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– Introduction –

Some years ago, Tom Kremer (the founder of Notting Hill Editions) told me that he was going to commission a new translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. He regarded it as the greatest work of European literature. Tom was a truly extraordinary person. Born in Transylvania, to a Hungarian-Jewish family, he survived the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. After the war, he lived in Israel, South Africa and eventually the UK. He became a football coach, a teacher, an inventor; he popularised the Rubik's Cube, wrote books, set up his own publishing house. Tom was in his eighties when I first met him but he was so robust and undaunted that it was genuinely a surprise when he died in 2017.

Before he died, Tom commissioned Michael Hulse to be his translator. This was an excellent idea because Hulse is such a distinguished poet as well as a renowned translator and critic. Readers may well know Hulse's work through his seminal translations of W. G. Sebald, in which he brilliantly re-renders the elegiac atmosphere of the original German. He has also translated many other authors, most notably Rilke and Goethe. The poetic atmosphere of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is also fundamental to the work. It's a wild prose poem, a fantastical rhapsody. It was published between 1883 and 1885 in four parts. The subtitle is ironic: 'A Book for All and None.' At the time, sales were poor and Nietzsche published the last part at his own expense, having been dropped by his publisher.

Now, Nietzsche is a world-famous philosopher, though the metaphorical ambiguities of his style have often caused his work to be misunderstood. He debunked the old religious and philosophical traditions of binary thought – good/evil, God/devil. Despite this, he has often been read in line with such binary traditions, as categorically one thing or another: good/evil, God/devil. He despised

monologic absolutes but his works were later appropriated by fascists in support of their own despicable monologic absolutes. He feared his work would one day be traduced yet he was opposed to clarity as a form of delusion. It is a further irony that any ostensibly factual claim about Nietzsche runs counter to his philosophical arguments against factual claims. His literary style is unbridled, provocative, contradictory, often humorous. He writes, possibly as a joke: 'I am no man. I am dynamite.' His work exceeds and explodes all traditional categories; it has also exploded across the world, influencing countless others including Georg Brandes, August Strindberg, Edvard Munch, W. B. Yeats, Martin Buber, Thomas Mann, André Gide, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Rainer Maria Rilke, Karl Jaspers, Albert Camus, Jacques Derrida, Ralph Ellison, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Luce Irigaray, Kelly Oliver, Marilyn Pearsall, Paul Tillich, Tamsin Lorraine and Maggie Nelson.

Nietzsche was born in 1844 in Röcken, Saxony, into a devout Lutheran family. His father was a pastor and died when Nietzsche was only four. After this, Nietzsche was raised by his mother and grandmother, along with his sister Elisabeth. At the age of twenty-five, he became a professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. He served as a medical orderly in the 1870 Franco-German War, and contracted diphtheria. He became friends with Wagner, wrote a highly Wagnerian book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), but their friendship had cooled by the end of the 1870s. Around the same time, Nietzsche's poor health made it increasingly untenable for him to teach. In 1879, the University of Basel gave him a pension, and for the following decade he lived in Switzerland, Italy and France. He was constantly ill, partly blind and yet he wrote *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–5), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). In 1888 he produced a final flurry of works including *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist* and *Ecce Homo*.

In 1889, Nietzsche broke down entirely. At the time, it was assumed that his madness was caused by syphilis, but there are other

theories including tumours and strokes. From Turin, he sent frenzied letters to his friends, signing off as Dionysus. In his last letter, he wrote: ‘I am just having all anti-Semites shot.’ Finally he collapsed in the street and was confined to an asylum; later his sister took him under her care. He died, never having regained his sanity, in 1900.

After his death, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* became Nietzsche’s most famous work. By the First World War it was so popular that every German soldier heading off to the trenches was given a copy, to inspire them. This was an odd choice. Nietzsche wrote each part swiftly; Part II was written in ten days. It contains many of the ideas for which Nietzsche is most widely known: ‘God is Dead,’ eternal recurrence, and the *übermensch* or superhuman. The protagonist, Zarathustra, wanders through the world, encountering friends and foes, trying to impart his ideas. People variously threaten, ignore or worship him. The name is significant: Zarathustra is the pre-sixth century BCE Iranian prophet regarded as the founder of the religion of Zoroastrianism. The Greeks saw Zoroastrianism as the origin point of the dualistic view of the world, in which reality is portioned into opposites: God/devil, good/evil, soul/body, dark/light. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche explains ‘what the name of Zarathustra precisely meant in my mouth’:

Zarathustra was the first to see in the struggle between good and evil the essential wheel in the working of things. The translation of morality into the realm of metaphysics, as force, cause, end-in-itself, is his work. [Zarathustra] created this most portentous of all errors [...] he must be the first to expose it.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche argues against all metaphysical absolutes. Without God, they have no logic, because there is no eternal referent: ‘everlasting good and evil do not exist!’ Equally we should be suspicious of all absolute systems, not merely the theological: we should not worship science without question, nor the state, ‘the coldest of all cold monsters.’ Human life is not a journey towards a goal – eternal life or the kingdom of heaven:

The human is a rope, fastened between the animal and the superhuman – a rope across an abyss. [...] What is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not an end in itself. What can be loved in the human is that it is both a crossing-over and a going-down.

The revised purpose of life is to become the superhuman. This is an idea that Nietzsche never clearly defines, typically enough, but it suggests a process of accepting mortal life as an end in itself, and living abundantly and without fear: ‘All the gods are dead; now we want the superhuman to live.’

The work is ironic, mischievous and full of contradictions and paradoxes. Zarathustra tells his followers to listen to him, then he tells them not to trust him. Perhaps he is deceiving them! He is the ‘laughing prophet,’ the ‘dancer,’ who wants to ‘kill the spirit of heaviness’: the despair that threatens those who live without God. Just as ‘all good things laugh’ so ‘all good things approach their goals obliquely.’ Eternal recurrence is another oblique approach but, fittingly, it recurs throughout the book. Imagine, says Zarathustra, that ‘we have already been here an infinite number of times, and all things with us.’ The superhuman can contend with the idea of eternal recurrence, of experiencing the same life over and over again, because they have lived well.

There are caveats to all Nietzsche’s arguments, and besides his meaning is never certain. Yet his dream of the laughing, dancing human – divested of heaviness, of cold eternal absolutes – remains radical even today. The path is fraught with danger; the rope is above an abyss, after all. In a letter, Nietzsche described *Thus Spake Zarathustra* as ‘an explosion of forces that have been building up over decades.’ The danger, he added, is that ‘the originator of such explosions can often get blown up.’ There are many interpretations, detonations, of Nietzsche’s life and work; this short introduction can barely begin to invoke them. If you are interested and would like to read further, then Sue Prideaux’s recent biography, *I Am Dynamite*, is a fascinating, nuanced portrait. Alexander Nehamas’s equally compelling *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* proposes that the ‘Nietzsche’