the harsh and tonic life nature grants the strong, this is what the superman will be. And after all, is it important that Nietzsche misunderstood some essential philosophical truths, that he sometimes erred concerning means and ends, that he was passionately unjust? Now that critics have distinguished between retrograde and true idealism in his oeuvre, we have no need fear being seduced by his errors. Let us stop before the statue of Dionysus and think about the teachings he left to us and which must remain ...

Be free ... "A free life remains open to great souls,"

Be willful ... "O Will, thou change of every need MY needfulness! Spare me for one great victory!" Yea, something invulnerable, unburiable is with me, something that would rend rocks asunder; it is called MY WILL. Silently doth it proceed, and unchanged throughout the years."

Be generous! Be harsh toward yourselves in order to strengthen yourselves and to later give yourself without measure. "I believe you capable of all wickedness and for this I ask you to be good."

Enjoy life! With pride, with beauty. Love elevated life; savor it intensely. "Sensual pleasure is, for free hearts, something innocent, like the song of terrestrial joy; it's the overflowing recognition of the future by the present." "The desire for domination that rises in the pure and the solitary, attracting them to the heights of their own satisfaction, ardent like a love that will trace in the heavens seductive and dazzling joys." Oh, who will find the true name with which to baptize and honor such a desire? "A virtue that gives; it is thus that Zarathustra one day named this inexpressible abstraction."

Be egoists! Zarathustra "praised egoism, the good and healthy egoism born of a powerful soul, united with a svelte, beautiful, victorious and comforting body around which everything is a reflection. The agile body that persuades, the dancer whose symbol and expression is the souls happy with itself. The selfish pleasure of such bodies, of such souls, is called virtue.

"With what this egoist pleasure says of good and evil, it protects itself as if it surrounded itself with a sacred forest, with the words of its speech it repudiates far from him everything that has no value."

Certainly, such an egoism has nothing base about it and is so powerful and healthy that its fruits will necessarily be great goodness, the fraternal instinct, and profound love capable of sacrifice. Since it always seeks its own satisfaction, this is the very principle of the inevitable egoism that it is necessary to fully know. But while the man without strength only encounters satisfaction in the jealous defense of the limits of his mediocrity, the superior man finds it in

the disinterested gift of his power. Christ allowed himself to be crucified, since his soul's highest satisfaction was in absolute sacrifice.

Such a desire cannot be confused with that of the wretches who, not dominating themselves, think they can rule by the whip. A will like this one demands full freedom for all. A generosity like this one cannot accept servitude.

If Nietzsche, led by his passionate temperament to extremes through the abuse of his exalted dialectic, didn't want this to be the case, it is up to us, free investigators, to approach his oeuvre and retain for our edification only those teachings that are worthwhile.

He was our enemy. So be it. He himself said to us: "Desire perfect enemies."

The struggle with them is more beautiful, more fertile. One can fraternize with "perfect" enemies. "You should have nothing but enemies worthy of hatred and not of scorn; it is necessary that you be proud of your enemies."

He was the philosopher of violence and authority, but like us he felt an immense love for life and knowledge, the invincible desire to fight for his cause, disgust for the current social order and the rule of the mediocre to which we are descending. He felt the need to destroy old ideas and things, to assist in destroying what is collapsing so that we can then be reborn.

In addition to the example of his boldness as a thinker, he taught us the horror of the mediocre life, the pride in suffering nobly, the cult of will and joy.

His prodigious talent for expression often vivified the ideas we serve. He was sincere and powerful. At times he was our fellow-traveler, and perhaps at those moments the best of his soul revealed itself to be too varied and complicated. His life's path was painful. Rare are the thinkers who suffered such a curse. Misunderstood, unrecognized, alone, isolated in his thought as in his daily existence and sick, sometimes despairing, but always able to master himself. For ten years he wandered around a deserted Europe, where he saw *nothing* worthy of being loved or served. His voice, which would later be greeted as that of a prophet, was lost with no echoes. No one paid attention to this great walker with his broad forehead who *was nothing more than a thinker*.

After those ten years of being uprooted, madness ruled him in his isolation. And ironically, he who wrote such magnificent pages on *voluntary death* survived his intelligence by ten years. In truth, he wrote with his blood.

For his oeuvre, so powerful in these times of pale mediocrity; for his absolute sincerity in these times of hypocrisy; for his passion in these times of cowardice; through his originality in these times of uniformity; for his sad end as a thinker; for his sad end as a madman, I love him. And I listen to and am largely inspired by his oeuvre. But I don't follow him. Imitating his example as a critic and free-thinker I only ask him for assistance in finding *my truth*.

I have no illusions concerning the value of his prejudices and I don't close my eyes to his errors. He looked men and things in the eye with a rebel's insolence and lack of respect. And how he would have despised the blindness of those who today want to set up a vain cult to him, because this master wanted no disciples.

In ending, I recall the words of Zarathustra to those who thought they understood him: "Now I order you to abandon me and to find yourselves."

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Victor Serge
A Critical Essay on Nietzsche
1917

Retrieved on 28th October 2022 from www.marxists.org
Originally appeared in the Spanish anarchist newspaper *Tierra y Libertad* 359 – 69, August – December 1917. The French original was only located and published decades later, and is the source of this translation. Translated for marxists.org by Mitchell Abidor

usa.anarchistlibraries.net