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The Gay Science

Edited by
Bernard Williams

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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE
The Gay Science

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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE



The Gay Science

*With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of
Songs*

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Introduction

The Gay Science is a remarkable book, both in itself and as offering a way into some of Nietzsche's most important ideas. The history of its publication is rather complex, and it throws some light on the development of his thought and of his methods as a writer. He published the first edition of it in 1882. In that version, it consisted of only four books, and had no Preface, though it did have the 'Prelude in Rhymes'. A second edition appeared in 1887, which added a fifth book, the Preface, and an Appendix of further poems. This is the work as we now know it, and which is translated here.

Between the two editions of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche wrote two of his best-known works, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883—5) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886); the last section of Book Four of *The Gay Science* (342)¹ is indeed virtually the same as the first section of *Zarathustra*. So the complete *Gay Science* brackets these two books, which are different from it and from each other. (*Zarathustra*, which is a peculiar literary experiment in a rhetoric drawn from the Bible, was once one of Nietzsche's most popular works, but it has worn less well than the others.) Book Five of *The Gay Science* anticipates, in turn, some of the themes of another famous book which was to follow in 1887, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, which is again different in tone, sustaining a more continuous theoretical argument.

The Gay Science is a prime example of what is often called Nietzsche's 'aphoristic' style. It consists of a sequence of sections which are not obviously tied to one another except, sometimes, in general content, and which do not offer a connected argument. The second half of Book Three, in particular, consists of many very short paragraphs of this kind. Elsewhere, however, there are longer passages, and in fact the arrangement of the shorter sections is not as fortuitous as it may look. It is often designed to gather thoughts which will, so to speak, circle in on some central theme or problem.

In his earlier works, Nietzsche had moved gradually towards this style. He had been appointed in 1869 as a professor of classical philology at the University of Basle, at the extraordinarily early age of twenty-four. He served in this position for ten years, resigning in 1879 because of the ill health which was to persist throughout his life. (The last letter he wrote, when in 1889 he broke down into insanity and a silence which lasted until his death in 1900, was to his distinguished colleague at Basle, Jacob Burckhardt, in which he said that he would rather have been a Swiss professor than God, but he had not dared to push egoism so far.) In his years at Basle he published first *The Birth of Tragedy*, which has the form, if not the content or the tone, of a

treatise, and a set of four long essays collected as *Untimely Meditations*. In 1878—9 he brought out two books forming *Human, All Too Human*, followed in 1880 by a further part called ‘The Wanderer and his Shadow’, and in these writings he moved from continuous exposition and argument to setting out a sequence of thoughts which were not necessarily tied discursively to their neighbours, a style that allowed him to approach a question from many different directions. In *Daybreak*, which came out in 1881, the style is fully developed. As late as 25 January 1882 he still referred to what were to be the first books of *The Gay Science* as a continuation of *Daybreak*; by June they had acquired their separate title.

When he made that decision, he sensed that Book Four, which is called ‘Sanctus Januarius’ and invokes the spirit of the New Year, might be found obscure, and he was anxious about whether his correspondent, Peter Gast, would understand it. He knew that this was not just a set of penetrating, perhaps rather cynical, *aperçus*. ‘Aphorism’, the standard term which I have already mentioned, implies too strongly that each is supposed to be a squib, or a compact expression of a truth (often in the form of an exaggerated falsehood) in the style of the French writers La Rochefoucault and Chamfort, whom Nietzsche indeed admired, but whom he did not simply follow in giving a self-conscious exposé of some human failing, foible or piece of self-deception. There is a certain amount of that, particularly in the earlier books, but he was very aware of the risk that such aphorisms run of sliding from the daring through the knowing to the self-satisfied (it is not merely cynicism that he intends when he says in 379 that ‘we are artists of contempt’). His ambitions are deeper; the effect is meant to be cumulative, and its aim is more systematically subversive. A philosopher who had a similar intention, though in totally different connections, is the later Wittgenstein, and Nietzsche might have called the sections of this book, as Wittgenstein called the paragraphs of his manuscripts, ‘remarks’.

His remarks cover very various subjects. Many of them touch on what may be called moral psychology, and sometimes he does claim to detect an egoistic origin of some ethically approved reaction (as he does, for example, in the shrewd observation about magnanimity and revenge at section 49). The search for the ‘shameful origin’ of our moral sentiments was later to become an important principle of his genealogical method. But he is very clear that mere reductionism, the readily cynical explanation of all such attitudes in terms of self-interest, is a mistake. Partly this is because he does not think that self-interest is an individual’s basic motive anyway, and this book contains some quite complex, if unresolved, reflections on that question, in particular when he considers whether the virtues have a value for the individual who possesses them, or for the group. But, more broadly, Nietzsche thinks that the reductive spirit itself can be in error, a form of vulgarity (3), and that the ‘realists’ who congratulate themselves on having the measure of human unreason and self-deception are usually themselves in the grip of some ancient fantasy (57).

Above all, it is simply not enough, in Nietzsche’s view, to ‘unmask’ some supposedly honourable sentiment or opinion and leave it at that. ‘Only as creators can we destroy’, he very significantly says (58). What things are *called* is fundamentally important, but a conventional set of names — as we may say, an interpretation — can be replaced only by another, more powerful, interpretation. When we say that one interpretation is more powerful than another, it is vitally important what counts as

‘power’. It is often said that Nietzsche explains everything in terms of power. This says something about the way in which he saw these problems, but it is wrong if it is supposed to state his solution to it. The point is very clear in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. There he tells a story of how a certain outlook or interpretation, embodying metaphysical illusions, came into existence as a psychological compensation for the weakness of people who were powerless, and how this outlook triumphed over the conventionally strong and their view of the world. The question must be, how could this have come about? What was the source of this new power? There had to be *something* to this new way of describing the world which accounted in naturalistic terms for its triumph, and Nietzsche fully accepts this, even if he does not have a very rich vocabulary of social explanation in which he can discuss what it might be. ‘Let us . . . not forget’, he goes on in section 58 of *The Gay Science*, ‘that in the long run it is enough to create new names and valuations and appearances of truth in order to create new “things”’. Indeed, but this immediately raises the question, one to which Nietzsche returned in many different connections: what must someone do to ‘create’ new names?

The words ‘The Gay Science’ translate the German title ‘Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft’. No one, presumably, is going to be misled by the more recent associations of the word ‘gay’ — it simply means joyful, light-hearted, and above all, lacking in solemnity (section 327, on taking things seriously, says something about this). ‘Science’ has its own difficulties. The word ‘Wissenschaft’, unlike the English word ‘science’ in its modern use, does not mean simply the natural and biological sciences — they are, more specifically, ‘Naturwissenschaft’. It means any organized study or body of knowledge, including history, philology, criticism and generally what we call ‘the humanities’, and that is often what Nietzsche has in mind when he uses the word in the text (it is often translated as ‘science’, for want of a brief alternative). But in the title itself there is an idea still broader than this. It translates a phrase, ‘gai saber’, or, as Nietzsche writes on his title page, ‘gaya scienza’, which referred to the art of song cultivated by the medieval troubadours of Provence, and with that, as he explains in *Beyond Good and Evil* (260), it invokes an aristocratic culture of courtly love. As he made clear, this association comes out in the fact that the book contains poems. But the title has other implications as well. One — particularly important to understanding this book and Nietzsche more generally — is that, just as the troubadours possessed not so much a body of information as an art, so Nietzsche’s ‘gay science’ does not in the first place consist of a doctrine, a theory or body of knowledge. While it involves and encourages hard and rigorous thought, and to this extent the standard implications of ‘Wissenschaft’ are in place, it is meant to convey a certain spirit, one that in relation to understanding and criticism could defy the ‘spirit of gravity’ as lightly as the troubadours, supposedly, celebrated their loves. This is why the original publisher could announce at the beginning of the book that it brought to a conclusion a series of Nietzsche’s writings (including *Human, All Too Human* and *Daybreak*) which shared the aim of setting out ‘a new image and ideal of the free spirit’.

He said that it was the most personal of his books, meaning that in part it was explicitly about his own life: some of it is like a diary. It is not irrelevant that the ‘gai saber’ belonged to the south of Europe, to the Mediterranean. Nietzsche spent much of

his time in the last years of his working life in Italy (in places such as those he praises in sections 281 and 291), and he was very conscious of the contrast between overcast German earnestness and Southern sun and freedom, an idea which had a long literary history and had been most famously expressed, perhaps, in Goethe's *Italian Journey*. That is a recurrent contrast in *The Gay Science*, but, as so often with Nietzsche, it is not one contrast, and his reflections on the German spirit in philosophy and religion are specially nuanced in this book, for instance in his discussion (357) of 'What is German?'

Nietzsche's general reflections, here as elsewhere, have some recurrent weaknesses. There are cranky reflections on diet and climate. His opinions about women and sex, even if they include (as at 71) one or two shrewd and compassionate insights into the conventions of his time, are often shallow and sometimes embarrassing; they were, biographically, the product of an experience which had been drastically limited and disappointing. However, what is most significant for his thought as a whole is the fact that his resources for thinking about modern society and politics, in particular about the modern state, were very thin. The point is not that he was opposed to a free society, equal rights, and other typically modern aspirations (though he certainly was, as section 377, for instance, makes clear). In fact, Nietzsche has by no means been a hero exclusively of the political Right, and many radical, socialist and even feminist groups in the last century found support in his writings.² This was possible just because the deeply radical spirit of his work was combined with a lack of effective political and social ideas, leaving a blank on which many different aspirations could be projected. His clearly aristocratic sympathies are, in political connections, not so much reactionary as archaic, and while he has many illuminating things to say about the religious and cultural history of Europe, his conception of social relations owes more to his understanding of the ancient world than to a grasp of modernity. The idea of nihilism which is so important in his later works is undeniably relevant to modern conditions, but his discussions of such subjects as 'corruption' (in section 23 of this book) borrow a lot from the rhetoric of the Roman Empire and the disposition of its writers to praise the largely imaginary virtues of the vanished Republic.

The Gay Science marks a decisive step beyond the books that came before it because it introduces two of what were to become Nietzsche's best-known themes, the Death of God and the Eternal Recurrence. The idea that God is dead occurs first at 108, in association with the image of the Buddha's shadow, still to be seen in a cave for centuries after his death. This is followed at 125 by the haunting story of a madman with a lantern in the bright morning, looking for God. He is met by ridicule, and he concludes that he has 'come too early', that the news of God's death has not yet reached humanity, even though they have killed him themselves. This idea recurs in more literal terms in 343, the first section of Book Five (published, we may recall, five years later). The death of God is identified there as the fact that 'the belief in . . . God has become unbelievable': this, 'the greatest recent event', is beginning to cast its shadow across Europe. Once this event is fully recognized, it will have incalculable consequences, in particular for European morality. Some of these consequences will be melancholy, and indeed elsewhere Nietzsche struggles with the question of what act of creation, by whom, might overcome the emptiness left by the collapse of traditional

illusions. But here the news brings, at least in the short term, only joy, a sense of daybreak and freedom, the promise of an open sea: ‘maybe there has never been such an “open sea” ‘.

Nietzsche continued to think that the death of God would have vast and catastrophic consequences. But on the account that he himself gave of Christian belief and its origins (in this book and in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but above all in *On the Genealogy of Morality*), should he really have thought this? He believed that the faith in the Christian God, and more generally in a reassuring metaphysical structure of the world, was a projection of fear and resentment, representing a victory of the weak over the strong. That metaphysical belief has died; it has been destroyed, as Nietzsche often points out, by itself, by the belief in truthfulness — and we shall come back to that — which was itself part of the metaphysical faith. But how much difference should he expect its death to make? He shares with another nineteenth-century subverter, Marx (with whom he shares little else), the idea that religious belief is a consequence, an expression of social and psychological forces. If those forces remain, and the Christian expression of them collapses, then surely other expressions will take its place. If need secretes thought, and the need remains, then it will secrete new thoughts.

Indeed, Nietzsche does think this: he thinks that liberalism, socialism, Utilitarianism and so on are just secularized expressions of those same forces. But he thinks that they are too manifestly close to the original, and that our growing understanding that the world has no metaphysical structure whatsoever must discredit them as well. The death of God is the death of those gods, too. He has a particular contempt for benign freethinkers who hope to keep all the ethical content of Christianity without its theology: George Eliot is the unlucky target when the point is spelled out very clearly in *The Twilight of the Idols* (the section called ‘Expeditions of an Untimely Man’). But that is not the most important point. Even if the content of our morality changes noticeably, as for instance attitudes towards sex have done in recent times, much more basic and structural elements of it, its humanitarianism and its professed belief in equal respect for everyone, are in Nietzsche’s view too bound up with the mechanisms that generated Christianity, and will inevitably go the same way that it has gone. It is too soon, surely, to say that he was wrong.

For Nietzsche himself there was another dimension as well, one immediately connected with his own values. He saw the unravelling of Christianity as part of the phenomenon that he called European nihilism, the loss of any sense of depth or significance to life. The world might conceivably avoid destruction and overt hatred by organizing a pleasantly undemanding and unreflective way of life, a dazed but adequately efficient consumerism. Nietzsche probably did not think that such a society could survive in the long run, but in any case he could not reconcile himself to such a prospect or regard it as anything but loathsome. Contempt was one of his readier emotions, and nothing elicited it more than what he sometimes calls ‘the last man’, the contented, unadventurous, philistine product of such a culture. This book, like all his others, makes it clear that any life worth living must involve daring, individuality and creative bloody-mindedness. This is indeed expressed in the ‘gaiety’ of its title. Gaiety can encompass contentment, as it does on New Year’s Day at the beginning of Book Four, but when that is so, it is a particular achievement and a piece of good luck. Gaiety is not itself contentment, and while it rejects solemnity and the spirit of gravity,

it does so precisely because it is the only way of taking life seriously.

Nietzsche has been thought by some people to have had a brutal and ruthless attitude to the world; sometimes, perhaps, he wished that he had. But in fact, one personal feature which, together with his illness and his loneliness, contributed to his outlook was a hyper-sensitivity to suffering. It was linked to a total refusal to forget, not only the existence of suffering, but the fact that suffering was necessary to everything that he and anyone else valued. 'All good things come from bad things' is one of his fundamental tenets: it signals his rejection of what he calls 'the fundamental belief of the metaphysicians, *the belief in the opposition of values*' (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 2). This is, for him, a principle of interpretation, but it presents itself in the first instance simply as a fact, which he thought no honest understanding of the world could evade. If a sense of the world's achievements and glories – art, self-understanding, nobility of character – cannot in common honesty be separated from the knowledge of the horrors that have been involved in bringing these things about, then there is a question that cannot, Nietzsche supposed, simply be ignored: whether it has all been worth it.

Thinkers in the past have supposed that the question could be answered, and answered positively. Leibniz, with his famous doctrine that this is the best of all possible worlds, believed in a cosmic cost-benefit analysis which would vindicate God's mysterious management. Hegel had told a progressive metaphysical story of the historical development of freedom and reason, which represented the horrors as all dialectically necessary to the eventual outcome, so that we could be sure that none of them was meaningless. Neither of these fantasies, Nietzsche reasonably thought, could be taken seriously in the late 19th century. Nor, he came to think, could one take altogether seriously someone who answered the same question, but in the negative. In his earlier years he had been very impressed, as Wagner was, by the philosophy of Schopenhauer, and his references to Schopenhauer in this book are mostly respectful (more so than those to Wagner), but he came to be very sceptical about Schopenhauer's so-called pessimism, which had been expressed in the judgement (for instance) that the world's 'non-existence would be preferable to its existence'.³ 'We take care not to say that the world is worth *less*', he says at 346:

The whole attitude of man. . . as judge of the world who finally places existence itself on his scales and finds it too light – the monstrous stupidity of this attitude has finally dawned on us and we are sick of it.

Nietzsche recognizes that his own *Birth of Tragedy* had been full of the Schopenhauerian spirit. Taken in that spirit, the question of 'the value of life', he came to think, had no answer and was indeed not a question. Yet it did not simply go away, because there remained what seemed to Nietzsche, at least, to be a fact, that anyone who really understood and held in his mind the horrors of the world would be crushed or choked by them. That fact left, if not a question to be answered, at least a problem to be overcome. Nietzsche presents the problem, and his way of overcoming it, in the form of the thought-experiment of the Eternal Recurrence, which appears for the first time in *The Gay Science*.⁴ In the startling words of 341, what would you think if a demon told you that everything in life would recur over and over again eternally? How would you answer the question 'Do you want this again and innumerable times

again?’? This question, Nietzsche says, ‘would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight’. It tests your ability not to be overcome by the world’s horror and meaninglessness. There is no *belief* which could ‘justify the world’: confronted with the question of its value, or rather with the replacement for that question, which is the prospect of being crushed by the consciousness of what the world is like, the only issue is (as Nietzsche also puts it) whether one can say ‘yes’ to it, and the test of that is whether seriously and in the fullest consciousness you could will that the course of everything should happen over and over again, including not just its pain and cruelty and humiliation, but also its triviality, emptiness and ugliness, the last man and everything that goes with him.

This is an entirely hypothetical question, a thought-experiment. It is not a matter, as I read him, of Nietzsche’s believing in a *theory* of eternal recurrence. The idea (which does not occur in *Beyond Good and Evil* or *The Genealogy of Morality*) appears in *Zarathustra* in a form similar to that of *The Gay Science*, and Nietzsche mentions its importance in *The Twilight of the Idols* and in *Ecce Homo* (the intellectual autobiography that he wrote on the verge of insanity). There are some places in which it is treated as a theoretical idea, but they are largely confined to his unpublished notes (his *Nachlass*), some of which, particularly from his last years, were published in *The Will to Power*, which is not a book by Nietzsche at all, but a selection from these notes tentatively put together by his sister.

But if the idea of the Eternal Recurrence is a thought-experiment, how can answering its question lie on our actions ‘as the heaviest weight’? If it is a mere fantasy, then how can ‘willing’ the Eternal Recurrence cost one anything at all? It seems as simple as saying ‘yes’. But one has to recall that in facing the question one is supposed to have a real and live consciousness of everything that has led to this moment, in particular to what we value. We would have to think in vivid detail, if we could, of every dreadful happening that has been necessary to create Venice, or Newton’s science, or whatever one thinks best of in our morality. Then we would have not simply to say ‘yes’, but to say ‘yes’ and mean it. That does not seem exactly weightless. What perhaps does less work in the thought-experiment is the element, which Nietzsche certainly thought essential to it, of *eternity*. If there is anything in this test at all, why would willing one recurrence not be enough? If you could overcome the ‘nausea’, as Zarathustra repeatedly puts it, of the prospect that the horrors and the last man and all the rest will come round again *even once*, and say ‘yes’ to it, you would have taken the essential step: could willing all those further recurrences cost you very much more?

There is another, very natural, reaction to the problem, which is almost everyone’s reaction: to forget about it. One can forget that the horrors exist, and also, if one has a taste for metaphysical consolations, that God is dead. The narrator of Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* says of Tom and Daisy that they ‘retreated back into their money and their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that held them together’, and that is, roughly speaking, the remedy that the ‘last man’ finds for Nietzsche’s problem. David Hume spoke of ‘carelessness and inattention’ as the only remedy for sceptical doubts; but that is not the same, because Hume thought that sceptical doubts were *unreal*. Nietzsche knew that the considerations we all forget were not unreal, and he held obstinately to an idea of truthfulness that would not allow us to falsify them. In

this book, he calls on honesty and intellectual conscience at 319 and (as we shall see) at 344; at 284 he speaks of those who have to have an argument against the sceptic inside themselves – ‘the great self-dissatisfied people’. In *The Anti-Christ* (50), at the very end of his active life, he wrote:

Truth has had to be fought for every step of the way, almost everything else dear to our hearts, on which our love and our trust in life depend, has had to be sacrificed to it. Greatness of soul is needed for it, the service of truth is the hardest service. – For what does it mean to be *honest* in intellectual things? That one is stern towards one’s heart, that one despises ‘fine feelings’, that one makes every Yes and No a question of conscience!

The value of truthfulness embraces the need to find out the truth, to hold on to it, and to tell it – in particular, to oneself. But Nietzsche’s own dedication to this value, he saw, immediately raised the question of what this value is. We have taken it for granted, he thinks, and we have seriously misunderstood it: as he says in *Beyond Good and Evil* (177), ‘Perhaps nobody yet has been truthful enough about what “truthfulness” is.’

Section 344 of *The Gay Science* (the second section of Book Five) gives one of Nietzsche’s most important and illuminating statements of this question:

This unconditional will to truth – what is it? Is it the will not to let oneself be deceived? Is it the will *not to deceive*? For the will to truth could be interpreted in this second way, too – if ‘I do not want to deceive *myself*’ is included as a special case under the generalization ‘I do not want to deceive’. But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived?

The reasons for not wanting to be deceived, he goes on to say, are prudential; seen in that light, wanting to get things right in our intellectual studies and in practical life will be a matter of utility. But those considerations cannot possibly sustain an *unconditional* value for truth: much of the time it is more useful to believe falsehoods. Our belief in the unconditional will to truth

must have originated *in spite of* the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of ‘the will to truth’ or ‘truth at any price’ is proved to it constantly. ‘At any price’: we understand this well enough once we have offered and slaughtered one faith after another on this altar! Consequently, ‘will to truth’ does *not* mean ‘I do not want to let myself be deceived’ but – there is no alternative – ‘I will not deceive, not even myself’; *and with that we stand on moral ground*.

. . . you will have gathered what I am getting at, namely, that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests – that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year-old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine. . .

The title of the section is ‘In what way we, too, are still pious’. The idea is developed further in Book III of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, where the ‘ascetic ideal’ which has received an unflattering genealogical explanation is discovered to lie at the root of the will to truth, which powered the need to discover that very explanation. But that does not overthrow the will to truth: ‘I have every respect for the ascetic ideal *in so far as it is honest!*’ (111.26).

The ‘unconditional will to truth’ does not mean that we want to believe any and every truth. It does mean that we want to understand who we are, to correct error, to avoid deceiving ourselves, to get beyond comfortable falsehood. The value of

truthfulness, so understood, cannot lie just in its consequences, as Nietzsche repeatedly points out. Earlier in this book (121), he says that various beliefs may be necessary for our life, but that does not show them to be true: 'life is not an argument'. Already in *Human, All Too Human* (517) he had noted: '*Fundamental Insight*: There is no pre-established harmony between the furthering of truth and the well-being of humanity.' Again, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (11) he says that we must understand that there are some judgements which 'must be *believed* to be true, for the sake of preservation of creatures like ourselves, though they might, of course, be false judgements for all that'.

Truth may be not just unhelpful, but destructive. In particular the truths of Nietzsche's own philosophy, which discredit the metaphysical world, can (as we have seen) destructively lead to nihilism if they come to be accepted. In the *Nachlass* (*The Will to Power* 5) there is a revealing note, which mentions the way in which the idea of truthfulness has turned against the morality which fostered it, and ends with the remark:

This antagonism – *not* to esteem what we know, and not to be *allowed* any longer to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves – results in a process of dissolution.

In what ways are we 'not allowed' to esteem these lies? To some degree, Nietzsche thought that this was already in his time a historical or social necessity: that, at least among thoughtful people, these beliefs simply could not stand up much longer or have much life to them. It is a good question whether this was right, indeed whether it is right today – particularly when we recall the secularized, political, forms which are now taken, as Nietzsche supposed, by the same illusions. What is certainly true is that Nietzsche took it to be an *ethical* necessity, for himself and anyone he was disposed to respect, not to esteem these illusions. He did think that there were things which, even for honest and reflective people, could rightly compensate in some ways for the loss of the illusions; it is in this spirit that he remarks elsewhere in the *Nachlass* (*The Will to Power* 822) 'We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*.' He does not mean that we possess art in place of the truth; he means that we possess art so that we can possess the truth and not perish of it.

There continue to be complex debates about what Nietzsche understood truth to be. Quite certainly, he did not think, in pragmatist spirit, that beliefs are true if they serve our interests or welfare: we have already seen some of his repeated denials of this idea. A more recently fashionable view of him is that he shared, perhaps founded, a kind of deconstructive scepticism to the effect that there is no such thing as truth, or that truth is what anyone thinks it is, or that it is a boring category that we can do without. This is also wrong, and more deeply so. As we have seen, Nietzsche did not think that the ideal of truthfulness went into retirement when its metaphysical origins were discovered, and he did not suppose, either, that truthfulness could be detached from a concern for the truth. Truthfulness as an ideal retains its power, and so far from truth being dispensable or malleable, his main question is how it can be made bearable. Repeatedly Nietzsche – the 'old philologist', as he called himself – reminds us that, quite apart from any question about philosophical interpretations, including his own, there are facts to be respected. In *The Anti-Christ* (59) he praises the ancient

world for having invented ‘the incomparable art of reading well, the prerequisite for all systematic knowledge’, and with that ‘the *sense for facts*, the last-developed and most valuable of all the senses’. At the beginning of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he tells us that ‘the English psychologists’ should not be dismissed as old, cold, boring frogs; rather, they are brave animals,

who have been taught to sacrifice desirability to truth, every truth, even a plain, bitter, ugly, foul, unchristian, immoral truth. . . Because there are such truths –

He keenly detects elements in our intellectual structures which we mistake for truths. In *The Gay Science* he stresses the importance of ‘a law of agreement’, which regulates people’s thoughts and provides intellectual security (76). He stresses the historical, indeed the continuing, importance of these conceptions, but he does not think that they are the truth, or that they are immune to the discovery of truth. They are *contrasted* with the truth, and the question is, what will emerge from a battle between them and a growing awareness of the truth: as he asks at 110, ‘to what extent can truth stand to be incorporated?’

In his earliest writings about truth and error, Nietzsche sometimes spoke as though he could compare the entire structure of our thought to the ‘real’ nature of things and find our thought defective. It is as though the business of using concepts at all falsified a reality which in itself was – what? Formless, perhaps, or chaotic, or utterly unstructured. Later, he rightly rejected this picture, with its implication that we can somehow look round our the edge of our concepts at the world to which we are applying them and grasp it as entirely unaffected by any descriptions (including, we would be forced to admit, the descriptions ‘formless’, ‘chaotic’, and so on).⁵ There are passages in *The Gay Science* where it is unclear whether he is still attached to this picture. He discusses fictions, the practice of regarding things as equal or identical or mathematically structured when they are not so or only approximately so (110, 121). He is making the point, certainly, that mathematical representations which are offered by the sciences are in various ways idealizations, and this is entirely intelligible. There is greater ambiguity when he suggests that nothing is really ‘identical’ or ‘the same’. To take an example: the concept ‘snake’ allows us to classify various individual things as ‘the same animal’, and to recognize one individual thing as ‘the same snake’. It is trivially true that ‘snake’ is a human concept, a cultural product. But it is a much murkier proposition that its use somehow *falsifies* reality – that ‘in itself’ the world does not contain snakes, or indeed anything else you might mention. Nietzsche came to see that this idea of the world ‘in itself’ was precisely a relic of the kind of metaphysics that he wanted to overcome. As a remark in the *Nachlass* puts it (*The Will to Power* 567): ‘The antithesis of the apparent world and the true world is reduced to the antithesis “world” and “nothing”.’

It is less than clear, and also well worth considering, how far the formulations of *The Gay Science* still commit him to the murky metaphysical picture. Some of the same problems affect another idea which appears in the book, and which was to be important in works he wrote after it, the idea of ‘a perspective’. Our interpretative outlook, our particular ‘take’ on the world, is modelled on the analogy of a literal, visual, perspective, and this analogy has two implications: that we understand that

there can be alternative perspectives, and, importantly, that these will be alternative perspectives *on the same reality*. In later works, Nietzsche is often less than definite about what is involved in this second implication, but he is very clear about the first implication, and indeed urges us to combine perspectives, or move between them, which shows that we not only know *that* there are other perspectival views, but that we know what some of them are. In *The Gay Science*, he seems on the very edge of stepping into this problem. Section 299, for instance, suggests that we can make use of different perspectives. But at 374, where he says ‘we cannot reject the possibility that it [the world] includes infinite interpretations’, the idea of the ‘alternatives’ seems to remain an entirely abstract possibility: ‘we cannot look around our corner’.

The ‘Greeks were superficial – out of profundity’, he says in the Preface (and he repeated the remark later, in the epilogue to *Nietzsche contra Wagner*). But the Greeks in their time could straightforwardly display a delight in surfaces and appearances which was indeed profound. That is not possible for us, after so much history: any such attitude for us will be a different and more sophisticated thing, and it will represent an achievement. At the very end of the book, he returns to the gaiety of the gay science, and calls up the ideal of ‘a spirit that plays naively, i.e. not deliberately but from overflowing abundance and power, with everything that was hitherto called holy, good, untouchable, divine. . .’ This might seem even inhuman in comparison to conventional forms of seriousness, that is to say, solemnity,

and in spite of all this, it is perhaps only with it that *the great seriousness* really emerges; that the real question mark is posed for the first time; that the destiny of the soul changes; the hand of the clock moves forward. . .

Then he adds, at the end of that section, ‘. . .the tragedy begins’. But immediately there comes the last section of all, *Epilogue*, in which the spirits of his own book tell him to stop these gloomy noises, these ‘voices from the crypt, and marmot whistles’. ‘Nicht solche Töne!’ they cry in an echo of Schiller’s *Ode to Joy*, ‘Not such sounds!’ He says he will give them something else – the poems, presumably, with which he ends the book. But he does so with a final question, and it is a question which he wanted his readers to ask themselves not just at the end of this book, but throughout it and indeed throughout all his books – ‘Is that what you *want*?’

¹ References to *The Gay Science*, and to other works by Nietzsche, are to numbered sections.

² A very interesting study in this connection is Steven E. Ascheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). A helpful discussion of Nietzsche’s political thought is Bruce Detwiler, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Aristocratic Radicalism* (University of Chicago Press, 1990). Mark Warren, in *Nietzsche and Political Thought* (Boston: MIT Press, 1988), well brings out the limitations of Nietzsche’s social ideas, but is over-optimistic in thinking that if his philosophy were true to itself, it would offer a basis for liberalism.

³ *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (2 vols., New York: Dover, 1969), vol. II, chapter 46, p. 576

⁴ The phrase ‘eternal recurrence’ occurs first at sec 285, but in a more limited connection, of recognizing that there is

no perpetual peace, but only (as the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus taught) a cycle of war and peace.

⁵ This is well argued by Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Chronology

- 1844 Born in Röcken, a small village in the Prussian province of Saxony, on 15 October.
- 1846 Birth of his sister Elisabeth.
- 1848 Birth of his brother Joseph.
- 1849 His father, a Lutheran minister, dies at age thirty-six of ‘softening of the brain’.
- 1850 Brother dies; family moves to Naumburg to live with father’s mother and her sisters.
- 1858 Begins studies at Pforta, Germany’s most famous school for education in the classics.
- 1864 Graduates from Pforta with a thesis in Latin on the Greek poet Theognis; enters the University of Bonn as a theology student.
- 1865 Transfers from Bonn, following the classical philologist Friedrich Ritschl to Leipzig where he registers as a philology student; reads Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*.
- 1866 Reads Friedrich Lange’s *History of Materialism*.
- 1868 Meets Richard Wagner.
- 1869 On Ritschl’s recommendation is appointed professor of classical philology at Basle at the age of twenty-four before completing his doctorate (which is then conferred without a dissertation); begins frequent visits to the Wagner residence at Tribschen.
- 1870 Serves as a medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian war; contracts a serious illness and so serves only two months. Writes ‘The Dionysiac World View’.
- 1872 Publishes his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*; its dedicatory preface to Richard Wagner claims for art the role of ‘the highest task and truly metaphysical activity of his life’; devastating reviews follow.
- 1873 Publishes ‘David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer’, the first of his *Untimely Meditations*; begins taking books on natural science out of the Basle library, whereas he had previously confined himself largely to books on philological matters. Writes ‘On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense’.
- 1874 Publishes two more *Meditations*, ‘The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’ and ‘Schopenhauer as Educator’.
- 1876 Publishes the fourth *Meditation*, ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’, which already bears subtle signs of his movement away from Wagner.
- 1878 Publishes *Human, All Too Human* (dedicated to the memory of Voltaire); it