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STEVEN MICHELS

Nietzsche's Aphoristic Turn

Nietzsche's use of the aphorism has most often been taken as evidence of his esotericism.

Nietzsche was less than clear in his writings, it is claimed, because he did not want his true teaching to be available to just anyone. This article contends the opposite—that is, that Nietzsche wrote aphoristically for the very purpose of being read, and understood, by the widest possible audience. Moreover, this change in style had a marked impact on the nature of his philosophy. Unburdened by conventional methods, Nietzsche's critique of modernity became more exact and his own positive philosophy became more radical.

More than any other philosopher, Nietzsche's philosophy is tied to the style in which it is presented. Many have taken Nietzsche's fondness for the aphorism, for example, as indicative of a thinker who is neither coherent nor systematic. Derrida, for example, in a now-famous part of his study of Nietzsche, takes issue with an undocumented fragment ("I have forgotten my umbrella") that was found among Nietzsche's writings. "We never will know *for sure* what Nietzsche wanted to say or do when he noted these words, nor even that he actually *wanted* anything," Derrida concludes.¹ Derrida proposes that the whole of Nietzsche's corpus might

amount to nothing more than what we can learn from this one aphorism, a truth for which students of Nietzsche must prepare themselves.

Nehemas argues that Nietzsche altered his mode of philosophising to avoid the trappings of Western metaphysics.² According to this view, the aphoristic style allowed Nietzsche to tear down the metaphysical tradition without reconstructing another one in its place. And Lampert claims, as Nehemas implied, that Nietzsche's affinity for the aphorism makes his writing somewhat esoteric in nature. The aphorism is "an art of writing whose brevity, whose thriftiness, does as little as possible for the reader."³ In a similar vein, Kofman describes this tactic as "aristocratic."⁴

But what did Nietzsche himself say of the aphorism? And why did he prefer it over other styles? This article examines Nietzsche's embrace of the aphoristic style and how he explained its usage. Focusing almost exclusively on *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche's first book of aphorisms, we see that the aphorism allowed Nietzsche to criticise other philosophers with greater vigour, articulate what would become his mature philosophy, and, contrary to what others have said, make his teaching available to the widest possible audience. Nietzsche's primary use of the aphorism was No-saying and freeing himself from metaphysics and metaphysical forms of thinking, yet he also developed intellectually as a result of his new style. While Nietzsche's use of the aphorism is more systematic than others have found it to be, it is perfectly suited for a philosophy that calls for experimentation and perspective.

Nietzsche's Chemistry

Not all of Nietzsche's books are written aphoristically. His first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, is anything but aphoristic. Compared to nearly all of his other works, it is somewhat unwieldy and

rather clunky. It consists of twenty-five unnamed sections and a preface that dedicates the book to Richard Wagner, his “highly respected friend.” Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*, completed four years later, is a collection of four essays. He intended to write more, but quickly tired of the project and its form.

A few years later, Nietzsche’s first aphorism arrived unannounced. The original edition of *Human, All Too Human* had nine parts and an epilogue. Its first aphorism, in the section entitled “Of First and Last Things,” is lengthy by Nietzschean standards. As he does with most of his earliest aphorisms, he gave it a title, “Chemistry of concepts and sensations.” It deals with the problem of metaphysics, or at least the problem that Nietzsche has with metaphysical thinking. It is worth quoting at length, if not in its entirety:

Almost all the problems of philosophy once again pose the same form of question as they did two thousand years ago: how can something originate out of its opposite, for example rationality in irrationality, the sentient in the dead, logic in unlogic, disinterested contemplation in covetous desire, living for others in egoism, truth in error?... All we require, and what can be given us only now the individual sciences have attained their present level, is a *chemistry* of the moral, religious and aesthetic conceptions and sensations, likewise of all the agitations we experience within ourselves in cultural and social intercourse, and indeed even when we are alone: what if this chemistry would end up by revealing that in this domain too the most glorious colors are derived from base, indeed from despised materials? Will there be many who desire to pursue such researches? Mankind likes to put questions of origins and beginnings out of its mind: must one not be almost inhuman to detect in oneself a contrary inclination?⁵

It is appropriate, almost expected, that Nietzsche’s first aphorism, and indeed the first part of a book of aphorisms, challenges metaphysics. He wishes to replace metaphysics with a sort of philosophic chemistry—one that mixes elements, concoctions, and potions. Consistent with his own method, Nietzsche will later call his new philosophers “tempters” or “experimenters.” Some of the experiments might be inert, but some might also combust. It is not that Nietzsche wishes to break free completely from Western rationalism; rather, he wishes to co-opt and

modify the scientific method for his new philosophy. His is the logic that opposes the “unlogic” at the start of *Human, All Too Human*. Nietzsche’s aphorising is an extra-human method of approaching wisdom. If Gods philosophise, as Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, they probably do it aphoristically.

Nietzsche’s second aphorism, entitled “Family failing of philosophers,” builds on the theme of metaphysics. Here he questions teleological understandings of human nature:

Everything the philosopher has declared about man is...at bottom no more than a testimony as to the man of a *very limited* period of time. Lack of historical sense is the family failing of all philosophers; man, without being aware of it, even take the most recent manifestation of man...the whole of teleology is constructed by speaking of man of the last four millennia as of an *eternal* man towards whom all things in the world have had a natural relationship from the time he began. But everything has become: there are *no eternal facts*, just as there are no absolute truths. Consequently what is needed from now on is *historical philosophizing*, and with it the virtue of modesty.⁶

Nietzsche is not recanting the teaching of his essay “On the Use and Abuse of History;” rather, he is illustrating that thinking (and living) ahistorically has its dangers. Mankind should not be bound by its past, nor should it be disregarded completely. Because there are no eternal facts, history exists only to serve the present. Nietzsche is not calling for a historical brand of philosophy as much as he is demanding a historically accurate portrait of human nature. It is a qualified embrace of history. Modesty is a virtue in that philosophers should not claim more for their philosophy than what is historically possible, not to say truthful.

The “mark of a higher culture,” Nietzsche counsels, is the willingness to use this method as a guide, for it is the surest means to happiness.⁷ This is not to say that the metaphysical world does not exist. As Nietzsche readily admits, “there could be a metaphysical world.”⁸ The problem, however, is that “knowledge of it would be the most useless of all knowledge: more useless even than knowledge of the chemical composition of water must be to the sailor in

danger of shipwreck.”⁹ Hence the question of the first section is not knowledge but the purpose of knowledge. Although it appeared somewhat incidental in his early writings—the most obvious exception being “The Use and Abuse of History”—this is a theme that will dominate the remainder of his life’s work.

That Nietzsche cares for knowledge is evident in his attention to the rigour and modesty of science and philosophy. But even a perfect understanding of the universe is useless if it does not serve the human condition. In the final aphorism of the original *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche writes, “*The Wanderer*.—He who has attained to only some degree of freedom of mind cannot feel other than a wanderer on the earth—though not as a traveler *to* a final destination: for this destination does not exist.”¹⁰ Mankind needs a compass more than it needs knowledge of a picture of where it is headed, even if the latter were possible. The purpose of knowledge explains the limits of history, too, for circumstances change.

This first section of Nietzsche’s first book of aphorisms also contains his first treatment of language and grammar, a treatment made more powerful by his aphoristic style. Language, he posits, has little direct correlation to truth; the same is true of the language of numbers and mathematics.¹¹ If language and grammar endanger “spiritual freedom,” then perhaps the aphorism exists, at least in part, to limit these problems. If the best words and concepts are those capable of being freed from their context, the aphoristic style is an attempt to make this possible.

As he does repeatedly throughout his writings, Nietzsche is attentive to the issue of age and experience. The young are, evidently, most drawn to metaphysical philosophies. “The young person values metaphysical explanations,” Nietzsche claims, “because they reveal to him something in the highest degree significant in things he found unpleasant or contemptible.”¹² Embracing metaphysics removes the responsibility for the world and for our actions. It also

makes things more interesting. The same reactions can be elicited “more scientifically” by “physical and historical explanations.” The change might even foster a greater “interest in life.”¹³

Nietzsche also questions our faith in causality and the notion of free will, issues that he returns to in his later writings.¹⁴ Approaching the world metaphysically affects creativity, “For the metaphysical outlook bestows the belief that it offers the last, ultimate foundation upon which the whole future of mankind is then invited to establish and construct itself.”¹⁵ Conscious creation of new (and higher) cultures is possible, provided that metaphysical prejudices are disposed of. Human consciousness and aspirations must be cleared of tradition and reverence for tradition if any sort of progress is to be realised.¹⁶

Nietzsche is clear that truth is not a useful standard for knowledge, and not only because there is no such thing as truth. More to the point, faith in convictions harms the very sort of progress that Nietzsche wishes to bring forth. “In reality one wanted to be in the right because one thought one *had* to be,” Nietzsche charges. “It is not conflict of opinions that has made history so violent but conflict of belief in opinions, that is to say conflict of convictions.”¹⁷ Forgoing this sense of truth and of being right allows for the greater exchange of ideas and the greater likelihood that high culture will result. This notion, what Nietzsche will later call perspectivism, is here called “being philosophically minded.”¹⁸

In the final aphorisms of the first part, Nietzsche turns to the issues of religion and morality, the subjects of the next two sections. He first explains that his project is not to have philosophy replace religion as it is to present a philosophy that displaces the need for religion.¹⁹ What Nietzsche will call the philosophy of the future certainly has religious implications, but more importantly, its purpose is to make religion less necessary and less crucial to the health and happiness of individuals and societies. Nietzsche’s break with metaphysical thinking makes this

possible, for if the world is divinely ordered, then reverence for that order must guide human action. Nietzsche presents his philosophy aphoristically because its vibrancy and love of perspectives most closely resemble the true nature of humanity. Hence Nietzsche wants his readers not only to approach him aphoristically, but to live aphoristically.

Not surprisingly, the next aphorism explains that “it is quite obvious that the world is neither good nor evil, let alone the best of all or worst of all worlds.”²⁰ Once religious understandings of the world are dispensed with, so too goes the moral component and its consequences for mankind. In the section entitled “On the History of Moral Sensations,” Nietzsche writes: “Every society, every individual always has present an order of rank of things considered good, according to which he determines his own actions and judges those of others. But this standard is constantly changing, many actions are called evil but are only stupid.”²¹ The freeing of human consciousness is done with an eye to purpose, or at least possibility.

Religions are unrelated to truth and natural laws; they are the worst products of human fear and trembling.²² If “nature is *irregularity*,” then any religion or moral imperative cannot be true, valid, or worthwhile.²³ The Greeks are superior to Christians and moderns because of the nature of their gods: they were set up not as masters or slaves, but as visions of excellence designed to inspire greatness.²⁴ Christianity does not serve mankind; it has become a burden that will soon perish as a result of this fact.²⁵ According to Nietzsche, Christianity does not reflect any particular religious or spiritual truth; it was intended to make us feel “as sinful as possible.”²⁶

Nietzsche’s rejection of conventional (or universal) morality is not an embrace of nihilism, however. It is unpleasant because many possibilities will be made impossible. Viewing the world metaphysically is a sort of “*logical world denial*: which can, however, be united with a practical world-affirmation just as easily as with its opposite.”²⁷ Metaphysical understandings of

the world are not necessarily just, nor are they blameworthy. Since they do not provide a positive goal for man, they can only serve as a negative on human will and creativity. To think that everything is possible is not to say that everything is equally valid or worthy of human attention. Theoretical nihilism is not practical nihilism. Theoretical nihilism is crucial, for it accurately depicts the human condition. But to practise nihilism is another matter entirely, one that Nietzsche consistently rejects.

With regard to metaphysics, religion, and morality, Nietzsche uses the aphorism to articulate his No-saying with greater vigour, if not greater clarity; and he is also able to do it without having a firmly established system or final destination. It is only after adopting the aphoristic style that Nietzsche can turn against metaphysics, and only after turning against metaphysics can he come to understand what he would see as the absurdity of Christianity and conventional moral imperatives. His “hostile silence” toward Christianity in *The Birth of Tragedy* was as much a consequence of style as it was a wilful disregard for this important theme. Nietzsche simply lacked the conceptual and stylistic framework necessary to consider his break with metaphysics, much less commit a final version to paper. The aphorism, a method of maximum freedom, allowed him to do this.

This freedom of method and thought goes to the very definition of what Nietzsche calls a “free spirit.” As is the case with many of Nietzsche’s concepts, the free spirit is not absolute:

He is called a free spirit who thinks differently from what, on the basis of his origin, environment, his class and profession, or on the basis of the dominant views of the age, would have been expected of him. He is the exception, the fettered spirits are the rule... what characterizes the free spirit is not that his opinions are the more correct but that he has liberated himself from tradition, whether the outcome has been successful or a failure. As a rule, though, he will nonetheless have truth on his side, or at least the spirit of inquiry after truth: he demands reasons, the rest demand faith.²⁸

If free spirits are unfettered thinkers, it is clear that free spirits should prefer the aphorism as a mode of expression.

Sometimes this freedom is from one's former self. One instructive aphorism explains that a "Positive and negative...thinker needs no one to refute him: he does that for himself."²⁹ Freedom is even made possible by having a bad memory—that is the ability to “enjoy the same good things for the first time *several* times.”³⁰ Nietzsche's use of the aphorism and perspectivism is the equivalent of a bad memory, or at least approaching the same subject from different angles. Nietzsche, like what he says of nature, is a doppelganger, and the aphorism is the work of a doppelganger. It is never one-sided, or at least not one-sided for too long.

Of the style and liberation of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche will later write: “almost every sentence marks some victory—here I liberated myself from what in my nature did not belong to me.... The term ‘free spirit’ here is not to be understood in any other sense; it means a spirit that has *become free*, that has again taken possession of itself.”³¹ *Ecce Homo* also notes that the essays for *Untimely Mediations* ended his stint as a scholar, a notion that explains the subtitle of *Human, All too Human*, “A Book for Free Spirits.” Nietzsche is free from his teachers; his time as a scholar is over. Scholars do not write in aphorisms, might be the conclusion we reach upon investigating Nietzsche's aphoristic turn. And we are free spirits only to the extent that we are free from him, he might later add.

Poetry and Truth

After sections on metaphysics, morality, and religion, Nietzsche finally turns his attention more directly to the matter of style. The sequence suggests that metaphysics and conventional morality

interfere with the freedom of writers. It is only after Nietzsche has cleared these items from the foreground that he can explain the grand nature of his project.

The subject of the first aphorism in the fourth section addresses the matter of perfection and becoming. Perfection, Nietzsche explains, is thought to be without a beginning, or at least we have grown unaccustomed to inquiring about such beginnings. Perfection, rather, is understood as sort of magic or mythology. The goal of artists, Nietzsche instructs, is to elicit this sort of response from an audience, to get others to take your art for granted.³² His point goes beyond art: the error of metaphysics was to think in terms of being and universality, to ignore becoming and imperfection. Nietzsche first exposes the error of metaphysics and then proceeds to expose the actual origins of metaphysical prejudices. His new philosophy, this new chemistry, intends to explore the relationship between art and truth.

Nietzsche warns against “The prejudice in favour of bigness”—the tendency to “overvalue everything big and conspicuous.”³³ It is much healthier, Nietzsche teaches, for individuals to develop uniformly than with an eye to size. Nietzsche even urges novelists to embrace brevity. “One has to make a hundred or so sketches for novels,” Nietzsche contends, “none longer than two pages but of such distinctness that every word in them is necessary.” Writing too much can compromise the honesty of a writer.³⁴ Nietzsche also counsels that novelists should gather anecdotes and descriptions of human characters and continue this activity for many years. His emphasis on experience and perspective means that his philosophy is hardly static. For all of his talk of experience and the individual, many perspectives must go into a philosophy.

This is not to say that Nietzsche demands perfection in writing. “The philosopher believes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the building,” he writes. “Posterity

discovers it in the bricks with which he built and which are then often used again for better building: in the fact, that is to say, that that building can be destroyed and *nonetheless* possess value as material.”³⁵ Nietzsche’s method is one of experimentation and spontaneity. Simply put, “It says nothing against the ripeness of a spirit that it has a few worms.”³⁶

Although Nietzsche proposes experimentation, he does not wander aimlessly through his books. In “Schopenhauer as Educator,” an essay from *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche claimed that he does not write without a sense of the whole. Although the aphoristic style might lend itself to experimentation, his writing is anything but inconclusive or tentative. Nietzsche writes of a “regulatory total picture” as evidence of his system or totality of vision.³⁷ It is something required of all writers and philosophers, he maintains. “What, however, do most people do?” he will later lament. “They begin, not with the parts, but with the whole.”³⁸ In this respect, the aphorism and his embrace of other styles were the means of expression, not necessarily of exploration or discovery.

Nietzsche did not abandon this sentiment when he turned to the aphorism. As he writes in *Human, All Too Human*, “Most thinkers write badly because they communicate to us not only their thoughts but also the thinking of their thoughts.”³⁹ In sum, style is not thinking, and thinking should not drive or pervade style. If Nietzsche’s philosophy is more stylistic than other philosophies, it is because it is richer and more substantive. As he adds in the second volume, “To improve one’s style—means to improve one’s thoughts and nothing else!—If you do not straightaway agree with this it will be impossible to convince you of it.”⁴⁰

To forego substance for style is what Nietzsche would call the definition of poetry. This distinction explains why the section on writing begins with a treatment of poetry before it turns to philosophy. Moreover, it is misleading to charge Nietzsche with being a poetic philosopher,

for he would not wish us to confound his philosophy with any sort of poetry. Poets are “backward-looking creatures,” he charges. They look to the past to “alleviate the life of men,” who “soothe and heal provisionally, only for a moment.”⁴¹ Poets are all-too-temporal artists who care little about truth. Their style is for the sake of style, and has little to do with truth, purpose, or consequence. If Nietzsche’s philosophy is poetic, it is poetic only in style, not in substance. The most we can say is that Nietzsche combines the style of poetry with the substance of philosophy.

Style and Culture

Nietzsche is radical in his appreciation of style and culture because he is fearful that these tendencies are rapidly disappearing, due in part to the spread of Christianity and, more recently, the emergence of the democratic state.⁴² As he laments, “*Genius is incompatible with the ideal state...* this comfortable life would destroy the soil out of which great intellect and the powerful individual in general grows: by which I mean great energy.”⁴³ The eighth part of *Human, All Too Human* is an attack on the state and its impact on individuals and culture. In this section, Nietzsche professes that as long as states govern, they will always support religion as a means to pacify the public.⁴⁴

In the second volume of *Human, All Too Human*, “The Wanderer and His Shadow,”

Nietzsche is more aphoristic and develops the theme of culture and writing even further:

The age of speaking well is past, because the age of the city cultures is past.... That is why everyone who is a good European now has to learn *to write well and even better*.... To write better, however, means at the same time also to think better; continually to invent things more worth communicating and to be able actually to communicate them; to become translatable into the language of one’s neighbor; to make ourselves accessible to the understanding of those foreigners who learn our language; to assist towards making all good things common property and freely available to the open-minded; finally *to*

prepare the way for that still distant state of things in which the good Europeans will come into possession of their great task: the direction and supervision of the total culture of the earth.⁴⁵

Nietzsche's focus on writing and style is driven by a concern for high culture (and free thinkers) that are essential to its restoration.

For this reason, Nietzsche is concerned with the influence of religion on art. "Art raises its head where the religions relax their hold," he writes. "Wherever we perceive human endeavors to be tinged with a higher, gloomier coloring, we can assume that dread of spirits, the odor of incense and the shadows of churches are still adhering to them."⁴⁶ His take on poetry, art, and music is in stark contrast to the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he held out for music as the source of new culture. The section on writing in *Human, All Too Human* starts with art, or the shortcomings of art, and moves on to philosophy as the solution to the problem of culture. Philosophising is a young form of expression, to be sure, but it is a superior sort of creativity. Philosophy is preferable because it understands that creativity and knowledge mean more than dedication to a particular style or method.⁴⁷

Yet even the best writing has its limitations. Foremost is the problem of making writing too personal.⁴⁸ Although Nietzsche later writes in a personal way, sometimes astonishingly so, this is less true of his earlier texts. Instead, he counsels, "A true writer only bestows words on the emotions and experience of others, he is an artist so as to divine much from the little he himself has felt."⁴⁹ Nietzsche's perspectivism begins with the individual, but it is also strikingly inclusive in nature.

One recurring theme in Nietzsche's writing is the problem of youth, and the issue of writing and style is no different.⁵⁰ To be youthful is to have great energy, but it is an energy lacking experience. Nietzsche fully expects individuals—and peoples, for that matter—to

abandon their most deeply held beliefs as they mature. “It is sound evidence for the validity of a theory if its originator remains true to it for *forty years*,” he writes. “But I assert that there has never yet been a philosopher who has not in the end looked down on the philosophy of his youth with contempt, or at least with mistrust.”⁵¹ If the change is never admitted, it is only for the sake of followers. If being honest means, more than anything, being honest about one’s own intellectual development, the aphorism is the perfect vehicle. For it demands that its author renew himself with each new addition, and allows for the growth of the reader. It also allows adherents to revisit the old aphorisms without the danger of forsaking the teacher.

Nietzsche also refers to the issue of health and writing. “To become sick in the manner of these free spirits, to remain sick for a long time and then, slowly, slowly, to become healthy, by which I mean ‘healthier,’ is a fundamental *cure* for all pessimism.... There is wisdom, practical wisdom, in for a long time prescribing even health for oneself only in small doses.”⁵² As he states more succinctly in *Ecce Homo*, “Only my sickness brought me to reason.”⁵³ Nietzsche may have suffered from chronic illness, but as he would contend, that makes him the resident expert on matters of health.

Nietzsche’s Audience

Although the notion that Nietzsche uses the aphorism to hide his true teaching will ultimately be rejected, there is some evidence to support his contention. On the issue of brevity, Nietzsche writes:

The relief-like, incomplete presentation of an idea, of a whole philosophy, is sometimes more effective than its exhaustive realization: more is left for the beholder to do, he is more impelled to continue working on that which appears before him so strongly etched in light and shadow, to think it through to the end, and to overcome even that constraint which has hitherto prevented it from stepping forth fully formed.⁵⁴

Because not all readers are capable of reading Nietzsche in this way, his work remains obscured or altogether inaccessible.

But that is not all that Nietzsche says on the subject. On the issue of style, for example, he cautions artists who proceed too quickly about losing their audience. “Progress from one stylistic level to the next must proceed so slowly,” he writes, “that not only the artists but the auditors and spectators too can participate in this progress and know exactly what is going on.”⁵⁵ He also cautions writers against using too few examples, for fear of losing the reader.⁵⁶ More to the point, Nietzsche contends, “Good writers have two things in common: they prefer to be understood rather than admired; and they do not write for knowing and over-acute readers.”⁵⁷ Elsewhere, Nietzsche uses the metaphor of a concert musician to get his point across. “One has to know, not only how to play well, but also how to get oneself heard well. The violin in the hands of the greatest master will emit only a chirp if the room is too big; and then the master sounds no better than any bungler.”⁵⁸ Whatever the particular strategy, Nietzsche’s aim is simple: the purpose of writing is to be understood by a large audience.

Being understood takes on greater importance, as books tend to become independent from their authors:

Every writer is surprised anew how, once a book has detached [itself] from him, it goes on to live a life of its own...it lives like a being furnished with soul and spirit and is yet not human.... If one now goes on to consider that, not only a book, but every action performed by a human being becomes in some way the cause of other actions, decisions, thoughts, that everything that happens is inextricably knotted to everything that will happen, one comes to recognise the existence of an actual *immortality*.⁵⁹

Although many have lamented the extent to which a reader, through interpretation, alters the meaning of an author, Nietzsche views writing as a means to immortality.

Although much is made of Nietzsche’s use of masks, in *Human, All Too Human* his masks are donned for the sake of communication. “Mediocrity is the most successful mask the

superior spirit can wear,” he writes, “because to the great majority, that is to say the mediocre, it will not seem a mask—: and yet it is on precisely their account that he puts it on—so as not to provoke *them*, indeed often out of benevolence and pity.”⁶⁰ It is not that philosophers are equal to the mass, but that their happiness and success too often depend on the appearance of a connection. The opposite method is used for more courageous readers.⁶¹

His talk of masks notwithstanding, Nietzsche cares a great deal for honesty, so much so that he places it among the virtues of a new philosopher. His honesty, however, is a different kind of honesty, one that also concerns the effect that an author has on the reader. “Honest books make the reader honest,” he writes, “at least to the extent that they lure out his antipathy and hatred, which cunning prudence otherwise knows best how to conceal.”⁶²

In addition to giving counsel on his own books, Nietzsche also directs readers away from what he calls “forbidden books.” “Never to read anything written by those arrogant knowalls and muddle-heads who indulge in that most revolting form of ill-breeding, that of logical paradox: they employ the form of *logic* in precisely those places where at bottom everything is impudently improvised and constructed in air.”⁶³ Nietzsche also urges readers to stay away from authors who try too hard: “I intend never again to read an author of whom it is apparent that he wanted to produce a book: but only those whose thoughts unintentionally became a book.”⁶⁴ Writing should be an experience, not a profession.

There are, however, great problems with writing and interpretation. The foremost is the metaphysical prejudice that lingers in modern circles. As Nietzsche warns, “we think we see opposites instead of transitions.”⁶⁵ Although the goal is to ascribe more meaning to the work in question,⁶⁶ it can have serious consequences for readers attempting to make a system out of a

philosophy that resists such simplistic categorisation. If truth is no longer the standard, then inconsistency is no objection to a philosophy.

Although Heidegger and Lampert insist that Nietzsche demands interpretation—and to a certain extent, they are correct—Nietzsche places limits on this interpretation. “He who explains a passage in an author ‘more deeply’ than the passage was meant has not explained the author but *obscured* him,” Nietzsche warns. “This is how our metaphysicians stand in regard to the text of nature; indeed, they stand much worse. For in order to apply their deep explanations they frequently first adjust the text in a way that will facilitate it: in other words, they *spoil* it.”⁶⁷ Elsewhere, Nietzsche instructs that modern readers need to realise that “The so-called paradoxes of an author to which a reader takes exception very often stand not at all in the author’s book but in the reader’s head.”⁶⁸ To avoid the paradoxes, readers often take a part of the philosophy. “The worst readers are those who behave like plundering troops: they take away a few things they can use, dirty and confound the remainder, and revile the whole.”⁶⁹ In this sense, the author is primary, and Nietzsche’s primary goal is to improve his readers’ ability to interpret the original intent of an author. His attention to audience notwithstanding, he is not content with letting his philosophy suffer in the process. Nietzsche’s is an untimely philosophy, and he knows the virtue of waiting.

He also understands that his philosophy might not be widely received: “Stylistic caution.—I write in such a way that neither the mob, nor the *populi*, nor the parties of any kind want to read me. Consequently these opinions of mine will never become public.”⁷⁰ Honest books come from honest writers. “If the author denies his talent merely so as to place himself on a level with his reader, he commits the only mortal sin the latter will never forgive him—

supposing, that is, he notices it.”⁷¹ But if Nietzsche’s audience is limited, it is not limited by style; it is limited by the nature of his philosophy.

Although Nietzsche attends to the question of his audience, his true focus is on the experience of writing. “Writing ought always to advertise a victory—an overcoming of *oneself* which has to be communicated for the benefit of others.”⁷² At its worst, writing is an attempt at mastery over the reader, rather than oneself:

Nevertheless, even artists who are able to gain long-term appeal are severely lacking. We all think that a work of art, an artist, is proved to be of high quality if it seizes hold on us and profoundly moves us. But for this to be so our *own high quality* in judgment and sensibility would first have to have been proved: which is not the case.... Such a predomination over entire centuries proves nothing in regard to the quality or lasting validity of a style; that is why one should never be too firm in one’s faith in any artist.... The blessings and raptures conferred by a philosophy or a religion likewise prove nothing in regard to their truth.⁷³

Books may be a means to immortality, but immortality by itself proves nothing of the book’s truth or the value of its author.

Conclusion: The Prejudice of Style

Although not all of Nietzsche’s books are entirely aphoristic, they are often interpreted in an aphoristic way. Nietzsche’s language of the aphorism has influenced interpretation, so much so that it has become a prejudice of sorts.

Certainly illness played a role in Nietzsche’s brief bouts of creativity. But his aphorisms started much earlier than his chronic illnesses; many of his later books are less aphoristic, and his literary masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is anything but aphoristic. Nietzsche’s philosophising had more to do with the change in his philosophy than physiology. His aphoristic turn marked a turn in his intellectual development, to be sure, but it also allowed for a great

advance in his philosophy, in presentation if not in development. His philosophy was limited by conventional forms, such as the treatise and the essay, and the aphorism allowed him to break from that. Although it was initially involuntary or subconscious, Nietzsche soon understood what this change of style allowed him to do philosophically, and he embraced it.

Moreover, it is not that the aphorism requires the greatest minds (“philosophers of the future”) to be understood; the aphorism *requires* the least from its readers. Even mediocre minds can latch on to a particular phrase, without having to embrace, much less understand, the context of the aphorism or the radicalism of Nietzsche’s philosophy. If Nietzsche’s writings are “fishhooks,” as he claims in *Ecce Homo*, then the aphorism is the perfect fishhook, for it catches the most fish. Although Nietzsche is hardly a democrat, the aphorism is the most democratic of philosophic modes, for it leaves a great deal of interpretation to the individual.

Nevertheless, with *Zarathustra* Nietzsche was well aware of the limitations of the aphoristic method: aphorisms are brilliant destructive forces and they do quite nicely when it comes to hooking unsuspecting readers. They are not, however, a sufficient means of presenting a positive philosophical teaching. For that, Nietzsche required another method and even another voice.

Notes

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Style* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 123.

² Alexander Nehemas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 34.

³ Laurence Lampert, “Nietzsche, the History of Philosophy, and Esotericism,” in Daniel Conway, ed., *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, 147. Originally published in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 9/10 (1995): 36-49.

⁴ Sarah Kofman, *Nietzsche et la métaphore* (Paris: Payot, 1972), 163-64.

⁵ Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York, Cambridge, 1997), §1, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §2, 13.

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- ⁷ Ibid., §3, 13.
⁸ Ibid., §9, 15.
⁹ Ibid., §9, 15-16.
¹⁰ Ibid., §638, 203.
¹¹ Ibid., §11, 16 and §19, 22.
¹² Ibid., §17, 20.
¹³ Ibid., §17, 21.
¹⁴ Ibid., §18, 21-22.
¹⁵ Ibid., §22, 22.
¹⁶ Ibid., §24, 24-25.
¹⁷ Ibid., §630, 199-200.
¹⁸ Ibid., §618, 195.
¹⁹ Ibid., §27, 26.
²⁰ Ibid., §28, 27.
²¹ Ibid., §107, 58.
²² Ibid., §110, 62; emphasis removed.
²³ Ibid., §111, 63.
²⁴ Ibid., §114, 66.
²⁵ Ibid., §119, 67.
²⁶ Ibid., §141, 77.
²⁷ Ibid., §29, 27.
²⁸ Ibid., §225, 108.
²⁹ Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow" §249, 371.
³⁰ Nietzsche, *Human*, §580, 188.
³¹ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Human, All Too Human," trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), §1, 283.
³² Nietzsche, *Human* §145, 80.
³³ Ibid., §260, 122.
³⁴ Ibid., §191, 93.
³⁵ Nietzsche, "Assorted Opinions and Maxims" §201, 261.
³⁶ Nietzsche, Ibid., §353, 292.
³⁷ Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator" §3, 141.
³⁸ Nietzsche, *Human* §163, 87.
³⁹ Nietzsche, Ibid., §188, 93.
⁴⁰ Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow" §131, 342.
⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Human* §148, 81.
⁴² Nietzsche, Ibid., §234, 111-112.
⁴³ Nietzsche, Ibid., §235, 112.
⁴⁴ Nietzsche, Ibid., §472, 172-73.
⁴⁵ Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow" §87, 332.
⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Human* §150, 81-82.
⁴⁷ Nietzsche, Ibid., §146, 80.
⁴⁸ Nietzsche, Ibid., §200, 95.
⁴⁹ Nietzsche, Ibid., §211, 97-98.
⁵⁰ Nietzsche, Ibid., §223, 105.
⁵¹ Nietzsche, Ibid., §253, 120.
⁵² Nietzsche, Ibid., Preface §5, 9.
⁵³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, "Clever" §2, 242.
⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *Human* §178, 92; cf. *Human* §199, 95.
⁵⁵ Nietzsche, Ibid., §168, 89.
⁵⁶ Nietzsche, Ibid., §202, 95.
⁵⁷ Nietzsche, "Assorted Opinions and Maxims" §138, 245.
⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *Human* §177, 91-92.
⁵⁹ Nietzsche, Ibid., §208, 96-97.
⁶⁰ Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow" §175, 352.

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- ⁶¹ Nietzsche, *Human* §308, 137.
⁶² Nietzsche, “Assorted Opinions and Maxims” §145, 246.
⁶³ Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and His Shadow” §92, 333.
⁶⁴ Nietzsche, *Ibid.*, §121, 339.
⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Ibid.*, §67, 326.
⁶⁶ Nietzsche, *Human* §222, 105.
⁶⁷ Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and His Shadow” §17, 309.
⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Human* §185, 92.
⁶⁹ Nietzsche, “Assorted Opinions and Maxims” §137, 245.
⁷⁰ Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and His Shadow” §71, 327-28.
⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Human* §190, 93.
⁷² Nietzsche, “Assorted Opinions and Maxims” §152, 248.
⁷³ Nietzsche, *Human* §161, 85.