

Why should we read Nietzsche today?

relation to other key figures

major works

main currents of N's thought

N wrote about Wagnerian opera

his critics find him dangerously close to the authoritarian excesses of fascism-- in this class we

will point out the fallacy of these claims... even though we might do in Nietzsche for other reasons

but still Nietzsche is very relevant. why?

Q: WHAT ARE CULTURAL POLITICS?

jeans in russia, rambo in vietnam...

style in politics (current german election, tony blair, television, ronald reagan...)

N anticipated effects of mass culture on world politics and thought. He was ahead of his time.

We'll trace his imprint into the most recent European literature and art (Byatt, Beuys, Vinterberg)

Nietzsche overview (1844-1900)

N born in prussia, son of lutheran minister who died insane four years later

1858 N enters boarding school. in poor health, but still goes on to study theology and classical philology (Q) at the univ of Bonn

After studies moved to Leipzig and came under influence of Kant, Schopenhauer, and composer
Richard Wagner

1868 one year in army, then illness cuts this short

but he was already so well known for his intellect that in 1869

he was appointed to the chair in philology at Basel.

Only 24 years old, had no formal qualifications

Leipzig gave him his doctorate without requiring exam or thesis.

1872 Birth of Tragedy, first book

introduces the famous distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirit in Greek life and
thought.

question what is the contrast bw Apollo and Dionysius

Apollo spirit of order, rationality, intellectual harmony

Dionysius ecstatic, spontaneous will to life

Q: WHAT CULTURAL FIGURES/CHARACTERS ALIGN WITH Apollo + Dionysus?

N's notion of Apollo becomes more obscure in later writings...

Apollo is identified with Christian virtues...

whereas classicists are oddly classified as Dionysian

Q: WHO WOULD BE A CLASSICIST? WHO DID NIETZSCHE HAVE IN MIND?

Goethe. N calls Goethe dionysian, despite his cool classicism.

Birth of Tragedy is, among other things, a challenge to the Buddhist resignation of Schopenhauer.

Why? It challenges Schopenhauer's resignation bc of this: N creates the Apollonian response to the terrors of Dionysius as something positive, active, and heroic...

in other words, the Apollonian response is not apathetic and passive, like the resigned heroes of Schopenhauer's imagination.

N's next major work-- of which we shall a part read later in the semester-- is Untimely Meditations (1873-76)

The last of these meditations is especially significant...

it signals N's break with Richard Wagner

Q: WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT WAGNER?

Q: Do you know about DANIEL BARENBOIM'S DECISION TO PLAY Die WALKUERE IN ISRAEL...

N broke with Wagner partly bc of Wagner's nationalism and anti-semitism,

partly bc he didn't like W's opera Parsifal,

and partly bc W didn't like Nietzsche's

own

flirtation with the French

Enlightenment

In 1879 N resigned from university bc of his chronic ill health. He lived on a modest pension and turned fully to writing.

1878-80 Human, All Too Human

1882 The Gay Science

here he begins his crucial exploration of three main issues:

1. self-mastery,
2. the relations between reason and power,
3. and the revelation of the unconscious strivings after power...

that provide the actual energy for the apparent self-denial of the ascetic and the martyr.

from this work followed...

1883-85 Thus Spoke Zarathustra

zarathustra (also called zoroaster) founded zoroastrianism

in 6th c. bce

this indo-iranian religion dominated persia until the rise of islam

zarathustra maintained a dualistic doctrine,

contrasting the force of light and good in the world

with that of darkness and evil

((had influence over judaism))

1887 Beyond Good and Evil

1887 The Genealogy of Morals

1889-- N collapses in Turin, sees horse flogging, goes clinically insane

question Why does N matter?

N is unchallenged as the most insightful and powerful critic of the moral climate of the 19th century.

Even though we are in the 21st century, much-- very much-- of this legacy remains in contemporary European culture.

N's exploration of unconscious motivations anticipated Freud (drives, ego/id)

N is notorious for stressing:

1. the will to power that is the basis of human nature
2. the resentment that comes when this will is denied its basis in action
3. the corruptions of human nature encouraged by religions-- particularly Christianity-- that feed on such resentment

But the powerful human being who escapes all this-- the Übermensch (overman, superman)-- is not the 'blond beast' of fascism...

rather the Übermensch is a human being who has mastered passion.

He has risen above the senseless flux,
and given creative style to his or her character.

See, Nietzsche was a philosopher of aesthetics and power, but especially aesthetics.

This makes his ideas particularly salient today, after cultural turn.

let's go back to the Übermensch.

he's a central figure in N's ethical vision.

the Übermensch transcends boundaries of classes, creeds, nationalities...

he overcomes human nature itself

he maintains a lordly superiority to the normal shackles and conventions of social life

N connects the UM to Aristotelian virtue,

but the idea of the UM is essentially Romantic (and Aristotle has little to do with Romanticism)

N's idea of a transfiguring freedom finds more

pessimistic echo in:

existentialism

(premise: existence precedes essence)

cynicism (Sloterdijk)

(transvaluation, devaluation)

N's free spirits recognize themselves by their

joyful attitude to eternal return.

eternal return/recurrence... history repeats itself...

the doctrine of recurrence was held by Plotinus and Origen (who is a character in the sub-novel within Babel Tower, which we read in this class)

N embraces idea of recurrence in Will to Power.

Here the cycle of history provides a litmus test

for success in life:

if we succeed in giving the right style to our actions,

we can joyously affirm

their return

(instead of regretting them!)

So, who are these joyful spirits? They are artists, they are creative people.

This is where N gets complicated.

He is not championing warlords, he is celebrating artists. But the disquieting fact remains:

one critic says: "N seems to leave himself no words to condemn any uncaged beasts of prey who best find their style by exerting repulsive power over others."

This problem isn't much helped by N's misogyny.

Q: what is misogyny?

Actually N writes in such an ironic tone, it's hard to figure out who his objects of contempt really were.

Similarly, and importantly, N has been accused of anti-semitism.

But whatever moments of anti-sem are balanced out by an equally vehement denunciation of anti-sem, AND

an equal or greater dislike of the German character of his time.

What are N's current influences?

They derive not only from his celebration of the WILL,

but more deeply from his scepticism

about the notions of truth and fact.

To this extent N anticipated many central tenets of

postmodernism (**Q:** what is postmodernism?)

1. aesthetic attitude twds the world that sees it
as a 'text'
2. the denial of facts
3. the denial of essences
4. the celebration of the plurality of interpretations
and of the fragmented self
5. the downgrading of reason and the politicization of discourse

All these were rediscovered in the 20th century, up until the nineties and to today.