

[E S S A Y]

FACING NIETZSCHE'S DEMON

DAMON YOUNG CONSIDERS THE PERTINENCE OF FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE'S
LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY TO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

'Was *that*—life?' I will say to death. 'Very well! Once more!'

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

IT is time to leave your life for a little while. Take your mind away from your school, work or home life, away from your family, friends and loved ones. Forget what you do, where you are, and who you are. For the next few minutes, you are the eccentric German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche.

You were born in Germany in 1844, the son of a Lutheran pastor. Your beloved father dies when you are a boy, and you are always haunted by his illness: 'softening of the brain'. As a child you are a gifted and hard-working student, but you are teased at school for your sickly body. You have few friends as a boy or a man. By the time you are twenty-four you are given the extraordinary distinction of a

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professorship at Basel University in Switzerland. For ten years you are an excellent teacher, with a promising academic career. However, your poor health leads you to retire at the age of thirty-six, and you leave Switzerland to 'take a cure' abroad. Plagued by 'three-day headaches' and the 'laborious vomiting of phlegm' you wander Italy, France and Switzerland without citizenship or a loving home. You break with your dotting mother and sister, and speak of them as vulgar and petty. Your romantic life is also dismal. You are rejected for marriage twice, once by a beautiful young woman who prefers your friend to you. You never marry or have children, and the women you idolise are always out of your reach. You pour your lifeblood into your books, but they are rarely read. In one work, *Ecce Homo*, you write: 'my time has not yet come'. In short, you have no job, few friends and you loathe your family. At the time when your peers are reaching their professional and domestic peaks, you are a sick, pensioned bachelor. At forty-six, fate plays its final card: your father's ghost returns, and you lose your brilliant mind to madness. You die eleven years later in 1900, in the house of the sister you despise. She gains the rights to your precious writings, and later twists them to glorify her Nazism. By the time your name is cleared of its stain and venerated, you are long buried.

So ends your sad journey in the life of Friedrich Nietzsche, what the great Greek novelist Nikos Kazantzakis, in his book *Report to Greco* (1973), called a 'holy, tragic life'. Now that you are yourself again, the question for you is this: if you led Nietzsche's life, would you become bitter and twisted? No-one would be shocked if you did. It is well known that lifelong defeat can make people vile. Life's so-called 'losers' can act like trapped foxes, either chewing away at themselves, or biting at everyone who seems to threaten them. In other words, a life like Nietzsche's can lead to horrifying guilt, jealousy or both. His tragic years should have left him like Gollum from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: a shrivelled, broken little monster of hatred and venom.

Yet Nietzsche was quite happy for much of his life, or happy about it, for all its setbacks. In his last year of sanity, he wrote in *Ecce Homo*, 'How should I not be grateful to my whole life?' Remarkably, he was thankful for his few stormy years, for he felt that they made him the great thinker and writer he was. Gleaning wisdom from happiness and sadness alike, he strove to make the best of his lot. In his words from *The Gay Science*, 'there is as much wisdom in pain as there is in pleasure'. Indeed, Nietzsche saw that only people who have faced their deepest pains can find the highest joys: 'how little you know of human *happiness*, you comfortable ... people, for happiness and unhappiness are sisters ... that ... grow up together'. So Nietzsche never gave up on the world's torments for any divine paradise or mystic

bliss. To do so would have been to do away with the very dark clouds that gave him his insights. He wanted to walk the path of what he called 'one's own hell', knowing it would lead to the heaven of himself. As he put it in Latin, '*amor fati*': 'love your fate'. While he was poor, lonely and tortured by psychological and physical pains, Nietzsche had the wisdom to cherish his life as a whole. Together with his literary style and his wit, Nietzsche's greatness lies in this love of life.

A CENTURY later, this love remains a challenge to us all. Can we, like Nietzsche, adore our lives as they are? To ask this question, Nietzsche wrote a short parable. One lonely evening, a demon sneaks into our room and whispers a devilish secret: we will never go to heaven or hell, nor will we live our lives anew. There is no Christian afterlife, Hindu karma, or Buddhist nirvana. Instead, we will relive our lives again and again, just as they are, for eternity. As the demon hisses in *Ecce Homo*: 'every pain and every joy and every thought and every sigh ... will return'. This is what Nietzsche called the 'Eternal Recurrence', and it is one of the most bold and brilliant parables ever written. It asks us whether we *really* love our lives; whether we would want them just as they are, forever. Nietzsche faced this challenge, and he believed it made him great. He wrote in *Ecce Homo*:

My formula for greatness in a human being is ... that one wants nothing to be other than it is, not in the future, not in the past, not in all eternity.

So, in the face of eternity, would we welcome our lives like Nietzsche, or lament them? If I do not love my life as it is, is it really worth *living*? Is yours?

Certainly, it is easy to ridicule Nietzsche's challenge, or to dismiss it as a ludicrous farce. For example, I could say confidently that demons are not real, and that Nietzsche died a syphilitic madman. Why on earth listen to his comical rambling? Also, the doctrine of the Eternal Recurrence has no demonstrable basis in physics or any of the natural sciences. Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power*, spoke of the universe as 'energy', 'forces' and so on, but his description was hardly modern science. But the Eternal Recurrence is neither a beautiful myth nor a scientific hypothesis. Moreover, it need not be. It is simply, as he says in *The Will to Power*, 'the great *cultivating* idea' that challenges us to look our lives in the face. If we are grateful for our lives and our world, we will 'welcome every moment of universal existence with a sense of triumph'.

ONE of Nietzsche's great disappointments was that Socrates seemingly said 'no' to life. Although he attacked Socrates' philosophy, Nietzsche deeply respected this

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ancient thinker. Courageous in war and debate, just in his dealings with friends and enemies, and witty in drinking parties, Socrates was very close to Nietzsche's 'great man'. For Nietzsche, however, Socrates' death implied a rejection of his glorious life. In 399 BC, a jury of Athenian men found the ageing philosopher guilty of corrupting the youth and introducing false gods. Socrates did not plead for mercy, or beg for a light punishment: he proudly requested a lifetime pension, but was sentenced to death by poison. Calmly sitting in his prison cell a few days later, he took a cup of hemlock. According to Plato's *Phaedo*, as the poison slowly killed him, Socrates said to his friend: 'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it, and don't forget.' Asclepius was the Greek god of healing, and it was customary to offer him a sacrifice when cured of an illness. From this Nietzsche argued, in *Twilight of the Idols*, that Socrates saw life as a disease, and death as his cure. Put simply, to die was to find health after a lifetime of sickness. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche asked: 'Is it possible that a man like him, who had lived cheerfully and like a soldier in the sight of everyone, should have been a pessimist?' Nietzsche believed that the pessimistic Socrates *wanted* to die—his smug courtroom defence was a kind of suicide, goading the jury to kill him. Socrates took his poison and said 'no' to life.

Nietzsche also found this attitude in his own age. Rather than deadly hemlock, the Germans of the nineteenth century took Christianity, alcohol and Wagnerian opera. For Nietzsche, all three were opiates that threw a pleasurable gloss over reality; balms to soothe the disease of life. Christianity praised weakness and otherworldliness—it was the revenge of a vulgar mob upon the world and on those noble souls like Nietzsche who loved the world for itself. Similarly, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche spoke of art as 'a little intoxication and madness' for those who were 'wretched, exhausted, and sick'. Instead of facing their ill feelings, German audiences sought inebriation in Wagner's overblown song and dance. The middle classes of the nineteenth century walked the short road from birth and work to death without ever looking soberly at the world around them. At the same time, Germans would drown their sorrows in beer, that 'gracious brunette', as he called it in *Twilight of the Idols*, that seduces men away from the world's hardships. They treated life like a chronic disease that needed palliative care. For Nietzsche, this was a clear 'no' to life.

I DO not wholeheartedly agree with Nietzsche's assessment of Socrates or beer, but I can still partly recognise our modern life in his portrait of nineteenth-century Germany. Like Nietzsche's compatriots, we are also inclined to intoxicate ourselves

with entertainment and drugs. Coffee, alcohol and cigarettes are necessary for many people to get through the day. Then there are the allurements of pornography and fast food and the diversions of television and the Internet. What these have in common is that they often do not educate us, or challenge us to face our fears. Instead, they simply amuse or occupy us. For Nietzsche, these would all be species of intoxication: addictions required to soothe the pain of life, or tell us little white lies. As he put it in *The Will to Power*, 'we have need of lies in order to conquer this reality, this "truth" ... in order to live'. Clearly, his challenge remains for the twenty-first century: the challenge to confront the world with honesty, ever grateful for the chance to be true to ourselves.

NOTE

The quotations here from Nietzsche's writings are taken from the following texts: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin Classics), p. 326; *Ecce Homo*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin Classics); *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1974); *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin Classics, 1990); *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York, 1968); *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Penguin Classics). Other quotations are from: Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, trans. P.A. Bien (London, 1973); Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues* (Princeton, NJ, 1996).