

THE AGE OF EARLY MODERNISM

1871–1914



FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Selection from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

The German thinker Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) is a key, though paradoxical, figure in Western thought. Supremely influential on the diverse minds of his own day and those of succeeding generations (see Freud, Sartre, and Beauvoir), he nonetheless felt an extreme psychological isolation from European culture. He eventually slipped into a paralyzing madness (perhaps the result of syphilis) for the last eleven years of his life. Even so, in his writings he registered his poignantly ambivalent vision of the emerging nihilism—belief in nothing—that has characterized the West since 1900. He was both a prophet of Modernism, the century-long movement (1870–1970) that sought to wipe the cultural slate clean of both the Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions, as well as a prophet of Post-Modernism, Modernism's successor starting around 1970. Post-Modernism aims at an open-ended, indeterminate set of attitudes democratically embracing the contributions, tastes, and ideas of many groups of people of all races and all countries, past and present.

Nietzsche is also one of the most passionate and misunderstood writers in the West, in part because German Nazis in the 1930s made him their favorite philosopher and linked him to their campaign against the Jews and in favor of Aryan superiority. He is also misunderstood through his own doing, for Nietzsche's thought is clouded by an excess of adolescent emotion and his writing style is filled with aphorisms, or pithy sayings, that are easily misinterpreted when quoted out of context. Today Nietzsche's linkage to Nazism has been exposed as false, since his writings repeatedly ridicule anti-Semites and German nationalists. Nietzsche's linkage to Nazism is now viewed as a joint fabrication by Nazis who twisted his ideas to support their cause and by his sister, a Nazi sympathizer and his literary executor, who edited his works to make this connection. As to interpretive problems arising from his style, that remains a central concern for all readers of this challenging writer.

Reading the Selection

This selection from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) offers an example of Nietzsche's striking, biblical-sounding prose. Two themes dominate here: uncompromising hostility to religion and emphatic support of the idea of the Will to Power. He was the first major Western thinker to break completely with religion ("God is dead") and deny the truth of all transcendent belief.

Much of his thought, such as radical perspectivism and rejection of universal values, was simply an attempt to come to terms with the full meaning of a godless world.



Thus Spake Zarathustra

Part I

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When Zarathustra came into the next town, which lies on the edge of the forest, he found many people gathered together in the market place; for it had been promised that there would be a tightrope walker. And Zarathustra spoke thus to the people:

"I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?"

"All beings so far have created something beyond themselves; and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to man, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too, man is more ape than any ape.

"Whoever is the wisest among you is also a mere conflict and cross between plant and ghost. But do I bid you become ghosts or plants?"

"Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth! I beseech you, my brothers, remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes! Poison-mixers are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying and poisoned themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so let them go.

"Once the sin against God was the greatest sin; but God died, and these sinners died with him. To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing, and to esteem the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth.

"Once the soul looked contemptuously upon the body, and then this contempt was the highest: she wanted the body meager, ghastly, and starved. Thus she hoped to escape it and the earth. Oh, this soul herself was still meager, ghastly, and starved: and cruelty was the lust of this soul. But you, too, my brothers, tell me: what does your body proclaim of your soul? Is not your soul poverty and filth and wretched contentment?"

"Verily, a polluted stream is man. One must be a sea to be able to receive a polluted stream without becoming unclean. Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this sea; in him your great contempt can go under.

"What is the greatest experience you can have? It is the hour of the great contempt. The hour in which your

happiness, too, arouses your disgust, and even your reason and your virtue.

"The hour when you say, 'What matters my happiness? It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment. But my happiness ought to justify existence itself.'

"The hour when you say, 'What matters my reason? Does it crave knowledge as the lion his food? It is poverty and filth and wretched contentment.'

"The hour when you say, 'What matters my virtue? As yet it has not made me rage. How weary I am of my good and my evil! All that is poverty and filth and wretched contentment.'

"The hour when you say, 'What matters my justice? I do not see that I am flames and fuel. But the just are flames and fuel.'

"The hour when you say, 'What matters my pity? Is not pity the cross on which he is nailed who loves man? But my pity is no crucifixion.'

"Have you yet spoken thus? Have you yet cried thus? Oh, that I might have heard you cry thus!"

"Not your sin but your thrift cries to heaven; your meanness even in your sin cries to heaven.

"Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the frenzy with which you should be inoculated?"

"Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this lightning, he is this frenzy."

When Zarathustra had spoken thus, one of the people cried: "Now we have heard enough about the tightrope walker; now let us see him too!" And all the people laughed at Zarathustra. But the tightrope walker, believing that the word concerned him, began his performance.

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When Zarathustra had spoken these words he beheld the people again and was silent. "There they stand," he said to his heart; "there they laugh. They do not understand me; I am not the mouth for these ears. Must one smash their ears before they learn to listen with their eyes? Must one clatter like kettledrums and preachers of repentance? Or do they believe only the stammerer?"

"They have something of which they are proud. What do they call that which makes them proud? Education they call it; it distinguishes them from goatherds. That is why they do not like to hear the word 'contempt' applied to them. Let me then address their pride. Let me

speak to them of what is most contemptible: but that is the last man."

And thus spoke Zarathustra to the people: "The time has come for man to set himself a goal. The time has come for man to plant the seed of his highest hope. His soil is still rich enough. But one day this soil will be poor and domesticated, and no tall tree will be able to grow in it. Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer shoot the arrow of his longing beyond man, and the string of his bow will have forgotten how to whirl!

"I say unto you: one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star. I say unto you: you still have chaos in yourselves.

"Alas, the time is coming when man will no longer give birth to a star. Alas, the time of the most despicable man is coming, he that is no longer able to despise himself. Behold, I show you the last man.

"What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?" thus asks the last man, and he blinks.

"The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest.

"We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one's neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.

"Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. A fool, whoever still stumbles over stones or human beings! A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death.

"One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing.

One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion.

"No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse.

"Formerly, all the world was mad," say the most refined, and they blink.

"One is clever and knows everything that has ever happened: so there is no end of derision. One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled—else it might spoil the digestion.

"One has one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health.

"We have invented happiness," say the last men, and they blink."

And here ended Zarathustra's first speech, which is also called "the Prologue"; for at this point he was interrupted by the clamor and delight of the crowd. "Give us this last man, O Zarathustra," they shouted. "Turn us into these last men! Then we shall make you a gift of the overman!" And all the people jubilated and clucked with their tongues.

But Zarathustra became sad and said to his heart: "They do not understand me: I am not the mouth for these ears. I seem to have lived too long in the mountains; I listened too much to brooks and trees: now I talk to them as to goatherds. My soul is unmoved and bright as the mountains in the morning. But they think I am cold and I jeer and make dreadful jests. And now they look at me and laugh: and as they laugh they even hate me. There is ice in their laughter."

SIGMUND FREUD

Selection from *Civilization and Its Discontents*

The Austrian physician and psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), like the English biologist Darwin, was a pioneer of Modernist thought. Indeed, it may be said that Freud began where Darwin (see *The Descent of Man*) left off. Darwin claimed that life was not the result of a divine plan set up at the dawn of time by a benevolent God; rather, it was the outcome of millennia of purposeless and random changes in an endless competition of survival of the fittest, so that the one thing that remains true for the human enterprise is the constancy of struggle. From this starting point, Freud argued that endless struggle, both within each individual and between the individual and society, is the basic nature of the human condition.

The founder of psychoanalysis—that is, the probing of the mind through the "free association" of ideas buried in it—Freud was one of the first to map out the subconscious, as he sought to prove that each person's self is a battle zone. The results of this probing into depth psychology led him to conclude that below the surface of human consciousness (ego) lurks a set of innate drives (id). The id is mainly sexual and aggressive, engaged in a continual war with the individual's socially acquired standards of right and wrong, called conscience (superego).