

The Story of My Life

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Chapter XVIII

My first acquaintance with Nietzsche's writings belongs to the year 1889. Previous to that I had never read a line of his. Upon the substance of my ideas as these find expression in *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity*, Nietzsche's thought had not the least influence. I read what he had written with the feeling of being drawn on by the style which he had developed out of his relation to life. I felt that his soul was a being that was impelled by reason of inheritance and attraction to give attention to everything which the spiritual life of his age had brought forth, but which always felt within: "What has this spiritual life to do with me? There must be another world in which I can live; so much does life in this world jar upon me." This feeling made him a spiritually incensed critic of his time; but a critic who was by his own criticism reduced to illness – who had to experience illness and could only dream of health – of his own health. At first he sought for means to make his dream of health the content of his own life; and thus he sought with Richard Wagner, with Schopenhauer, with modern positivism to dream as if he wished to make the dream in his soul into a reality. One day he discovered that he had only dreamed. Then he began with every power belonging to his spirit to seek for realities – realities which must lie "somewhere or other." He found no roads to these realities, but only yearnings. Then these yearnings became to him realities. He dreamed again, but the mighty power of his soul created out of these dreams realities of the inner man which, without that heaviness which had so long characterized the ideas of humanity, floated within him in a mood of soul joyful but resting upon foundations contrary to the spirit of the age, the "Zeitgeist."

It was thus that I viewed Nietzsche. The freely floating weightless character of his ideas attracted me. I found that this free-floating element in him had brought to maturity many thoughts that bore a resemblance to those which had shaped themselves in me by ways quite unlike those of Nietzsche's mind.

Thus it was possible for me to write in 1895 in the preface to my book *Nietzsche, ein Kämpfer gegen seine Zeit*.¹ "As early as 1886 in my little volume, *The Theory of Knowledge in Goethe's World-Conception*, the same sentiment is expressed" – that is, the same as appears in certain works of Nietzsche. But what attracted me particularly was that one could read

Nietzsche without coming upon anything which strove to make the reader a “dependant” of Nietzsche's. One could gladly experience without reserve his spiritual illumination; in this experience one felt oneself to be wholly free; for one had the impression that his words began to laugh if one had attributed to them the intention of being assented to, as is the case when one reads Haeckel or Spencer.

Thus I ventured to explain my relationship to Nietzsche in the book mentioned above by using the words which he himself had used in his book on Schopenhauer: “I belong among those readers of Nietzsche, who, after having read their first page from him, know for a certainty that they will read every page and listen to every word which he has ever uttered. My confidence in him continued from that time on ... I understood him as if he had written for me, in order to express me intelligibly, but immodestly, foolishly.” Shortly before I began the actual writing of that book, Nietzsche's sister, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, appeared one day at the Goethe and Schiller Institute. She was taking the preliminary steps toward the establishment of a Nietzsche Institute, and wished to learn how the Goethe and Schiller Institute was managed. Soon afterward there came to Weimar the editor of Nietzsche's works, Fritz Koegel, and I made his acquaintance.

Later I got into a serious disagreement with Frau Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche. Her emotional and lovable spirit claimed at that time my deepest sympathy. I suffered inexpressibly by reason of the disagreement. A complicated situation had brought this to pass; I was compelled to defend myself against accusations; I know that it was all necessary, that the happy hours I was permitted to spend among the Nietzsche archives in Naumburg and Weimar should now lie under a veil of bitter memories; yet I am grateful to Frau Förster-Nietzsche for having taken me, on the first of many visits I made to her, into the chamber of Friedrich Nietzsche. There he lay on a lounge enveloped in darkness, with his beautiful forehead-artist's and thinker's forehead in one. It was early afternoon. Those eyes which in their blindness yet revealed the soul, now merely mirrored a reflection of the surroundings which could find no longer any way to reach the soul. One stood there and Nietzsche knew it not. And yet one could have believed, looking upon that brow permeated by the spirit, that this was the expression of a soul which had all the forenoon long been shaping thoughts within, and which now would fain rest a while. An inner shudder which seized my soul may have signified that this also underwent a change in sympathy with the genius whose gaze was directed toward me and yet failed to rest upon me. The passivity of my gaze so long fixed won in return a comprehension of his own gaze: his longing always in vain to enable the soul-forces of the eye to work.

And so there appeared before my soul the soul of Nietzsche, hovering above his head, boundless in its spiritual light; surrendered wholly to the spiritual worlds, longing after its environ-

ment but failing to discover it; and yet chained to the body, which would have to do with the soul only so long as the soul longed for this present world. Nietzsche's soul was still there, but only from without could it hold to the body, that body which so long as the soul remained within it had offered resistance to the full unfolding of its light.

I had ere this read the Nietzsche who had written; now I perceived the Nietzsche who bore within his body ideas drawn from widely extended spiritual regions – ideas which still sparkled in their beauty even though they had lost on the way their primal illuminating powers. A soul which from previous earthly lives bore rich wealth of light, but which could not in this life cause all its light to shine. I had admired what Nietzsche wrote; but now I saw a luminous form behind that which I had admired.

In my thoughts I could only stammer over what I then beheld; and this stammering is in effect my book, *Nietzsche as the Adversary of His Age*. That the book is no more than a stammering conceals what is none the less true, that the form of Nietzsche I beheld inspired the book.

Frau Förster-Nietzsche then requested me to set Nietzsche's library in order. In this way I was enabled to spend several weeks in the Nietzsche archives at Naumburg. In this way also I formed an intimate friendship with Fritz Koegel. It was a beautiful task which placed before my eyes the books in which Nietzsche himself had read. His spirit lived in the impressions which these volumes made upon me – a volume of Emerson's filled throughout with marginal comments showing all the signs of an absorbing study; Guyau's writing bearing the same indications; books containing violent critical comments from his hand – a great number of marginal comments in which one could see his ideas in germinal form.

A penetrating conception of Nietzsche's final creative period shone clearly before me as I read his marginal comments on Eugen Dühring's chief philosophical work. Dühring there develops the thought that one can conceive the cosmos at a single moment as a combination of elementary parts. Thus the history of the world would be the series of all such possible combinations. When once these should have been formed, then the first would have to return, and the whole series would be repeated. If anything thus exists in reality, it must have occurred innumerable times in the past, and must occur again innumerable times in future. Thus we should arrive at the conception of the eternal repetition of similar states of the cosmos. Dühring rejects this thought as an impossibility Nietzsche reads this; he receives from it an impression, which works further in the depths of his soul and finally take form within him as “the return of the similar,” which, together with the idea of the “superman,” dominates his final creative period.

I was profoundly impressed – indeed shocked – by the impression which I received from thus following Nietzsche in his reading. For I saw what an opposition there was between the character of Nietzsche's spirit and that of his contemporaries. Dühring, the extreme positivist, who rejects everything which is not the result of a system of reasoning directed with cold and mathematical regularity, considers “the eternal repetition of the similar” as an absurdity, and sets up the idea only to show its impossibility; but Nietzsche must take this up as his solution of the world-riddle, as an intuition, arising from the depths of his own soul.

Thus Nietzsche stands in absolute opposition to much which pressed in upon him as the content of the thought and feeling of his age. This driving pressure he so receives that it pains him deeply, and it is in grief, in inexpressible sorrow of spirit, that he shapes the content of his own soul. This was the tragedy of his creative work.

This reached its climax while he was sketching the outlines for his last work, *Willen zur Macht, eine Umwertung aller Werte*.² Nietzsche was impelled to bring up in purely spiritual fashion everything which he thought or experienced in the depth of his soul. To create a world-concept from the spiritual events in which the soul itself participates – this was the tendency of his thought. But the positivistic world conception of his age, the age of natural science, swept in upon him. In this conception there was nothing but the purely materialistic world, void of spirit. What remained of the spiritual way of thought in the conception was only the remains of ancient ways of thinking, and these no longer found him. Nietzsche's unlimited sense for truth would expunge all this. In this way he came to think as an extreme positivist. A spiritual world behind the material became to him a lie. But he could create only out of his own soul – so create that true creation seemed to him to have meaning only when it holds before itself in idea the content of the spiritual world. Yet this content he rejected. The natural-scientific world-content had so firmly gripped his soul he would create this as if in spiritual fashion. Lyrically, in dionysiac rush of soul, does his mind soar aloft in *Zarathustra*. In wonderful fashion does the spiritual hover there, but it is a wonderful spiritual dream woven out of the stuff of material reality. The spirit strews this about in its effort to escape because it does not find itself but can only live in a seeming reality in that dream reflected from the material.

In my own mind I dwelt much during those Weimar days in the contemplation of Nietzsche's type of mind. In my own spiritual experience this type of mind had also its place. My spiritual experience could enter sympathetically into Nietzsche's struggles, into his tragedy. What had this to do with the positivistic forms in which Nietzsche proclaimed the conclusions of his thought?

Others looked upon me as a “Nietzschean,” merely because I could unreservedly admire what was entirely opposed to my own way of thinking. I was impressed by the way in which Nietzsche's mind revealed itself; in just this aspect I felt myself close to him, for in the content of his thought he was close to no one; as to the experience of the spiritual way of thought he felt himself isolated both from men and from his age.

For a long time I was in frequent intercourse with the editor of Nietzsche's works, Fritz Koegel. We discussed in detail many things pertaining to the publication of Nietzsche's works. I never had any official relation to the Nietzsche archives or the publication of his works. When Frau Förster Nietzsche wished to offer me such a relationship, this led to a conflict with Fritz Koegel which at once rendered it impossible that I should have any share in the Nietzsche archives.

My connection with the Nietzsche archives constituted a very stimulating episode in my life at Weimar, and the final rupture of this relationship caused me deep regret.

Out of the various activities in connection with Nietzsche, there remained with me a view of his personality – that of one whose fate it was to share tragically in the life of the age of natural science covering the latter half of the nineteenth century and finally to be shattered by his impact with that age. He sought in that age, but nothing could he find. As to myself, I was only confirmed by my experience with him in the conviction that all seeking for reality in the data of natural science would be vain except as it directed its view, not within these data, but through them into the world of spirit.

It was thus that Nietzsche's work brought the problem of natural science before my mind in a new form. Goethe and Nietzsche stood in perspective before me. Goethe's strong sense for reality directed him toward the essential being and processes of nature. He desired to remain within nature. He restricted himself to pure perceptions of the plant, animal, and human forms. But, while he kept his mind moving among these forms, he came everywhere upon spirit. For within the material he found everywhere dominant the spirit. All the way to the actual perception of the spirit living and controlling he would not advance. A spiritual sort of natural science was what he constructed, but he paused before arriving at the knowledge of pure spirit lest he should lose his hold upon reality.

Nietzsche proceeded from the vision of the spiritual after the manner of myths. Apollo and Dionysos were spiritual forms which he experienced in vital fashion. The history of the human spiritual seemed to him to have been a history of co-operation and also of conflict between Dionysos and Apollo. But he got only as far as the mythical conception of such spiritual

forms. He did not press forward to the perception of real spiritual being. Beginning with the spiritual in myth, he made a path for himself to nature. In Nietzsche's thought Apollo had to represent the material after the manner of natural science; Dionysos had to be conceived as symbolizing the forces of nature. But thus was Apollo's beauty dimmed; thus was the world-emotion of Dionysos paralysed into the regularity of natural law.

Goethe found the spirit in the reality of nature; Nietzsche lost the spirit-myth in the dream of nature in which he lived.

I stood between these two opposites. The experiences of soul through which I had passed in writing my book *Nietzsche as the Adversary of His Age* could at first make no advance; on the contrary, in the last period of my life in Weimar, Goethe became once more dominant in my reflections. I wished to indicate the road by which the life of humanity had expressed itself in philosophy up to the time of Goethe, in order to conceive the philosophy of Goethe as proceeding out of this life. This endeavour I made in the book *Goethes Weltanschauung*³ which was published in 1897. In this book it was my purpose to bring to light how Goethe, wherever he directed his eyes to the understanding of nature, saw shining forth everywhere the spiritual; but I did not touch upon the manner in which Goethe related himself to spirit as such. My purpose was to characterize that part of Goethe's philosophy which expressed itself vitally in a spiritual view of nature.

Nietzsche's ideas of the "eternal repetition" and of "supermen" remained long in my mind. For in these was reflected that which a personality must feel concerning the evolution and essential being of humanity when this personality is kept back from grasping the spiritual world by the restricted thought in the philosophy of nature characterizing the end of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche perceived the evolution of humanity in such a way that whatever happened at any moment has already happened innumerable times in precisely the same form, and will happen again innumerable times in future. The atomistic conception of the cosmos makes the present moment seem a certain definite combination of the smallest entities; this must be followed by another, and this in turn by yet another – until, when all possible combinations have been formed, the first must again appear. A human life with all its individual details has been present innumerable times; it will return with all its details in innumerable times.

The "repeated earth-lives" of humanity shone darkly in Nietzsche's subconsciousness. These lead the individual human life through human evolution to life-stages at which overruling destiny causes men to pass, not to a repetition of the earth-life, but by ways spiritually determined to a traversing in many forms through the course of the world. Nietzsche was fettered by the

natural-scientific conception. What this conception could make of repeated earth-lives – this exercised a fascination upon his mind. This he vitally experienced; for he felt his own life to be a tragedy filled with the bitterest experiences, weighed down by grief. To live such a life countless times – this was what he dwelt upon instead of the liberating experience which is to follow upon such a tragedy in the further unfolding of future lives.

Nietzsche felt also that in the man who is living through one earthly existence another man is revealed, a superman, who is able to form but a fragment of his whole life in a bodily existence on earth. The natural-scientific conception of evolution caused him to view this superman, not as the spirit dominant within the sense-physical, but as that which is shaping itself through a merely natural process of evolution. As man has evolved out of the animal, so will the “superman” evolve out of man. The natural scientific view drew Nietzsche's eyes away from the spiritual man to the natural man, and dazzled him with the thought of a higher “natural man.”

What Nietzsche had experienced in this way of thought was present in the utmost vividness in my mind during the summer of 1896. At that time Fritz Koegel gave me his collection of Nietzsche's aphorisms concerning the “eternal repetition” to look through. The opinions I formed at that time of this process of Nietzsche's thought were expressed in an article published in 1900 in the *Magazin für Literatur*. Certain statements occurring in that article fix definitely my reactions at that time to Nietzsche and to natural science. I will transcribe those thoughts of mine here, freed from the polemics with which they were there associated.

“There is no doubt that Nietzsche wrote these single aphorisms in a series without any order ... I still maintain the conviction I then expressed, that Nietzsche grasped this idea when reading *Eugen Dühring's Kursus der Philosophie als streng Wissenschaftlicher Weltanschauung und Lebensgestaltung*⁴ (Leipzig, 1875) and under the influence of this book. On page 84 of this work the thought is quite clearly expressed; but it is there as energetically opposed as Nietzsche defends it. This book is in Nietzsche's library. It was read very eagerly by Nietzsche, as is evident from numerous pencil marks on the margins ... Dühring says: ‘The profound’ logical basis of all conscious life demands in the strongest sense of the word an *inexhaustibleness* of forms. Is this endlessness, by virtue of which ever new forms will appear, a possibility? The mere number of the parts and of the force elements would in itself preclude the unending multiplication of combinations but for the fact that the perpetual medium of space and time promises a limitlessness in variations. Moreover, of that which can be counted only a limited number of combinations is possible. But from that which cannot according to its nature be conceived as enumerable it must be possible for a limitless number of states and relationships to

come to pass. This limitlessness, which we are considering with reference to the destiny of forms in the universe, is compatible with any sort of change and even with intervals of approximation to fixity or *precise repetitions* (italics are mine) but not with the cessation of all variation. Whoever would cherish the conception of an existence which contradicts the primal state of things ought to reflect that the evolution in time has but a single true tendency, and that causality is always in line with this tendency. It is easier to abandon the distinction than to maintain it, and it then requires but little effort to leap over the chasm and imagine the end as analogous with the beginning. But we ought to guard against such superficial haste; for the once given existence of the universe is not merely an unimportant episode between two states of night, but rather the sole firm and illuminated ground from which we may infer the past and forecast the future ... ‘Dühring feels also that an everlasting repetition of states holds no incentive for living.’ He says: ‘Now it is self-evident that the principle of an incentive for living is incompatible with the eternal repetition of the same form ...’”

Nietzsche was forced by the logic of the natural-scientific conception to a conclusion from which Dühring turned back because of mathematical considerations and the repellent prospect which these represented for human life.

To quote further from my article: “... if we set up the postulate that with the material parts and the force-elements a limited number of combinations is possible, then we have the Nietzschean ideal of the ‘return of the similar. Nothing less than a defence of a contradictory idea taken from Dühring's view of the matter occurs in Aphorism 203 (Vol. XII in Koegel's edition, and Aphorism in Horneffer's work, *Nietzsche's Lehre von der ewigen Wiederkunft*.⁵ The amount of the all-force is definite, not something endless: we must beware of such prodigality in conceptions! Accordingly the number of stages, modifications, combinations, and evolutions of this force, though vast and practically immeasurable, is yet always definite and not endless: that is, the force is eternally the same and eternally active – even to this very moment already an endlessness has passed, which means that all possible evolutions must already have occurred. Therefore, the momentary evolution must be a repetition, and likewise that which brought it forth and that which arises from it, and so on both forwards and backwards! Everything has been innumerable times insofar as the sum total of the stages of all forces is repeated ...’ And Nietzsche's feeling in regard to these thoughts is precisely the opposite of that which Dühring experienced. To Nietzsche this thought is the loftiest formula in which life can be affirmed. Aphorism 43 (in Horneffer; 234 in Koegel's edition) runs: ‘Future history will ever more combat this thought, and never believe it, for according to its nature it must die forever! Only he remains who considers his existence capable of endless repetitions: among such, however, a state is possible to which no Utopian has ever attained.’ It can be proven that many

of Nietzsche's thoughts originated in a manner similar to that of the eternal repetition. Nietzsche formed an idea opposite to any idea then present before him. At length this same tendency led to the production of his masterpiece, *Umwertung aller Werte*.⁶

It was then clear to me that in certain of his thoughts which strove to reach the world of spirit Nietzsche was a prisoner of his conception of nature. For this reason I was strongly opposed to the mystical interpretation of his thought of repetition. I agreed with Peter Gast, who wrote in his edition of Nietzsche's work: "The doctrine – to be understood in a purely mechanical sense – of limitedness and consequent repetition in cosmic molecular combinations." Nietzsche believed that a lofty thought must be brought up from the foundations of natural science. That was the way in which he had to sorrow because of his age.

Thus in my glimpse of Nietzsche's soul in 1896 there appeared before me what one who looked toward the spirit had to suffer from the conception of nature prevailing at the end of the nineteenth century.

1. *Nietzsche as the Adversary of His Age.*
2. *The Will to Power, a Transvaluation of all Values.*
3. *Goethe's World-Conception.*
4. *The Course of Philosophy as a Strictly Scientific World-Conception and Shaping of Life*
5. *Nietzsche's Doctrine of the Eternal Repetition.*
6. *The Will to Power, a Transvaluation of all Values.*

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