

4 Nietzsche on the Task of the Poets in His Middle Writings

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Anyone who wants to give the deepest meaning to life entangles the world in fables; we are all still deeply tangled up in it, however free-minded we may seem to ourselves.

Nietzsche 1876–7

Introduction

In this chapter, I propose to examine how Nietzsche figures the task of the poet in his middle writings. These are the texts published between 1878 and 1882 and comprise the three books that make up volumes one and two of *Human, All Too Human* (1878–80), *Dawn* (1881), and *The Joyful Science* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*), more widely known as *The Gay Science* (1882). I shall focus most of my attention on what he has to say about the poets in relation to the passions. In my view, such a focus provides in any case the best way possible to comprehend the figuration of the poets we encounter in these writings. Nietzsche's attention is centered on the idea of a poetry of the future, and this is an idea he posits in a specific manner. A number of writers after Nietzsche, including poets, concerned themselves with a poetry of the future or with the poet yet to come, such as Rilke, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf, and some of their concerns resonate with Nietzsche.¹ However, as we shall see, Nietzsche appeals to the poets to assume the task of providing signposts to the future in the context of his specific concern with the cultivation of human beings.²

¹ Rilke 2011; Lawrence 2019; Woolf 2008. Woolf's essay on "Poetry, Fiction, and the Future" is especially pertinent since, like Nietzsche, she focuses on the task of the poet in relation to issues of the beautiful and the emotions or passions.

² One might argue this is an exaggeration since surely Nietzsche's supreme teaching is the teaching of the *Übermensch*. However, even humanity remains for Nietzsche something

The nature of his conception of cultivation will be brought out as my analysis of the texts proceeds, but several points are worth noting at the outset. The first point is to stress the need to take cognizance of the fact that Nietzsche advances his conception in the context of his perception of and response to social and political developments taking place in the nineteenth century. The second point is the need to take cognizance of the fact that the cultivation of the human being, which in large part centers on a doctrine of the passions, is Nietzsche's abiding concern, and this is true even though his oeuvre is marked by a complex intellectual development. Nietzsche prides himself on the fact that he is a thinker and writer whose work is marked by intellectual development. Indeed, one of the great problems he has with a thinker like Schopenhauer is that he lacks development and has no history (D 481; see also GM III 6).

The topic I am focusing on in this chapter has been sorely neglected in the literature on Nietzsche to date. For example, both Walter Kaufmann and Erich Heller wrote fine essays on Nietzsche and poetry, including essays on Nietzsche and Rilke, but they consider the relevant issues, such as the nature of poetry and the nature of the relation between philosophy and poetry, in abstraction from what Nietzsche himself says and seeks to teach.³ More recently, Michael Robertson has sought to provide a fresh illumination of Nietzsche ideal of the "poet-philosopher," and although he utilizes material from middle texts such as GS and has interesting things to say, once again we are given a consideration that is divorced from an appreciation of the specific details of what Nietzsche says and argues for and with no reference to key aphorisms we find in middle texts such as AOM and WS.⁴ These texts are far too often overlooked and neglected by commentators who seem to operate with the assumption that they are merely transitional or casual texts, little more than a loose collection of aphorisms, and so not crucial to an understanding of Nietzsche's philosophical project. This in my view is a gross error of judgment, and it is thus not surprising that appreciations of Nietzsche as a so-called poet-philosopher end up being cashed out in terms that are often vague and general, as well

that needs cultivating and sculpting. As he asks in the mouth of Zarathustra, "Yet tell me, my brothers: if a goal for humanity is still lacking, is there still not lacking – humanity itself?" (Z I 15, "Of the Thousand and One Goals"; trans. Hollingdale). We should also pay attention to Zarathustra's words when he utters: "The human being and the human earth are still unexhausted and undiscovered" (Z I 2, "Of the Bestowing Virtue").

³ Kaufmann 1980; Heller 1988.

⁴ Robertson 2012. In terms of recent relevant literature, Grätz and Kaufmann 2017 is worthy of note.

as insufficiently informative and unnecessarily speculative. The result is that little insight is offered either into Nietzsche's conception of philosophy or his thinking about the poets. The German word for poet Nietzsche uses is *Dichter*, which literally means "composer," to be conceived as someone who brings together in an artistic form images, symbols, ideas, thoughts, and meditations. Many of the writers he admires were prose writers and storytellers as well as poets, and so his esteem of writers such as Adalbert Stifter needs to be acknowledged and comprehended, and in addition to the poetry of the future he identifies as having its source in Goethe.⁵ Nietzsche's interest in Stifter will be illuminated in the final section of the chapter.

Nietzsche's Suspicions about the Poets

One major shift that takes place in Nietzsche's thinking from the early writings to the middle writings is his changing attitude toward art. For example, whereas in BT and the four *Untimely Meditations*, it is art that dominates his thinking about culture – be it the artist's metaphysics of BT or the need to will illusion in the *Untimely Meditations* – in the middle writings, it is "the passion of knowledge" that now governs his thinking, and this necessarily means that Nietzsche now values art in a very different way to the valuation we find in his early writings, where it is accorded tremendous significance. Nietzsche introduced the passion of knowledge into his writings in the final book of *Dawn* (429), and it is then figured in significant ways in *The Gay Science* (3, 123, 249, 283, 319, 328, 351; see also BGE 210 from the late period). We see the change that has taken place in his thinking about art in aphorism 107 of *The Gay Science*, entitled "Our Ultimate Gratitude to Art." Here Nietzsche credits art with having "the good will to appearance." It makes existence bearable for us by providing us with ways of taking a rest from ourselves, gaining an artistic distance, and so enabling us to laugh and weep at ourselves. However, what is governing Nietzsche's reflections on the value of art in this aphorism is the primacy accorded to the passion of knowledge. Because we are such grave and serious creatures – "really more weights than human beings" – it helps if we can "discover the *hero* no less than the *fool* in our passion of knowledge." Art exists, then, to

⁵ This conception of the poet is common in the history of thought and literature. See, for example, the insights of Vico on poetry and poetic wisdom in his *New Science* (Vico 1999). See also Melville's discussion of the art of the poet, be it prose or verse, in his essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (Melville 2018).

help us endure existence as we pursue the passion of knowledge. Although we honor truth on account of its great power, we must guard against it assuming a tyrannical status in our lives. If we dedicate ourselves solely to truth, this will make our existence tasteless, powerless, and boring. It is thus necessary to be in a position from time to time to recover in forms of untruth (D 507).

In his middle writings, Nietzsche conceives of philosophy as a practice of a sober mind that cools down a human mind prone to neurosis. Philosophy, in concert with science, has the task of tempering emotional and mental excess. Indeed, Nietzsche defines the philosopher as a human being who speaks “from a cool, invigorating resting place” (HH II, WS, 171 ; trans Handwerk). Nietzsche favors a project of sobriety that supposes philosophical moderation to combat both human neurosis and a sentimental, self-intoxicating worldview, which he largely associates with Rousseau (see HH I 463; trans Handwerk; HH II, WS, 216 and 221). In aphorism 244 of HH I, he notes his century’s proximity to madness, where the “overstimulation of the nervous and intellectual powers is a universal danger” and in which “the cultivated classes in European countries are thoroughly neurotic.” Nietzsche lives in hope of a “*new Renaissance*” and notes that we “have Christianity, the philosophers, poets, and musicians to thank for an overabundance of deeply moving sensations,” an overabundance that can only be combated with the spirit of science since this spirit is what best serves to make us colder and skeptical. In terms of the nineteenth-century developments, Nietzsche is responding to a range of events, including “national wars,” “ultramundane martyrdom,” and “socialist alarm” (HH II, AOM, 171; trans Handwerk). In terms of art, he is responding most critically to “Wagnerian art,” which he describes as: “the *last of all* reactionary military campaigns against the spirit of the Enlightenment” (HH II, AOM, 171).

In the middle writings, Nietzsche expresses several suspicions about the poets. In large part, this is owing to the intellectual virtues he commits himself to in these writings, such as honesty and courage, along with his privileging of the passion of knowledge and the desire to challenge the pretensions of metaphysics (including the metaphysical need), religion, and art through an unforgiving critical lens. In HH I, Nietzsche lets it be known that he maintains that there has not yet been any philosopher who has not eventually looked down upon the philosophy he invented in his youth with disdain, or at least with suspicion (HH I 253). In an unpublished note from 1877, he wants to make clear to his

readers that he has abandoned the metaphysical-artistic views of his early writings (1872–6) (KSA 8, 23 [159]). In particular, he wants to overcome what he calls his “deliberate holding on to illusion” as the foundation of culture (KSA 10, 16 [23]).⁶ Nietzsche is seeking to overcome what he called Jesuitism, which he located in his predecessors in German philosophy and himself. In the words of one commentator, this means not allowing the uncovering of the limits of human knowledge to be conducted in such a way that the task also gives free rein to metaphysics and the metaphysical need, which is the need to ask the so-called big questions about first and last things.⁷

Aphorism 145 of HH I makes clear that Nietzsche is keen to expose what he sees as the mythological sensibility that informs our appreciation of art and refers to a “science of art” that will now contradict the illusions we have about art and point out “the erroneous reasoning and self-indulgence that lead the intellect into the artist’s net.” In aphorism 146, he points out that regarding the apprehension of truths the artist has a “weaker morality” than the thinker and so cannot be relied upon. According to Nietzsche, the artist is so committed to his “brilliant” and “meaningful interpretations of life” that he will not allow the sober, simple methods and results of science to impinge upon them. Instead, the artist, in struggling for his vision of “the higher dignity and meaning of humanity,” is devoted to the presuppositions that prove so effectual for his art and craft, namely “what is fantastic, mythical, uncertain, extreme,” and executed with a “sense for the symbolic, the overestimation of his own person, the belief that there is something miraculous in genius.”

In aphorism 147, Nietzsche construes the task of the artist, therefore, as one of “juvenilizing humanity,” and this is both his glory and his limitation; the artist does not, then, “stand in the forefront of the enlightenment and the progressive *masculinization* of humanity.” Indeed, in aphorism 220, Nietzsche states that the artists of all ages “are the glorifiers of the religious and philosophical errors of humanity,” and he mentions in this regard Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, the paintings of Raphael, the frescoes of Michelangelo, and Gothic cathedrals. We should also note that philosophy fares no better for Nietzsche. In the

⁶ In his early period, Nietzsche holds to the view that philosophy is the selective knowledge-drive in which the aim is to place knowledge in the service of the best life, even if this means “One must even *desire illusion*” (KSA 7, 19 [35]).

⁷ Montinari 2003, 60. For insight into the human need for metaphysics, see Schopenhauer 1966, volume two, chapter XVII.

text *Dawn* from his middle writings, Nietzsche cannot conceal his irritation with philosophy when it sets its sight on getting behind the veil of appearance and accessing either divine being (Plato and dialectics) or the horror of the world (Schopenhauer and the opposite of dialectics): “the thing to which they want to show us the way does not *exist* at all. – And up until now haven’t all of humanity’s great passions been just such passions for nothing (*Nichts*)? And all their solemnities – solemnities about nothing?” (D 474).⁸

Nietzsche’s critical appreciation of the artist also shapes and guides his views on the poets in the middle writings. For example, in aphorism 148 of *Human, All Too Human*, he contends that the poets exist to soothe and heal life, but they do so only temporarily and even “keep people from working toward genuine improvement of their circumstances,” palliating the discharge of the passion that would impel them to act. Moreover, he further contends that the images the artist creates for himself and presents to others – images of the human being and images of life – can only have validity for a certain time, “because humanity as a whole has come to be and is changeable, and even the individual human being is neither fixed nor enduring” (HH I 222). Art can teach us, and teach us well, about the need to take pleasure in existence and without too fervent engagement with it. It can also teach us the importance of viewing human life as a piece of nature, as an object whose development is governed by laws. However, Nietzsche astutely recognizes that this latter teaching now expresses itself in us as an omnipotent need to know, and so in this respect it is possible to appreciate that the scientific human being is a further development of the artistic one (HH I 222).

In the subsequent texts that make up the middle writings, Nietzsche continues to express his suspicions about the poets. For example, in aphorism 32 of *Mixed Opinions and Maxims*, he advances the critical insight that poets tend to disparage reality, transforming it in the process into “something uncertain, apparent, counterfeit, full of sin, sorrow, and deceit.” He even goes so far as to suggest that poets aim at this and are secretly conscious of it as part of their power over human minds, and so they indulge in “every skeptical extravagance in order to

⁸ Nietzsche’s worry over philosophy’s – and humanity’s – attachment to nothingness expresses itself more dramatically, of course, in the third essay of GM, including and especially its final damning lament: “And, to conclude by saying what I said at the beginning: one still prefers to *will nothingness*, than *not will*” (GM III 28; trans. Diethe). As Santayana notes in the preface to *The Realm of Spirit*, the “desire to cease from willing is evidently a form of will” (Santayana 1940, xii).

spread the crumbled veil of uncertainty over things.” This would not be so dangerous to future human health and well-being were it not for the fact that so many poets spread obscurity and exercise their sorcery and magic as a way of enticing people into believing that they are offering “the way to the ‘true truth,’ to the ‘real reality.’”

We should not be surprised, then, and as most readers of Nietzsche might well be, when he expresses a deep interest in “Plato’s great question concerning the moral influence of art” (HH I 212). In *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, he writes pithily that the thoughts of poets are not worth as much as we think: “we are not only paying for them, but also for the veil and our own curiosity” (HH II, WS, 105). In GS, he presents a thought credited to Homer: “Many lies tell the poets” (GS 84).⁹ In this aphorism on the origin of poetry, Nietzsche challenges the view that holds that the wild and beautiful irrationality of poetry is of such value because it is beyond utility. When poetry came into existence in ancient times, he argues, the aim was “a very great utility ... the utility in question was *superstitious*.” Rhythm, for example, was intended to impress the gods more deeply with some human petition, and with the poets noticing that human beings remember a verse much better than ordinary speech: poetry was thrown at the gods, then, “like a magical snare.” Nietzsche concludes this long aphorism by suggesting we ought to find it amusing to this day that the most earnest philosophers, “however strict they may be in questions of certainty, still call on what poets have said in order to lend their ideas force and credibility.” Is it not, he concludes, and just before referring to Homer, “more dangerous for a truth when a poet agrees than when he contradicts it?” (GS 84).

Echoing Nietzsche, the great Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz notes in his study *The Bow and the Lyre*: “The tale and its representation are inseparable. Both are already in the rhythm, which is drama and dance, myth and rite, story and ceremony. The twofold reality of the myth and the rite rests on the rhythm, which contains them” (Paz 1973, 47). Moreover, he notes, “The poet’s process is no different from conjuration, enchantment, and other magical procedures. And the poet’s attitude is very similar to the magician’s ... both act for utilitarian and immediate

⁹ That the poet is a liar is readily acknowledged by Walter Raleigh in his “History of the World”:

Readers, believe Historians, and not those
Which to the world Jove’s thefts and vice expose.
Poets are liars, and for verse’s sake
Will make the Gods of human crimes partake.

ends: they do not ask themselves what language or nature is, but use them for their own purposes.”¹⁰ Paz is not saying that the poet is a magician, but rather noting that the poet, like the magician, utilizes rhythm as a means of seduction.

We have encountered a cluster of problems that require clarification. On the issue of skepticism we find that, on the one hand, Nietzsche is keen to deploy modes of skepticism in his writings as part of a program of intellectual enlightenment where it is a valuable component in the pursuit of knowledge and serves to guard against the gullible and the overly enthusiastic. In a note from 1876/7, he writes: “We must live through skeptical periods from time to time if indeed we want to have the right to call ourselves scientific personalities” (CWFN III, 379). In the published writings, one might consider the following contention from *Zarathustra*: “The bold attempt, prolonged mistrust, the cruel No, satiety, the cutting into the living – how seldom do *these* come together! But from such seed is – truth begotten” (*Wahrheit gezeugt*) (Z III 12, “Of Old and New Law-Tables,” 7).¹¹

On the other hand, Nietzsche is critical of a skepticism that places arbitrary limits upon knowledge and that serves to encourage and spread obscurantism. He locates this kind of skepticism in Kant’s critical philosophy (HH II, AOM, 27), in writers and poets such as Emerson, and in art in general. In an unpublished sketch of 1875, “On the Poet,” anticipating what he will go on to publish in the volumes of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche approaches the poet as a deceiver who “*imitates being a knower*,” and argues:

Sleep and dream for the head – that is what the artist is for human beings. He makes things *more valuable*: because people *believe* that what seems more valuable is *truer*, more real. Even today, poetic people (for example, Emerson or Lipiner) prefer to seek the limits of knowledge, indeed, skepticism, in order to withdraw from the path of logic. They want uncertainty because then the magician, intuition and great effects upon the soul become possible once again.¹²

The fairness of Nietzsche’s criticism of Emerson is debatable. We can note that Emerson himself insists on poetry’s “science” and on the poet as a “truer logician.”¹³ Indeed, he names poetry “the *gai science*.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Paz 1973, 42.

¹¹ For further insight into how to read Nietzsche as a skeptic, see Ansell-Pearson 2021.

¹² Gilman, Blair, and Parent 1989, 243–244. ¹³ Emerson 2010, 20.

¹⁴ Emerson 2010, 19.

He conceives of poetry in these terms because, he thinks, the “poet is enamored of thoughts and laws.”¹⁵ In this essay on “Poetry and Imagination,” Emerson several times appeals to poetry as a species of *sanity*, and he means this in two senses: first, in the sense of showing “that life should not be mean,” and with the aid of it although we may lose our wit we gain our reason;¹⁶ and, second, in the sense that the poetry that elevates us will dissipate the dreams under which we reel and stagger, bringing in new thoughts and a sense of the heroic.¹⁷ “The grandeur of our life exists in spite of us.”¹⁸

On the issue of Plato and his instigation of the quarrel between philosophy and poetry, Nietzsche is not, of course, unequivocally lending his support to Plato’s desire to banish the poets from the *polis*. Rather, his aim is to raise a suspicion or two about art and to argue that unless it attaches itself to a specific noble task, such as being an educator and cultivating the self, art will lose sight of its true vocation and become little more than a medium for giving vent to barbarizing impulses. As Santayana notes, although Plato’s judgment on the arts and poetry has been generally condemned by philosophers, it is eminently rational, “justified by the simplest principles of morals.”¹⁹ The relation between (idealist) philosophy and poetry is considered afresh in GM, where “Plato versus Homer” is presented as the most complete antagonism, and where it represents a contest between the slandering of earthly, sensual life, including an advocacy of the beyond, and its involuntary idolizer (GM III 25).

The issue of the poets telling lies is a highly complex one in Nietzsche. Cognizance needs to be taken of observations we find in his early notebooks and that assume an especially dramatic form in the story of Zarathustra (Z II 17, “Of the Poets,” and Z IV 14, “The Song of Melancholy”). In the notes for his planned *Philosophenbuch* from the early 1870s, for example, he writes: “Now, however, what is rare and unaccustomed is *more attractive*: the lie is felt as a stimulus. Poetry.”²⁰ In the penetrating unpublished essay “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” from 1873, Nietzsche notes how the human animal allows itself

¹⁵ Emerson 2010, 22. ¹⁶ Emerson 2010, 30. ¹⁷ Emerson 2010, 41.

¹⁸ Emerson 2010, 42.

¹⁹ Santayana 2009, 272. Santayana’s essay contains not only an incisive consideration of Plato on poetry, but also a significant consideration into poetry in relation to the emotions and passions. For a helpful and fair-minded appreciation of Plato on art and the poets, see Janaway 2009, 388–401. See also stimulating essays by Gadamer 1986, 116–123 and 131–140.

²⁰ PT 51.

to be deceived and becomes “enchanted with happiness when the rhapsodist tells him epic fables as if they were true.”²¹ Although the issue is too complex for me to examine in this chapter, I wish to note one key point concerning the teaching of Zarathustra.

Nietzsche has Zarathustra lament the fact that he is a poet since he too, as a suitor of truth, speaks in metaphors and teaches with the aid of parables. However, Zarathustra’s “poetic” teaching that we need to remain true to the earth distinguishes him in Nietzsche’s eyes from the kind of poets he is depicting in the text. As depicted in the book, the poet is a figure who seeks to draw humanity upward to “cloudland,” where humans “set out motley puppets on the clouds and then call them gods and supermen.” Although Zarathustra observes, in a nod to Hamlet’s famous lines – “there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” – that poets dream about the things that lie between heaven and earth, he contends that the poets are too often attached to *heavenly* images, even supra-heavenly ones, and such an attachment reveals their surreptitious character. Hence his exclamation that he is weary “of all the unattainable that is supposed to be reality. Alas, how weary I am of the poets! . . . I cast my net into their sea and sought to catch good fish; but I always drew up the head of some ancient god” (Z II 17, “Of Poets”).²² Nietzsche’s problem with the poet, then, is not that he is a “fool” who tells lies since, as he notes, the lie can serve as a stimulus, but rather with the fact that the poet is too often a figure whose messages to humanity encourage it to have supra-terrestrial hopes.

In aphorism 148 of HH I, poets are said to exist to ease life and their gaze is typically directed backward toward the past. “We can use them,” Nietzsche writes, “as bridges to faraway times and ideas, to dying or deceased religions and cultures. They are, in fact, always and necessarily *epigones*.” In seeking to make our lives easier, poets either turn our gaze away from the toilsome present or aid the present by shining a light upon it from the past, and it is this preoccupation with the past and bygone times that serves to turn them into deeply melancholic figures.

In the second volume of the text, featuring *Mixed Opinions and Maxims* and *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Nietzsche enunciates his expectation

²¹ PT 89.

²² Commentators on *Zarathustra* who have sought to illuminate Nietzsche on the poets in the text include Lampert 1986, 126–132, and Rosen 2004, 162–163. For especially incisive readings of the figuration of the poets and lying in *Zarathustra*, see Hatab 2018 and Tuncel 2014. See also the lengthy treatment in Grundlehner 1986, 184–212.

of the poets of today. He writes of a “poetry of the future” and assigns to the poet a specific task. The new role he assigns to the poet is not to portray present times or to reanimate and condense the past, but rather to intimate the future. The poet is to do this by composing and recomposing “images of beautiful human beings” and indicate that such humans are still possible “*in the midst* of our modern world.” This is not an easy task when we consider what Nietzsche says in aphorism 111 of *Mixed Opinions and Maxims*, chiefly that today’s poets live in too close a proximity to “the sewers of the big cities.” This theme is continued in aphorism 283 of GS, where he writes of the need for “preparatory courageous human beings” – which echoes the preparatory task he assigns to the poets – and who somehow will emerge out of “the sand and slime of present-day civilization and metropolitanism.”

Nietzsche on the Poets and the Passions

Robert Solomon has argued that Nietzsche attacks philosophy’s modern emphasis on epistemology and seeks to return philosophy to its true vocation as a doctrine of the passions (Solomon 2003, 63). However, Solomon’s appreciation of Nietzsche as a “passionate defender of the passionate life” – a thinker, he claims, who wanted to promote living with passion and who writes from the perspective of the passions and not from the supposedly objective perspective of reason and rationality, and who offers an *unrestrained* defense of them – requires a great deal of qualification since Nietzsche’s views on the passions are far subtler and decidedly more complex than this.²³ Moreover, this appreciation of Nietzsche is out of tune with the things he himself says about the passions and cannot aid us in seeking to understand the ways in which he configures the nature and role of the poet in his middle writings.

For example, Nietzsche construes Christianity as in essence a religion of the affects and, as such, it represents a popular protest against philosophy that teaches virtue as “the triumph of reason over affect” (D 58). Nietzsche claims that Christianity, “disallows all moral value to virtue as it was conceived of by philosophers . . . condemns rationality altogether,” and it wants the affects to be revealed in their utmost strength, for example, as “*love of God*,” “*fear before God*,” “*fanatical faith in God*,” and as “*blindest hope for God*” (D 58). He is quite serious

²³ See also Nietzsche in DV 543, where he warns against turning passion into an argument for truth.

when he contends that Christianity has sought to liberate humanity “from the burden of the demands of morality by pointing out a *shorter way to perfection*” (D 59). Just as we cannot eschew the need for “laborious and tedious dialectics, as well as the collection of rigorously tested facts” – since there is no “royal road to truth,” Nietzsche writes, echoing Hegel – so there is no easy path to self-perfection, and those who need and purport to find such a path are simply overweary ones “despairing in the wilderness” (D 59).

In his middle writings, Nietzsche is working with a specific conception of the passions and affects, involving letting ourselves go, not controlling ourselves, and giving free play to our wrath or our desires (HH I 211). Although Nietzsche often employs the word *Affekten*, for the most part he is using the German word for passion, *Leidenschaft*, stemming from the verb *leiden*, meaning to suffer. The word has several connotations worth taking note of. A “passion” takes hold of us and seeks to compel us to some action; it involves suffering precisely because it operates on the level of bodily and psychic feeling or affect; and this may also result in pain and hardship because of what one undergoes and must endure. Attached to a passion are feelings of pleasure and displeasure “so strong,” Nietzsche observes, “that they reduce the intellect to silence or to servitude,” and at this point where the heart replaces the head we speak of passion (*Leidenschaft*) (GS 3). Nietzsche acknowledges that passions are powerful forces of nature that exert their seductions on us. Once we have experienced a passion, Nietzsche observes, it leaves within us an obscure longing for it and so, “It must in fact have provided a sort of pleasure to be scourged with its whip” (HH I 606).

Here Nietzsche’s psychological insight into the character of passion is typically trenchant. He is noticing how human beings prefer a more intense displeasure to a feeble pleasure. Indeed, he is keen for us to acknowledge that human beings strive for an *emotion in itself*, using other human beings only as a means and that is most clearly evident in the example of cruelty. Human beings derive a complex pleasure from what is tragic: “In the dramatic art in general, a human being wants emotions (*Emotionen*), e.g., of compassion, without having to help.” In the case of passionate peoples – he gives the examples of Greeks and Italians – we can observe a delight “in the art of passion (*Leidenschaft*), of emotion in itself (*Emotion an sich*); without it, they are bored” (CWFN 3:413).

In aphorism 211 of HH I, Nietzsche notes, with reference to Homer describing Achilles, that a real writer is one who gives words to the affects and experiences of others. Artists are not themselves persons of great

passion, although they often present themselves as such. Furthermore, although artists may exist as “unbridled individuals,” it is not in their mode of living that they are artists and cultivate and practice their craft. In aphorism 221 on “the revolution in poetry,” he argues that the task of the artist is to freely bound and limit him- or herself in the most severe, even arbitrary way, and to do so to ensure that “naturalizing impulses” are gotten past (HH I 221; compare BGE 188).

If we trace the history of music, for example, we observe how musicians learned *artistic grace*, so bringing “the highest suppleness in movement” (HH I 221). The situation, Nietzsche contends, is different in the case of modern poetry, where there has taken place a “leap into naturalism” (HH I 221). Goethe, Nietzsche notes, inspires us insofar as he made the effort “to bind himself in ever new and varied ways,” but even he could only go as far as continual experimentation permits. In this aphorism, Nietzsche most prizes Voltaire and his “aesthetic moderation,” and he urges his readers to read his play *Mahomet* for evidence of this.²⁴ In Nietzsche’s appreciation, Voltaire is a dramatist who deployed Greek moderation to “restrain a polymorphic soul that encompass tragic thunderstorms”; he had a Greek ear and a Greek aesthetic conscientiousness in his handling of prose discourse.

Indeed, Nietzsche will declare possession of an aesthetic conscience a *sine qua non* for being an artist, since it is the only thing that can prevent the artist and writer from becoming the fanatic of an artistic faction (HH II, AOM, 133). Nietzsche compares Voltaire’s freedom of the spirit and unrevolutionary disposition with the woeful predicament of the modern spirit characterized by restlessness and a hatred of moderation and restraint (HH I 221). Even Shakespeare is referred to by Nietzsche as “the ‘great barbarian’” (HH I 221). Furthermore, whenever we encounter a great artist or poet, we ought to ask ourselves: what is the new constraint this artist or poet has imposed on him- or herself? Nietzsche adds, “For what we call ‘invention’ (with respect to meter, for example), is always this sort of self-imposed fetter.” The successful creative artist or poet, then, is always “dancing in chains” (HH II, WS, 140).

²⁴ At the time Nietzsche is reading Voltaire’s *Mahomet*, he recommends that various people, including his sister Elisabeth, read the play (see letter to her dated February 13, 1881, KSB 6:62, no. 82). However, we need to read carefully here since there is the danger of turning Nietzsche’s so-called positivistic championing of the Enlightenment against forces of reaction into an all-too-timely position against Islam. To avoid this requires a careful analysis of Nietzsche’s insights into and comments on different religions. In GS 347, it is not Islam but Christianity and Buddhism that he describes as promoting fanaticism.

In Homer, for example, it is possible to perceive an abundance of formulas and rules for epic narration “*within* which he had to dance.” At the same time, the poet created a set of new conventions for poets who came after him (HH II, WS, 140). Nietzsche is keen to stress that the clarity, simplicity, and order we associate with ancient Greek art, such as tragedy or the epigram, was not given to them as a gift and we deceive ourselves if we think otherwise. Although periodically subject to “a dark, overflowing flood of mystical impulses, elementary savagery, and gloom,” the Greeks succeeded in returning to the light as good swimmers and divers, “the people of Odysseus” (HH II, AOM, 219).

What are we to make of Nietzsche’s endorsement of the reception of Shakespeare as “the barbarian”?²⁵ Santayana’s definition of the barbarian may be relevant to engaging with how Nietzsche conceives Shakespeare since it focuses on the issue at the very heart of his consideration of the poets: “For the barbarian is the man who regards his passions as their own excuse for being; who does not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their ideal

²⁵ In what was his final work, Harold Bloom reads Nietzsche as “Desiring to be Shakespeare,” and failing this, he “instead became a Shakespearean tragic protagonist” (Bloom 2020, 5). Although there is some truth in what Bloom claims, the picture is a little more complicated. In EH, Nietzsche states that he seeks his “highest formula” for Shakespeare in the fact that he was able to conceive “the type of Caesar,” a creation that shows, he claims, that a great poet creates only by drawing on his own reality (EH III, “Why I Am So Clever,” 4). It is, then, a specific appreciation of Shakespeare that Nietzsche is advancing in this part of EH. One should also note what Nietzsche says in the previous section of the same part of EH, namely that his “artistic taste stands up for the names of Molière, Corneille, and Racine, not without indignation against a wild genius like Shakespeare.” Here Nietzsche departs, then, in artistic taste from the preferences of one of his literary heroes, namely Stendhal, and whom he admires as France’s “last great psychologist” (BGE 39; see also EH XIV “The Wagner Case,” 3). Stendhal favors Shakespearean drama over the seventeenth-century French drama of Racine and company because in “Racinian tragedy . . . there is never any development of the passions . . . Either I am mistaken, or these changes of the passions in the human heart are the most magnificent thing that poetry can hold up to be viewed by the eyes of human beings, whom it at once moves and instructs” (Stendhal 1962, 38). Stendhal gives the example of Macbeth, who, he says, begins as a good man and becomes a bloody monster. For Stendhal, Shakespeare is to be championed over Racine as a tragedian owing to the fact, as he sees it, that the former can better inspire plays that will vitally interest nineteenth-century audiences by giving them “dramatic pleasures” and not merely “epic” ones (Stendhal 1962, 12). He holds that a century of troubles, civil wars, and countless acts of treason and torture had well prepared the subjects of Elizabeth’s reign for this kind of tragedy (Stendhal 1962, 32–33), and he sees parallels with the France of his own time dominated by “factions, tortures, and plots” (Stendhal 1962, 37). Nietzsche was familiar with Stendhal’s text *Racine and Shakespeare*. See KSA 14, 639–642 for references to the text and to notes that Nietzsche makes in 1880.

goal.”²⁶ Both of these operations are at work in Nietzsche, for example, in his efforts to get us to dispense with “fantastic causalities,” such as supernatural ones (D 10), to counter the disdain human beings have had in their history for real causes and consequences, and even for reality itself, to break the spell of the “morality of mores” in which human beings concoct all the higher sentiments of human life – reverence, sublime exaltation, pride, gratitude, and love – from an entirely imaginary “higher world” (D 33), and to cease from turning causes into sinners and consequences into executioners. He makes an appeal for the creation of “new physicians of the soul” who will be trained in identifying real causes and know how to treat the maladies of the soul more effectively (D 52).

In reading Shakespeare as a moralist – in the sense of the French tradition that he greatly admires and that runs from Montaigne through to figures such as Chamfort – Nietzsche holds that although Shakespeare may have reflected a great deal about the passions and possessed a temperament that gave him access to many of them, he was not capable like Montaigne of speaking about them, but instead “placed observations *about*” them in the mouths of several impassioned figures (HH I 176). The result, he claims, is that Shakespeare’s dramas are “full of ideas” to the point “that they make all others seem empty and easily arouse a general antipathy against them” (HH I 176). Nietzsche concludes by arguing that while Shakespeare can be credited with doing honor in his maxims to his model, Montaigne, and acknowledging that they contain some serious thoughts in polished form, they are ultimately “too far-reaching and too finely wrought for the eyes of the theatrical public and therefore ineffective” (HH I 176).²⁷

In drawing attention to aphorisms such as this one my aim is not to defend Nietzsche or to claim that he is an especially perceptive reader of Shakespeare. I readily acknowledge that his readings of literary and philosophical figures are typically tendentious. I highlight such aphorisms to clarify Nietzsche’s thinking about the poets and the passions, and to ensure that we do not construe him on the passions in the uninformative and, in fact, highly misleading way that is encountered in much of the literature – for example, in Robert Solomon’s simple-minded conception of a “passionate” Nietzsche. Nietzsche develops

²⁶ Santayana 1989, 108.

²⁷ For insight into Shakespeare as a sympathetic reader of Montaigne, see Bate 2009, 12, 142, and especially chapter 22, “The Foolosopher,” 382ff. See also Hackett 2022, 335–337.

other insights into Shakespeare in his middle writings that I am unable to discuss in this chapter (see, for example, HH II, AOM, 162, D 240, D 549, and GS 98). In a chapter on “Nietzsche’s Shakespeare,” Andreas Höfele claims to investigate “for the first time, Nietzsche’s relation to Shakespeare in its entire development” (Höfele 2016, “Abstract,” <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198718543.001.0001>). However, except for a discussion of GS 98, no coverage is offered in his chapter of Nietzsche’s reception of Shakespeare in the middle writings. GS 98 is entitled “In Praise of Shakespeare,” and the way Nietzsche concludes it is highly telling since it once again reveals the problems he has with the poets:

Before the whole figure and virtue of Brutus, Shakespeare prostrated himself, feeling unworthy and remote. His witness of this is written in the tragedy. Twice he brings in a poet, and twice he pours such an impatient and ultimate contempt over him and it sounds like a cry – the cry of self-contempt. Brutus, even Brutus, loses patience as the poet enters – conceited, pompous, obtrusive, as poets often are – apparently overflowing with greatness, including moral greatness, although in the philosophy of his deeds and his life he rarely attains even ordinary integrity. (GS 98)

Nietzsche is keen to protect tragedy, including Shakespearean tragedy, from the expectation of offering the audience moral lessons, in which the tragic poet would supply an audience with images of life that seek to turn them against life, when what they need to show is that “It is an *adventure* to live” (D 240, entitled “On the Morality of the Stage”). At the same time, however, he is equally keen to draw attention to Shakespeare’s “gloominess” (D 76), and it is this concern with the gloomy character of the poets that separates Nietzsche from the appreciation of Shakespeare and the passions we encounter in Stendhal. For Nietzsche, too many poets reveal an impatience with themselves and are gloomy on account of their desire to take flight from themselves (he mentions the likes of Byron and Musset); they “resemble stampeding horses, who glean from their own creative work only a short-lived joy and ardor that virtually explodes their veins before falling into so wintery a desolation and woebegoneness” (D 549). The poets thirst to dissolve “beside themselves,” or to dissolve into God and become completely one with him, or, as in the case of Shakespeare, Nietzsche adds, “into images of the most passionate life” (D 549). The poet might even thirst for deeds as a way of diverting the self from itself, as Nietzsche finds in the case of Byron. This suggests to him that in the

most extreme examples we encounter of someone disclosing in their behavior this drive for action, we need to consult the knowledge and experience of the psychiatrist.

One aphorism in *Dawn* enables us to get a grasp on how Nietzsche's artistic taste informs both his appreciation of tragedy (and the arts in general) and his dedication to the cultivation and sublimation of the passions. The aphorism in question bears the ironic and witty title "*Better people!*" It centers on how a modern humanity experiences art and frames an encounter with this experience in the following instructive terms:

Everyone says to me that our art is directed toward the greedy, insatiable, unrestrained, disgusted, harassed people of today and opens up for them an image of bliss, loftiness, and otherworldliness next to their own image of a dissolute wasteland: such that they can for once forget and breathe a sigh of relief, indeed, perhaps they bring back from that forgetting an impulse toward flight and toward turning back. Poor artists with such a public as this! With ulterior motives of such a half-priestly, half-psychiatric bent! How much happier and more fortunate was "our great Corneille," as Madame de Sévigné exclaims with the inflection of a woman in the presence of a complete *man*. (D 191)

Nietzsche goes on in the aphorism to refer to the images of "valiant virtues," "magnanimous sacrifice," and "heroic self-restraint" that Corneille employed to elevate his audience. As he brings the aphorism to a close, we get a glimpse of his model of self-cultivation and his informing his treatment of the passions, as well as his appreciation of the art of the poets:

How differently did he and they love existence, not out of a blind dissolute "will" that one curses because one is unable to kill it, but as a place instead where greatness and humanity are *possible* side by side and where even the strictest constraint of forms, subjugation to princely and priestly arbitrariness, is able to suppress neither pride, nor valor, nor grace, nor the spirit of each individual; on the contrary, it is experienced much more as an *antithetical stimulus and spur* toward innate self-sovereignty (*angeboren Selbstherrlichkeit*) and nobility (*Vornehmheit*), to an inherited power of the will and passion! (*Macht des Wollens und der Leidenschaft*) (D 191)

Living a "passionate" existence for Nietzsche does not mean giving free and spontaneous rein to a destructive egocentric energy. In his middle writings, such as D, for example, Nietzsche makes the goal of cultivation clear: self-sovereignty and nobility of character. Nietzsche champions egoism in his later reflections on nobility in BGE, but always

as a mark of one's sovereign achievement, or what he calls having respect for oneself (BGE 287). He insists that this sovereignty is not a matter of vanity; indeed, it would be more accurate to describe it as "humility" or "modesty" (BGE 261). If one has this proud consciousness of one's sovereignty, one does not need the atavism of vanity, relying on the opinions of others and seeking to seduce their good opinions. With respect to the passions, Nietzsche writes in BGE of living with a "tremendous and proud composure" in which one condescends to one's affects, sitting on them as we might a horse or an ass, but also knowing how to use their stupidity as well their fire (BGE 284).

I will now turn my attention to illuminating further the second aspect of Santayana's helpful insight into the nature of the barbarian, which is centered on a conception of the goal for the cultivation of the passions, a goal that guides Nietzsche's thinking on the task of the poets. I shall begin by focusing attention on aphorism 99 of *Mixed Opinions and Maxims*. In it he invokes the idea of a new art of poetry and makes clear that the poet is to cultivate a quite specific attitude toward the passions. Let me first attend to Nietzsche's concern with the poet as a teacher of humankind as this will serve to better illuminate what he is proposing in this aphorism.

Nietzsche laments the fact that, as he sees it, poets are no longer teachers. Aphorism 172 is devoted to exploring this topic: "However strange it may seem to our age: there were once poets and artists whose souls were beyond the passions, with their convulsions and raptures, and who therefore took pleasure in purer materials, worthier human beings, more delicate combinations and solutions" (HH II, AOM, 172). Today, Nietzsche reflects, all the talk amongst artists is on unchaining the will, liberating life, and smashing things. In previous ages, however, the artist was conceived as a tamer of the will, a transformer of animals, and a creator and sculptor of human beings. Whereas the ancient Greeks saw the poet as a teacher of adults, as someone who himself "became a good poem or a beautiful creation," today we are presented with art that is the reflection, even celebration, of little more than "a cave of desires, ruinously overgrown with flowers, prickly plants and poisonous weeds," so presenting the thinker with an object for melancholy reflection because the "most noble and most precious now grow up already in ruins."

Informing Nietzsche's consideration of the poet is a quite specific conception of the role and task of art and one that he is keen to hold on to. He contests the idea that the artwork of the artist is the real thing

and is all that matters. Against this modern idea he wants us to see and appreciate the artwork as an appendage of life. Art should exist, he ventures, first and foremost to embellish life, aiding the task of making ourselves tolerable to ourselves and pleasing to others: “with this task before its eyes, it restrains and reins us in, creates forms for social intercourse, binds ill-bred people to the laws of propriety, purity, politeness, of speaking and keeping silent at the right time” (HH II, AOM, 174). Furthermore, art needs to focus its energy on concealing and reinterpreting everything ugly, “those painful, frightening, disgusting things that will, despite all our efforts, break out again and again in accordance with the descent of human nature” (HH II, AOM, 174). In particular, and with regards to this focus, art needs to address the problems presented by human passions, “to the soul’s pains and fears and allow the *meaning* behind whatever is unavoidably or insurmountably ugly to shine through” (HH II, AOM, 174). A human being, therefore, who feels within him or herself a surplus of “embellishing, concealing, and reinterpreting energies” will “seek to discharge this surplus in artworks” (HH II, AOM, 174). In aphorism 177, Nietzsche discloses his interest in the perfecting of the human animal and with reference to the task of art, and he ends this aphorism by noting that it is perhaps the Greeks who, in the ideal of Athena, cast their gaze the farthest of any human being thus far (HH II, AOM, 177). The nature of the appeal he makes here to the female warrior Athena is perhaps obvious: she represents for him a figure of unity, namely the unity of culture involving justice, wisdom, and the arts.²⁸ In aphorism 173 of the same text, he conceives of art as the energetic surplus of a wise and harmonious individual:

Forward and backward glance. An art as it flows forth from Homer, Sophocles, Theocritus, Calderón, Racine, Goethe as the *surplus* of a wise and harmonious mode of life – that is the right sort of art, toward which we finally learn to reach when we have ourselves become wiser and more harmonious, not the barbaric, however delightful bubbling over of heated and brightly colored things from an untamed, chaotic soul, which we had earlier, as youths, understood to be art.²⁹

With these insights into Nietzsche’s thinking about art in mind, let me now turn to his conception of a poetry of the future. Aphorism 99 of

²⁸ For instructive insight into Athena, see Deacy 2008.

²⁹ In HH II, AOM, 173, Nietzsche stresses an additional important insight: “it is self-evident that at certain times of life an art that is overwrought, agitated, averse to anything orderly, monotonous, simple or logical is an essential need that artists *must* acknowledge if the soul is not to discharge itself at such times in another way, by all sorts of mischief and bad behaviour.”

Mixed Opinions and Maxims is entitled “The Poet As a Signpost to the Future.” He proposes that all the surplus poetic strength available to contemporary human beings needs to be dedicated to a principal single goal, namely not simply portraying present times, and most definitely not seeking to reanimate and condense the past, but rather showing the way to a possible future. The poet’s task is clearly not that of an imaginative political scientist who seeks to anticipate in their images more favorable social and cultural conditions that might then give rise to new human beings; rather, the poet needs to take the lead from artists of earlier times who sought to compose and recompose images of “divine human beings.” Now, though, the task is to create images of “beautiful human beings,” sniffing out cases where “*in the midst of*” the modern world, and without withdrawing from reality, the beautiful and great spirit can be found. If poets commit themselves to this task, they will help create the future. In writing their poems, the new poets will be distinguished, he goes on to elaborate, “by seeing to be closed off from and protected against the breath and heat of the *passions*.”

Nietzsche then spells out why he holds to this view. If the poets focus on “smashing the entire human frame,” they will be overburdened by such a task and may well end up producing little more than “mocking laughter” and “gnashing their teeth,” simply because they will be dealing with “everything tragic and comic in the usual old sense.” In short, the danger of the poets who pursue the task set in this way will be one of indulging in cynicism and promoting despair, and so allowing a mood of profound melancholy to take root. Instead, Nietzsche encourages poets to develop the “innate sense of moderation,” along with “strength” and “mildness,” cultivating “a level ground that gives rest and pleasure to the foot, a shining heaven mirrored in faces and events,” and in which knowledge and art flow together into a new unity. What is needed from the poets is “the grace of seriousness” and not “the impatience of division.” He ends the aphorism by referring to this art of the poets as being informed by an “inclusive, general, golden background” upon which, and for the first time, “the delicate *differences* among embodied ideals would make up the actual *painting* – that of an ever-increasing majesty.” Although several paths lead to this poetry of the future from the example of Goethe, the need remains for many more “good pathfinders” and a greater power than can be found in today’s poets, who are little more than “inoffensive depictees of semi-animals and of an immaturity and immoderation that they confuse with force and nature.” The poets will help build the future by composing images of beautiful and

great spirits that will stimulate envy and imitation. Such spirits will be shown embodying themselves “in harmonious, well-proportioned circumstances,” revealing “visibility, durability, and exemplarity.”

The notions and ideas Nietzsche utilizes in this aphorism continue to resonate in his subsequent and later texts – for example, in the critique he offers of the sublime human beings in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* who return gloomily from the forest of knowledge, failing to learn the lessons of beauty and who are depicted as tense, wild beasts. Nietzsche equates beauty with gracefulness and a nonviolent will: “When power grows gracious and descends into the visible: I call such descending beauty” (Z II 13, “Of the Sublime Ones”). The discourse on the sublime ones in *Zarathustra* clarifies Nietzsche’s sense of beauty, though much remains teasingly enigmatic. We remain merely “sublime” when we continue to hide our “sportive monsters,” ultimately presenting ourselves as something “ugly.” Nietzsche here is opposing the attraction to the sublime, where it is conceived as an experience of supersensible transcendence and that ends up with little more than a divided and torn self.³⁰ Like Emerson, Nietzsche subscribes to the view that beauty is, in Emerson’s words, “the most enduring quality and the most ascending quality,” bound up with “the grace of movement.”³¹

An intriguing note from the *Nachlass* of the autumn of 1880 clearly reveals Nietzsche’s attachment to the cultivation of new and beautiful human beings. In this note, the task, he discloses, is not simply to demonstrate or display love toward human beings, but rather to take joy in the human: “And to prevent this being ridiculous, we have to help to provide what gives us joy.” He then adds:

[I]ntegrity on our part and the recognition of an unfamiliar phenomenon, the development of taste, which needs to see *beautiful, joyful* humans, must lead the way. This is where a *selection* takes place: we seek out those who provide us with enjoyment and assist us and flee from the others – that is the right morality! . . . We stamp out the wild animals and we breed and tame: that is a great instinct. We *ourselves deteriorate* at the sight of the ugly and contact with it; build a dam! Level it into a commodity! And so on. If we just consort with those who please and uplift us, groups and classes will form which in their turn occupy an alienated position, close or remote, in just such a case. This is *very good*, a necessary construction by society, out of integrity! (KSA 9, 6 [203])³²

³⁰ See also “Of War and Warriors” (X) in Z I: “Are you ugly? Very well, my brothers! Take the sublime about you, the mantle of the ugly!”

³¹ Emerson 2003, 154–155.

³² Nietzsche also discusses what he calls “people of beautiful culture” in D 513 and D 515.

The concern with the cultivation of “beautiful” human beings is a constant one in Nietzsche. For example, in the penultimate aphorism of BGE, Dionysus is portrayed enigmatically as the tempter god and a philosopher who possesses the intellectual and personal virtues of courage and honesty, as well as philosophy’s traditional love of wisdom. Nietzsche presents such a god and philosopher as the teacher of self-cultivation and self-mastery. He is “the born piper of consciences whose voice knows how to descend into the underworld of every soul.” This god loves humans, conceived as “agreeable, brave, ingenious” animals who know how to make their way through every labyrinth, and who he wishes to make stronger and more profound and beautiful (BGE 295).

Nietzsche and Stifter

According to Ernst Bertram, the main inspiration on Nietzsche with regards to the idea of beautiful human beings comes from the writings of the Austrian poet and storyteller Adalbert Stifter, especially his novel *Indian Summer* (*Der Nachsommer*), first published in 1857.³³ Indeed, we find extensive discussions of beauty in Stifter’s novel, along with appeals to the creation of “beautiful human figures” in painting and in art in general. As Martin and Erika Swales note in their study, reflecting on Nietzsche’s interest in Stifter, it at first sight seems an unlikely meeting of minds. They venture the explanation that Nietzsche was well attuned to the *unzeitgemäss* impulses informing Stifter’s art and that he admired him “because of what he perceived as the embattled integrity of his art, its uncompromising transcendence of the tangle and turmoil of human passion, its willed calm and repose beyond heartbreak and weariness.”³⁴ In addition, they note what Bertram also sees in Nietzsche’s appreciation of Stifter’s letters: “Nietzsche esteemed Stifter’s fierce resistance to his times, to their banality and meretriciousness.”³⁵

Although Stifter’s influence on Nietzsche is at its strongest in his middle writings, notably key aphorisms in *Mixed Opinions and Maxims*, Nietzsche’s admiration of him is revealed in his notebooks of the late period. For example, in reflecting on what is born in the nineteenth century from relative plenitude, revealing a self-confidence, he remarks, “among poets,

³³ Bertram 2009, 208. In addition to his study of Nietzsche, Bertram was the author of an earlier appreciation of Stifter. See Bertram 1907.

³⁴ Swales 1984, 21. ³⁵ Swales 1984, 22.

e.g., Stifter and Gottfried Keller are signs of greater strength, inner well-being” (WP 1029; trans. Kaufmann and Hollingdale). Moreover, in a note from October–November 1888, Nietzsche discloses that *Indian Summer* is the only German book after Goethe that has magic for him (KSA 13:634, 24 [10]). The Indian summer in Stifter’s novel, completed when he was fifty-two years old, refers to the blossoming time of one’s life, “the time when the roses cultivated through many hard years of toil burst forth in full bloom.”³⁶ It is precisely this time Nietzsche is referring to when in the note of October–November 1888 he writes of an autumnal mood of the soul, “golden and sweetening,” telling of an “October sun” of profound serenity. In aphorism 338 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Nietzsche writes of the “constantly sunny October air” as an atmosphere where Italy and Finland “have come together in union, in a place that seems to be home to all the silvery tints of nature: – how happy is he who can say: ‘There is certainly much that is greater and more beautiful in nature, but *this* I find to be intimate and familiar to me, related by blood, indeed, even more than that.’” We can also note the way Nietzsche depicts this mood and experience in “Of the Blissful Isles” in Z: “Thus, like figs do these teachings fall to you, my friends: now drink their juice and eat their sweet flesh! It is autumn all around and clear sky and afternoon. Behold what abundance is around us! And it is fine to gaze out upon distant seas from the midst of superfluity.”

In the published writings, it is in *The Wanderer and His Shadow* that Nietzsche expresses his admiration for Stifter’s book. If we leave to one side the writings of Goethe, especially the conversations with Eckermann, “the best German book that exists,” Nietzsche writes, then, he continues, only four German books remain that merit being read again and again: “Lichtenberg’s aphorisms, the first book of Jung-Stilling’s biography, Adalbert Stifter’s *Nachsommer* and Gottfried Keller’s *Leute von Seldwyla*” (HH II, WS, 109). In Bertram’s incisive appreciation, Nietzsche is seen, in fact, as more strongly affected by the pedagogical utopia depicted in Stifter’s *Indian Summer* than he was by an Eckermann mood of late classicism and humanism, and whose end Nietzsche intuited and saw reflected in Stifter’s novel in terms of a “melancholy transfiguration” (Bertram 2009, 208). In the novel, Nietzsche would have found references to several poets of concern to him, including Homer, Shakespeare, and Goethe, along with discussions between the main characters on a range of topics that, we can surmise, resonated

³⁶ Blackhall 1948, 15.

deeply with him, including reflections on life in the city contrasted with life in the country, on the need to approach the study of the human animal and its history through the lens of the natural sciences, on the importance of beauty in life, on the role of the poets, on the nature of philosophy, and on the need to master the emotions.³⁷ In the chapter entitled “Die Erweiterung,” the poets are referred to as “the greatest benefactors of mankind, indeed, as ‘the priests of the beautiful (*die Priester des Schönen*).’”³⁸ Indeed, according to one commentator, love of beauty, including nature, the human body, art, and human relations, is the basic theme of the novel.³⁹

Stifter saw himself not as a Goethe, but simply as his kin, and in his writings, “the seed of the pure, noble, simple goes out to men’s hearts” in an attempt to direct their minds and lives away from the “odious, disgusting nihilism” that surrounds them.⁴⁰ Indeed, in the preface to *Motley Stones*, Stifter anticipates the principal features of decadence that will come to occupy so much of the thinking found in Nietzsche’s late texts, such as TI, CW, and A:

Declining peoples first lose their sense of moderation. They strive for isolated particulars, they fling themselves shortsightedly on narrow and trifling things, they raise the conditional above the universal ... their art depicts what is one-sided what is valid from one perspective only, then what is disjointed dissonant bizarre, eventually what excites and tantalizes the senses ... the individual scorns the whole, pursuing his pleasure and his ruin.⁴¹

W. H. Bruford argues that, for us today, Stifter’s novel has a strong suggestion of the faint luster and enigmatic Milky Way gleam that Nietzsche saw radiating around German thought and literature and

³⁷ In the novel, it is *King Lear* that is given prominence. Although Nietzsche’s corpus includes references to several of Shakespeare’s plays, *King Lear* is not one of them. What interests the hero of Stifter’s novel about the play are the strength of the emotions portrayed and acted out in it, and the fear of going mad. For valuable insight into the references to *Lear* in Stifter, see Gump 1974, 104, 115, and Sjögren 1972, 93.

³⁸ Stifter 2005, 334; see also Stifter 1994, 7 and 2021, 3. One might here compare Emerson’s reflections on the nature and function of the poet “or the man of Beauty”: “The sign and credentials of the poet are that he announces that which no man has foretold” (Emerson 2000, 290).

³⁹ Gump 1974, 99–100. ⁴⁰ Stifter cited in Bruford 1975, 130.

⁴¹ Stifter 1994, 13 and 2021, 8. In the preface to CW, Nietzsche discloses that the problem that has occupied him the most is the problem of decadence. In section 5, he refers to the “total sickness,” centered on an “over-excitement of the neurological mechanism,” and in section 7, he conceives literary decadence as a situation where “The whole does not live at all any more: it is cobbled together, calculated, synthetic, and artifact. –” (CW; trans. Norman).

roundly criticized, but this is a myopic appreciation of Stifter's novel (he is referring to D 190, where Nietzsche references the likes of Schiller, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Schelling). Stifter, we should note, was a keen observer of nature and a student of the natural sciences, and they play a large part in *Indian Summer*.⁴² As one commentator has noted, "Science and Art are the two educative factors of most importance in *Der Nachsommer* and they synthesize in the garden of the 'Rosenhaus.'"⁴³ Indeed, in the novel, the main character, a young man named Heinrich Drendorf, and a student of the natural sciences, confides that it is the history of the Earth that represents the most stimulating and promising history there is, "where man is only an interpolation, who knows how small a one, and can be superseded by other histories of perhaps higher beings."⁴⁴ In addition, we can note that in the chapter "Die Erweiterung," Drendorf distances himself from bombastic writers who fail to "portray Nature as it is within and outside the human," but instead "make it more beautiful, seeking to elicit certain effects . . . In natural science I had gotten used to observing the characteristics of things, to value those qualities and pay homage to their essential nature. I found no qualities whatsoever amongst the authors of bombast (*Dichtern des Schwulstes*)." He concludes: "it seemed the height of ridiculousness that someone who had learned nothing was trying to create something."⁴⁵

Hannah Arendt identifies Stifter's greatness in the way he brings out into the open "the last implications of the philosophy of man that underlies the German educational novel." Stifter, she suggests, is "the true heir of Goethe's prose," and for whom *Wilhelm Meister* "probably was the always-present model." She describes Stifter as the greatest landscape painter in literature, even greater than Goethe: "someone who possesses the magic wand to transform all visible things into words and all visible movements – the movement of the horse as well as that of the river or the road – into sentences."⁴⁶ Although Arendt provides a rich appreciation of Stifter, his novel can be too hastily interpreted in terms of the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. J. P. Stern offers an astute description of the novel when he notes:

The hero gets older but time stands still. A state of finality replaces the provisional and experimental mode of the *Bildungsroman*, but it isn't the finality of

⁴² For an instructive appreciation of this aspect of Stifter, see Wiedemann 2004, especially chapters 1, 5, and 6.

⁴³ Blackhall 1948, 319.

⁴⁴ Stifter 2005 328 and 2009, 192; for echoes of this thought in Nietzsche, see D 45 and 551.

⁴⁵ Stifter 2005, 329, 193. ⁴⁶ Arendt 2007, 110–111.

experience as we know it. The journey isn't a journey but a composition, a still life; that is, an assembling of the diverse elements of *Bildung* – moral, spiritual, and emotional as well as scientific and aesthetic – into a unified whole.⁴⁷

Bruford notes the heathen, anti-Christian sentiments that inform the novel: "Instead of the hope of salvation, the inhabitants of the world of *Der Nachsommer* have before them the ideal of a truly civilized life on earth, a life fashioned to match their disciplined human desires."⁴⁸ Indeed, it is my conviction that when Nietzsche refers in GS to courageous human beings emerging out of "the sand and slime of present-day civilization and metropolitanism," he is drawing inspiration from Stifter (GS 283). More recently, Samuel Frederick has developed an appreciation of the novel as an exercise in post-narrative. He argues persuasively that Stifter's aim of undermining the narrative conventions of the novel, as well as the expectations of the reader, represent an attempt to tell a story without a story, "a story that would not just convey, but enact beauty and truth, without succumbing to plot's constricting devices, which only play into the public's predilection for base pleasures."⁴⁹

Margaret Gump has it right, I think, when she notes that admirers of Stifter's *Nachsommer* share the perception of having come across something unique. The novel is best approached in terms of its uniqueness, and not simply as an *Entwicklungsroman* or *Bildungsroman*. The education of the hero, who is *already* educated at the start of the novel, is not staged in terms of trial, error, and guilt.⁵⁰ As one commentator has noted, Heinrich is prepared to probe the nature of existence, "to the very frontier of death and meaninglessness. Though terrified of the void, he resists the seduction of despair by summoning up the forms he has come to love."⁵¹ Gump is surely right when she states that the book will never become a popular novel (indeed, the popular judgment will always be that it is a strong contender for being the most boring novel ever written). It will, however, Gump argues, always be appreciated as a great work of art by the happy few, borrowing the phrase from Stendhal.⁵² Nietzsche is one of these.

⁴⁷ Stern 1971, 120. ⁴⁸ Bruford 1975, 145. ⁴⁹ Frederick 2012, 167.

⁵⁰ Gump 1974, 93; see also Sjögren 1972, 88–96. ⁵¹ Sjögren 1972, 89.

⁵² Gump 1974, 117. The phrase "the happy few," denoting those of like mind and taste, is first deployed by Stendhal in a letter he composes to Edouard Mournier in 1804. It is then used for the dedication to the beginning of the second volume of his *Histoire de la peinture en Italie*, published in 1817. Léon Blum notes the affinity to Nietzsche and writes that a characteristic of "Beylism" "is that it relates exclusively to an elite. Stendhal

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to cast light on Nietzsche's appreciation of the poets in his middle writings.⁵³ His suspicion about the poets continues to express itself in the writings of his late period, such as BGE (see 269 where he refers to the likes of Byron, Musset, Poe, Leopardi, Kleist, and Gogol). His impatience is well expressed in this note from 1885:

Against false idealism, where exaggerated subtlety alienates the best natures in the world. What a pity that the whole of southern Europe has lost the inheritance of that bound sensuality through the abstinence of the clergy! And it's fair that such Shelleys, Hölderlins, Leopardis perish, I don't think much of such people. It amuses me to think of the revenge that the rough naturalness of nature takes in such people, e.g. when I hear that Leopardi used to masturbate and later became impotent. (KSA, 11:451, 34 [95])

As we have seen, a key part of Nietzsche's appreciation centers on the poet's relation to the passions. However, there is another dimension to his thinking on the poets in his middle writings that I wish to draw attention to in my conclusion, and this is his conception of the poet as a seer. The main text to consider in this regard is D.

For Schopenhauer, the poet is the universal human being and the mirror of humanity who brings what it feels and does to its own consciousness.⁵⁴ For Nietzsche, by contrast, the task of the poet is to assume the role of a seer. This appreciation is in evidence in aphorism 551 of D, where he appeals to poets to once again desire to become what they were once held to be: "*seers, who recounted to us something of the possible! If only they wanted to let us experience in advance something of the future virtues! Or of virtues that will never exist on earth, although they could exist somewhere in the world – of purple-glowing galaxies and whole Milky Ways of the beautiful! Where are you, you astronomers of the ideal?*"

The contrast with Schopenhauer reveals an important difference between the two thinkers and highlights a distinctive feature of Nietzsche's thinking, namely his futurism and concern with the

writes and thinks only for 'the happy few,' for the small number of original personalities who dare to violate 'the great principle of the epoch: be like everyone else'" (Blum 1962, 102). For a more recent, instructive consideration of Stendhal's "happy few," see Pearson 1988, 3–18.

⁵³ For instructive insight into Shelley's idealism, see Santayana's essay "Shelley: Or the Poetic Value of Revolutionary Principles," in Santayana 1968. For other references to Shelley in Nietzsche, see SE III, and BGE 245.

⁵⁴ Schopenhauer 2010, 276.

future.⁵⁵ Schopenhauer famously has no hope in the future. The solution to the problem of existence for human beings is aesthetic (contemplation) and ascetic (renunciation). Georg Simmel astutely noted that Schopenhauer's pessimism is not drawn from positive pain so much as it is derived from ennui, including the dulling monotony of days and years. "It is the absence of the idea of evolution which condemns the world and mankind to always being the same, without solace."⁵⁶

For Nietzsche, by contrast, there are "possibilities of life" (HH I 261), and the human being remains the undetermined animal (BGE 62).⁵⁷ Although we may be inclined to associate this futural dimension of Nietzsche's thinking with his late writings, such as BGE, it is fully in play and at work in his middle writings, especially the second volume of HH, D, and GS. Indeed, in D, Nietzsche dedicates his thinking to the future and sees such dedication as part of the magnanimity of the thinker. Unlike Rousseau and Schopenhauer, who professed to dedicate their lives to truth – taking their inspiration from the motto found in Juvenal's *Satires* – Nietzsche aims to dedicate truth to life, and by "life" here he means the furtherance and growth of human life, including discovering and creating new possibilities.⁵⁸ Nietzsche contends that both Rousseau and Schopenhauer sought in knowledge only a mirror of their characters and maintains that "knowledge would be in a sorry state if it were meted out to every thinker only as it suited his person! And thinkers would be in a sorry state if their vanity were so great that they could endure only this!" (D 459). Although Nietzsche's contention may not do full justice to the likes of Rousseau and Schopenhauer and the contribution each makes to the stock of human knowledge, it serves to reveal an important aspect of his project. It is in the context of his concerns with the future, and perhaps especially his commitment to cultivating and perfecting human beings, that his reflections on the poets can best be understood and appreciated, including his critique of the vanity of the artists and his call for poets to assume the responsibilities of a new task (GS 87).

⁵⁵ For insight into this aspect of Nietzsche, see Loeb 2018. ⁵⁶ Simmel 1986, 8–9.

⁵⁷ The conception of "(beautiful) possibilities of life" first appears in Nietzsche in his reflections on the pre-Platonic philosophers. See KSA 8, 6 [48].

⁵⁸ Rousseau employs Juvenal's motto – *vitam impendere vero* – in his letter to D'Alembert on the theatre. Schopenhauer employs the motto for the frontispiece of his two-volume work *Parerga and Paralipomena*.

In having a dedication to the passion of knowledge, it is important for Nietzsche that we cultivate a respect for the integrity of knowledge: knowledge and its pursuit do not make us better or happier human beings, only more profound ones. Nietzsche worries that the poets want only the happiness of the knowledgeable (D 450). Furthermore, in pursuing knowledge we should be seeking truth and not remedies for ourselves. However, although we need to respect what is entailed in upholding the integrity of knowledge – including the coldness, dryness, and inhumanity of science or scholarship (D 424) – Nietzsche advocates that to “the true nature and naturalness of *Wissenschaft*” a new age may commence “that discovers the most powerful beauty in the ‘wild, ugly’ parts of *Wissenschaft*, just as it was only since Rousseau that one first discovered a feeling for the beauty of the Alps and the desert” (D 427).⁵⁹ In D, he refers to the realism of contemporary artists and suggests today that our happiness may reside in what is realistic, “in having the most acute senses possible ... not therefore *in* reality but *in knowing about reality* ... Science has gained such a profound and widespread effect that artists of this century ... have already become the true glorifiers of scientific ‘ecstasies’ (*wissenschaftlichen ‘Seligkeiten’*)!” (D 433). Nietzsche goes so far as to maintain that “knowledge even of the ugliest reality is itself beautiful,” and he readily acknowledges that there is no such thing as the “beautiful in itself” (D 550). On the one hand, then, we can say that the realm of beauty is getting bigger for us moderns (D 468). On the other hand, we may come to appreciate that those who pursue knowledge in the spirit of the joyful science serve to increase the amount of beauty in the world: “knowledge places its beauty not merely around things but, in the long run, into things – may future humanity bear witness to this proposition!” (D 550).

In his *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau imagines himself a dweller “in the dazzling halls of Aurora ... playing with the rosy fingers of the Dawn.”⁶⁰ He is keen to ensure that what he calls the “matutine intellect of the poet,” and that dwells in this auroral atmosphere, keeps itself “in advance of the glare of philosophy.”⁶¹ By contrast Nietzsche is a thinker and writer who, without fearfulness and in a spirit of serene cheerfulness (*Heiterkeit*), bestows on philosophy the task of heralding and prefiguring the era of new dawns.

⁵⁹ In her book *Winter in Majorca* (1842), George Sand writes: “Rousseau is the true Christopher Columbus of Alpine poetry” (Sand 1956, 11).

⁶⁰ Thoreau 1998, 151. ⁶¹ Thoreau 1998, 49–50.

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Poet and bird. – The bird Phoenix showed the poet a flaming scroll turning into ashes. “Do not be terrified!” it said, “it is your work! It does not possess the spirit of the times and still less the spirit of those who are against the times: consequently, it has to be burned. But it is a good sign. There are many types of dawn.” (D 568)⁶²

⁶² My thanks to James Porter for his helpful suggestions for improving this chapter in places. Thanks also to Daniel W. Conway, Marta Faustino, Nardina Kaur, Levan Kobakhidze, and Paul S. Loeb for encouragement and advice.