NIETZSCHE AND THE POETIC IMPULSE.¹

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IN one of his playful moments Nietzsche makes good fun of himself as a poet. Sitting in the woods one day he hears a regular tap-tap-tapping in measure, annoying at first, but spell-binding afterwards, and he begins to talk in time with it, metrically. "Yes, sir," said the wood-pecker, "you are a poet." "Is it as bad as that with me," he asks, but he goes on with his new game notwithstanding, pinning down his thoughts and images with rhyme like a scientist collecting insects:

Als ich jüngst, mich zu erquicken,
Unter dunklen Bäumen sass,
Hört' ich ticken, leise ticken,
Zierlich, wie nach Tact und Maass.
Böse wurd' ich, zog Gesichter,—
Endlich aber gab ich nach,
Bis ich gar, gleich einem Dichter,
Selber mit im Tiktak sprach.

Wie mir so im Verse-machen
Silb' um Silb' ihr Hopsa sprang,
Musst' ich plötzlich lachen, lachen
Eine Viertelstunde lang,
Du ein Dichter? Du ein Dichter?
Steht's mit deinem Kopf so schlecht?
—"Ja, mein Herr, Sie sind ein Dichter"
Achselzuckt der Vogel Specht.

Wessen harr' ich hier im Busche?
Wem doch laur' ich Räuber auf?
Ist's ein Spruch? Ein Bild? Im Husche
Sitzt mein Reim ihm hintendrauf.

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 13th March, 1935.
This is from the poem "Dichters Berufung," one of the "Lieder des Prinzen Vogelfrei," appended to Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft. In another poem of the same group, "Rimus remedium," he half-contemptuously shows the poet taking refuge from the monotony, the heartlessness, the storms of life behind a barricade of rhymes:

-Wer jetzt nicht hundert Reime hätte,
Ich wette, wette,
Der ginge drauf.

And in an earlier note he observes that just as bad poets in the second half of the verse seek the thought to fit the rhyme, so men in the second half of their lives lose courage and enterprise and seek, as it were, merely to find the rhyme to the first half (II, 393).1

Too much must not be made of these little ironies. It was a habit of Nietzsche's, formed in student days, to amuse himself by composing doggerel rhymes. His sister tells how she travelled with him in 1883 from Rome to Como, and how they composed rhymed couplets—Knittelverse—the whole way, much as at a later date they might have solved cross-word puzzles. It is only natural that he should now and then make fun of his peccadillo: and if these passages stood alone there would be no more to be said. But they are part of an attitude. Nietzsche has a philosophical distrust of poetry, and warns his readers against it. Poetry, he argues, has its origin in superstition; charms and incantations, he suspects, being the oldest forms of poetry, and "yet," he continues, "after centuries of education, the wisest of us now and then becomes the fool of rhythm, at least to the extent of feeling that a thought is true, if it has metrical form and comes from the gods with a hop, skip, and jump (mit einem göttlichen Hopsasa). Is it not amusing that the most serious of philosophers, however strenuous they are in other respects, still refer to rhymed proverbs in support of their ideas? But if a poet agrees with a truth he endangers it more than if he contradicts it. For, as Homer says, poets are full of lies" (V, 117).

This again is not a solitary outburst. Nietzsche says the

1 The quotations from Nietzsche's works are all taken from the (Kröner) Leipzig edition in 20 vols.
same thing in several other places. The poet, he claims, is milk-brother to the liar. He has stolen all the milk and made himself comfortable, leaving the plain liar in his misery; the poet lies with a good conscience, the liar with a bad (V, 195). And in *Zarathustra* he states his meaning more emphatically when he says that there has always been a lot of unhealthiness among those who “write poetry and seek God” (welche dichten und gottsichtig sind). They “hate the man of intellect and that youngest of virtues, intellectual honesty” (VI, 44).

Here the charge comes clear. Poets are not only the descendants of superstition, they seek superstition. Poets, he says elsewhere, are always the lackeys of a morality (V, 35). And he points the opposition between the poet and the philosopher very acutely in another note which says: “A man who really thinks clearly does not like the poet’s images; they recall too much that is irrelevant, just as a man who hears very clearly feels the overtones of a note as a disharmony” (XI, 104). To think without overtones, to follow the intellect scrupulously, yet ruthlessly, regardless of consequences—this impulse was at the heart of Nietzsche’s genius, and he finds the poetic impulse incompatible, or not wholly compatible with it.

To complete the account of Nietzsche’s hostile scrutiny of the poet there is yet another charge to consider. He claims that poets are unequal to life, they are escapers from life: “Poets, in so far as they seek to make life easier for man, either look away from the present or enliven the present with a light from the past. To do this they must themselves be in some ways retrospective natures, links with remote times, with dead or dying religions. Poets are necessarily epigoni” (II, 159). Thus they only offer a temporary palliative and stand in the way of progress. And Nietzsche hints in another place that poets are moral failures for the most part—creatures that seem full of the possibilities of greatness, even moral greatness, and yet seldom reach an average level of integrity in active life (V, 129).

Now it would take more than these random strictures of Nietzsche’s to bring down poetry from its seat among the mighty. It is not for the light they throw on poetry that I have quoted them, but for the light they throw on Nietzsche, because Nietzsche
was himself a poet in the English sense of the word—a poet of high, though not extensive achievement. These remarks of his are not what they seem to be at first sight—the hard-headed prosaic scepticism of the man of brains; they come from a nature that was artistic to its finger-tips. The artist in Nietzsche was so strong that the historians are at a loss where to put him, whether in the literary field or the philosophical. Coming from such a nature, these attacks on poetry which seem at the beginning merely unsympathetic and not particularly subtle, become problematical and illuminating. What they suggest is that Nietzsche's impulses did not constitute an entirely happy family, and that intellect and poetry, reason and emotion, conflicted with each other. And this, I shall maintain, proves to be the case.

In the first of Nietzsche's chief works, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, there is no sign of the conflict. Here the poetic mind and the philosophical seem to be working in perfect unison—profound ideas passionately and imaginatively expressed. Far from distrusting the metaphors and images of poets, Nietzsche at this time seems to prefer them as giving him a preciser terminology. Not the Schopenhauerian terms that he might naturally have borrowed—since he was steeped in Schopenhauer as he wrote—but Apollo and Dionysus, the names of divinities, are the basic concepts of his thought; the wisdom of the Greeks is not in the early philosophers to whom he was devoted, it is in their myths and legends, the poets dramatic and epic are the mouthpieces of deep philosophy; and there is that in the mere setting-down of this fascinating work—its eloquence, its enthusiasm, its speed—which leaves the reader wondering whether it is a treatise he has been reading or a poem. Thus far light and heat, analysis and imagination, seem to come from the same source.

But the reconciliation, the fusion, is more apparent than real, the truth being that the philosopher in Nietzsche was scarcely born yet and that the poet and reader of poetry was in the saddle. The fusion, if there is a fusion, is at the expense of real philosophy. It is the poets whom Nietzsche champions at this early stage; it is the function of the poet that he idealises, as an ability to see oneself surrounded by visions—a rapturous definition; and it is the first of the intellectuals, Socrates, whom he attacks, calling
him the destroyer of what was best in Greek life. Looking back on his work in later years, he sees poetry in it only and feels that here he should have said his say in poetry. "I should have sung, not talked. What a pity that I did not venture to say what I had to say as a poet. I might have succeeded" (I, 5). And this, it may be remembered, is the view of Nietzsche taken by the George school; it is essential to Bertram’s interpretation, and it is the key-note of George’s commemorative poem:

Sie hätte singen
Nicht reden sollen diese neue Seele!

But it is only at the beginning—up to and including Die Geburt der Tragödie—that this view can be sustained—the view of Nietzsche as a poetically integrated person. Next there comes that reversal of the spirit from Dionysus to Voltaire, signalised by the destructive aphorisms of Menschliches Allzumenschliches; it puts the intellect on top and keeps it there—with interruptions—to the end. Not that the artist in Nietzsche disappears. There is artistry in every line of his prose and he knew it. But characteristically enough, the art of prose becomes in his view an art of opposition to poetry, a defeating of poetry, not a yielding to it or an alliance with it or an outlet for it. "Consider," he says, "that the great masters of prose have almost always been poets who published poetry or wrote it privately for themselves; and indeed good prose can only be written in the light of poetry, for prose is a sort of continuous warfare with poetry. All its charm consists in dodging poetry and thwarting it. Every abstract noun is intended as a piece of roguishness against poetry and should be spoken mockingly. Any dryness or coolness of style is intended to bring the sweet goddess into sweet despair. Often there are approaches, momentary reconciliations and then a sudden recoil and laughter; often the curtain is raised and a lurid glare thrown in just when the goddess is enjoying her twilights and low tones . . . and so there are a thousand delights of war, including the defeats, of which unpoetical people, the so-called prosaic people, know nothing. They just write and talk bad prose" (V, 123).

A delightful sidelight this on the subtle interplay of poetic and anti-poetic in Nietzsche’s composition; for once we see his
mind playing happily on the conflict. He is writing at a time of comparative calm and serenity in that feverish life of his and he indicates how as a prose stylist he was able to turn the conflict to account. Thus far we can agree with him. His prose is the prose of a poet, but—with one exception—it never becomes poetic; its movement is towards speech and colloquialism, not towards rhetoric or rhythm or emotive writing. Yet it remains sensitive and distinguished even in its most careless-seeming moments. However early we date the first shadows of the prison-house—his mental derangement—we have to admit that his prose grew in mastery all the time, till at the last before his mind breaks his prose excels itself; here it is an almost insolent mastery, and one that we should have scarcely held attainable in German, so light-footed is it, and yet so unsentimental, so practical.

Nietzsche, as he reminds us above, wrote verse as well as prose. No Germananthologist is likely to forget him. But what a strange disparity is here, between Nietzsche the prose-writer speaking to all Europe and Nietzsche the sensitive, even the shrinking lyricist in German books of poetry. To begin with, what a small body of verse he wrote—the smallest, I suspect, among notable lyrical poets in German. The reason presumably is that he not only doubted the poetic impulse, but resisted it. We know that he wrote verses—probably insignificant verses, if we are to go by what is left of them—as a schoolboy, but as early as 1865 we find him forswearing poetry and music—for it will be remembered that he had musical gifts as well as poetic—in order to devote himself more strenuously to intellectual pursuits. Here the deep conflict shows its head for the first time. He writes to Gersdorff on 25th May, 1865: “I have carefully avoided composing music, though I may compose again. Also I am not writing any more poetry.” It had been a New Year’s resolution. On 4th August of the same year he says to Gersdorff again: “Perhaps I wrote to you at the beginning of the year that I was not going to write or compose this year. Thus far I have kept the former pledge—a good reason for thinking that this vein is exhausted.” Yet the vein was not as completely exhausted as he seems to have wished. He continued to write verses. And four years later we find him trying
to recover his poems written at school from two of his school-fellows.

These early poems are for the most part conventional, even painfully so, dealing tritely with the stock themes of home, love, spring, parting. There is only one early poem that would have made its way without Nietzsche's name to help it. It is the poem "To the unknown God," in which on going out into the world Nietzsche sets down his belief in a God who will not release him and whom he is not willing to lose. It says: "Once more before I go my way and cast my gaze forward, I raise my hands in solitude to thee, my refuge, to whom in my deepest heart I have set up altars so that thy voice may at all times reach me. And there it is written: To the Unknown God. I am his though I have consorted hitherto with sinners. I am his and I feel the toils in which he holds me and compels me to serve him. I will know thee, thou unknown one, who takest deep hold of me, goest through me like a storm, intangible one, akin to me. I will know Thee and serve Thee."

Noch einmal. eh' ich weiter ziehe
Und meine Blicke vorwärts sende,
Heb' ich vereinsamt meine Hände
Zu Dir empor, zu Dem ich fliehe,
Dem ich in tiefster Herzenstiefe
Altäre feierlich geweiht,
Dass allezeit
Mich Deine Stimme wieder riefe.

Darauf erglüht tief eingeschrieben
Das Wort: dem unbekannten Gotte.
Sein bin ich, ob ich in der Frevler Rotte
Auch bis zur Stunde bin gebliehen:
Sein bin ich—und ich fühl' die Schlingen,
Die mich im Kampf darniederziehn
Und, mag ich fliehn,
Mich doch zu seinem Dienste zwingen.
Ich will Dich kennen, Unbekannter,
Du tief in meine Seele Greifender,
Mein Leben wie ein Sturm Durchschweifender,
Du Unfassbarer, mir Verwandter.
Ich will Dich kennen, selbst Dir dienen.
On reading the title of the poem—it is one of the best-known of his poems—one thinks first of Nietzsche, the budding radical, the seeker, turning from known gods to unknown. Our knowledge of what its author became flavours the poem and slightly distorts it. On a closer reading Nietzsche proves to be more like the fugitive run down by the hound of heaven or even the sinner returning repentant to the fold, to the known god, not the unknown. In the end this proves to be a poem quite without philosophical direction, it leaves us wholly in the dark about Nietzsche's thought, if any, at this date. All we get is the religious impulse without commitments, a little vague and a little self-conscious. This is not one of the great religious poems in German—beside Novalis and Rilke it is trite—and it is very early Nietzsche. He was nineteen when he wrote it, we must not press it too hard.

Yet in one particular it is representative. In its unintellectuality, its absence of philosophical thought or trend, it is exactly characteristic of Nietzsche's maturer verses. The truth is that Nietzsche seems nearly incapable of getting his thought into verse. We do not find in him as in so many German poets—Goethe, Hölderlin, Gottfried Keller, Hebbel—that verse draws out, elucidates, deepens his thinking. Instead, we find that it tends to suppress it. Practically all the verse of Nietzsche that is of the highest value is so unphilosophical, so exclusively emotional, so impressionistic that no stranger to Nietzsche, making his acquaintance through his verse, would suspect that his was the most explosive intellect in the Europe of his day. To judge him by these verses he would seem to be less philosophical than his lyrical fellows, not more philosophical—the least intellectual of German lyrical poets, not, as we might more nearly expect, the most philosophical.

What we get in these best verses of his is simply the quintessence of his moods. He makes us feel his intensity, as in that epigrammatic self-portrait in which he compares his nature with a flame: “All that I am turns to light, all that I leave turns to ashes, surely I am made of flame,”

Licht wird alles, was ich fasse,
Kohle alles, was ich lasse:
Flamme bin ich sicherlich.
Or his Protean changefulness, as when he says: "Only those who change and grow can remain of kin with me,"

Nur wer sich wandelt, bleibt mit mir verwandt,

to say nothing of that other poem entitled: "Bei der dritten Hautung." Or his courage and resolution: "There I shall go, trusting myself henceforth,"

Dorthin—will ich; und ich trau
Mir fortan und meinem Griff.

Or his rapture, as in his dance-poem to the Mistral: "Mistral, cloud-hunter, dejection-killer, Heaven-sweeper, how I love thee,"

Mistral-Wind, du Wolken-Jäger,
Trübsal-Mörder, Himmels-Feger,
Brausender, wie lieb’ ich dich.

Or his serenity, for he has that mood too: "The white sea sleeps, a purple sail, rocks, fig-trees, a tower, a harbour, bleating sheep, an idyll—innocence of the South, make me thine,"

Das weisse Meer liegt eingeschlafen,
Und purpurn steht ein Segel drauf.
Fels, Feigenbäume, Turm und Hafen,
Idyle rings, Geblock von Schafen,—
Unschuld des Südens, nimm mich auf.

Or his loneliness: "The crows caw and fly raggedly townwards, soon it will snow, woe to the homeless,"

Die Krähen schrein
Und ziehen schwirren Flugs zur Stadt:
Bald wird es schnein—
Weh dem, der keine Heimat hat.

Sometimes he writes a few lines that bear directly on his prose writings, but this makes no difference. For instance, he has a poem on Zarathustra, called "Sils-Maria" after the place in which he wrote it. But only those who know Zarathustra will be able to relate these lines to the thought of Zarathustra. The lines merely record the suddenness with which Zarathustra came to him, out of the blue: "Here I sat waiting, waiting for nothing, beyond good and evil, a mood all of play, sea, noon, time without
a goal. Then suddenly one became two and Zarathustra went past me,"

Hier sass ich, wartend, wartend,—doch auf nichts,
Jenseits von Gut und Böse, bald des Lichts
Geniessend, bald des Schattens, ganz nur Spiel,
Ganz See, ganz Mittag, ganz Zeit ohne Ziel.

Da, plötzlich, Freundin. wurde Eins zu Zwei—
—Und Zarathustra ging an mir vorbei . . .

Those in the know will seize on "Jenseits von Gut und Böse," but in this context the phrase tells us nothing or next to nothing, it can mean whatever the reader likes. Thus, even Zarathustra, as a subject for a poem, divests itself of its thought and becomes a spurt of emotion. And in the one lyrical poem—as distinct from the prose—in the text of Zarathustra which commits Nietzsche to the expression of a philosophical thought—Das trunkne Lied, which he uses deliberately to point the significance of the idea of Eternal Recurrence, the idea that every moment and situation in life will recur sooner or later exactly as it was before—we find, if we read the poem by itself, out of context, that its philosophical meaning has all but evaporated. All it is able to tell us is that "suffering says 'pass' and joy says 'stay, stay for ever,'"

Weh spricht: Vergeh'
Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit.

No one could read the theory of Eternal Recurrence from that. The lines bear psychologically on the theory but do not state it, as Goethe in like situation would have stated it.

No doubt there are exceptions to this general finding. There are rhymed epigrams—halfway between the prose aphorisms and the poems proper—which, as Jakob Burckhardt immediately felt, remind us of Goethe, say, of the Zahme Xenien. But, broadly speaking, it holds good. You can read the thought into the verse if you know the thought to begin with, but not otherwise. Nietzsche in spite of being both a German and a philosopher cannot make his poetry philosophical; he can only use it successfully to express states of feeling—as a substitute, one
suspicts, for the music that he might have preferred to write—never to express his mind. If he were a negligible poet there would not be much to infer. But at his best he is with the best in a great tradition. There are short pieces in that golden mood of his, sometimes serene, but if serene with a serenity poised on the brink of despair—pieces that go with the most intimate moods of Hölderlin and Rilke and do not shame them. There is that little poem on Venice, doubly untranslatable because Byron had been there before him and queered the pitch,

An der Brücke stand
jüngst ich in brauner Nacht.
Fernher kam Gesang:
goldener Tropfen quoll's
über die zitternde Fläche weg.
Gondeln, Lichter, Musik—
trunken schwamm's in die Dämmerung hinaus . . .

Meine Seele, ein Saitenspiel,
sang sich, unsichtbar berührt,
heimlich ein Gondellied dazu,
zitternd vor bunter Seligkeit.
—Hörte jemand ihr zu ?

"Zitternd " gives the mood—tremolo. And there is also that little fragment, less known, "Nun da der Tag," with its perfect vowel mastery and its marvellous intimacy:

Nun, da der Tag
des Tages müde ward und aller Sehnsucht Bäche
von neuem Trost platschern,
auch alle Himmel, aufgehängt in Gold-Spinnetzen,
zu jedem Müden sprechen: "Ruhe nun."
was ruhst du nicht, du dunkles Herz,
was stachelt dich zu fusswunder Flucht . . .
wes harrest du ?

To one who could write thus poetry cannot have been a trivial matter, however light he may have made of it in moments of intellectual distrust or of playful relaxation. To have this richly musical gift of words and to have also his psychological gift of masterly analysis and argument and to be unable or all but unable to merge the two, to have to suppress the one in order to release the other—this cannot have made for ease and happiness,
it must have had its bearing on his crisis. And it throws a
significant light on the most nearly tragic of his books—
Zarathustra, the great exception to the general rule and habit of
Nietzsche’s writings.

Everything goes to show that when he wrote Zarathustra
Nietzsche knew less about what was happening than at any other
point in his literary life. In all his other books of essays and
aphorisms he gives the impression of being peculiarly sure of
himself, not merely writing coolly even at moments of swiftest
thought, but, it has been argued, cunningly envisaging his audience
and adapting his volumes to what he felt to be the need of the
moment, suppressing this, stressing that, leading his public from
book to book, from less radical to more radical. But this,
whether true or not in the main, cannot apply to Zarathustra,
which, as Nietzsche tells us himself, did not so much come from
him as descend on him: “Auf diesen beiden Wegen fiel mir der
ganze Zarathustra ein . . . richtiger, er überfiel mich.” And he
tells also with pride that each of the first three parts—the con-
stituent parts of Zarathustra—was written within a period of
ten days. Again and again he insists that Zarathustra was an
extreme, a classical case of inspiration.

He might perhaps have said an extreme case of the poetic
impulse. For without his assistance it is obvious to any reader
that Zarathustra is in some sense—perhaps primarily—a poem.
We cannot restrict our view of Nietzsche, the poet,—as I have
done thus far—to his shorter lyrics or to the poetry latent or
subordinated in his normal prose. There is Zarathustra as well.
Here at any rate the poetic impulse and the philosophical mix at
high pressure in a work which arrests us as much with its colour
and its imagination as with its provocative thought. And success-
fully too, in so far as Zarathustra is Nietzsche’s most famous
book and for many—unfortunately—his only book.

Successful it was in notoriety and in violence of impact. But
there are other considerations. Was it successful in the sense of
my argument? Is the fusion of poetic and philosophical a
satisfactory fusion?

Hardly. Only those—and they are many—who read Zar-
thustra without knowledge of Nietzsche’s previous writings will
realise what extreme intellectual concessions he made in the writing of it. In the aphorisms that immediately preceded Zarathustra his intellect had reached its finest point of development. Here—in Die fröhliche Wissenschaft—it impresses us as being an almost ideal instrument for fearless modern thought, quick to sense an opponent, quick to sense a friend, crystal-clear, and, above all, scrupulously honest with itself. Some concession, no doubt, there had to be, if this brilliant intellect was to work in harness with the poetic faculty, with the emotions. Yet Goethe had managed to write his Faust, popularising his mind at some points more than is commonly realised, without ever making us feel that the intellectual price was too great. And Lessing had performed a similar feat in Nathan der Weise without seeming to sacrifice anything of his dialectical virtue. There is abundant precedent in German Literature as in English for high intellectuality in imaginative form. But in Zarathustra we shall not find it.

Between its two leading ideas—that of the superman and that of eternal recurrence—there is not a reconciling syllable in the whole work. No two ideas could be more difficult to reconcile. The one, holding out the prospect of mankind transcending itself in some higher type of being, is, as it were, a progression; the other, affirming that everything, every moment, every cross-section of time, will recur and recur complete and unchanged, is, as it were, a circle. The spiritual problem is as difficult as the mathematical. It may be too much to say that they cannot be reconciled. Some of Nietzsche’s commentators believe that they can, but only poetically, emotionally. What one looks for in such a case is that the inner life of the work should offer clues, hints, suggestions, of the sort proper to imaginative writing, which might enable us to feel our way spiritually from the one to the other. But we may read the work twenty times—the clues are lacking. Or they point the opposite way. The thought of eternal recurrence crops up suddenly in the body of the work as a thought which he dare not release, as a thought which he dreads. When it at last breaks through, it does so in the—intellectually—most undesirable form of a nightmare. Zarathustra encounters a shepherd—who afterwards proves to be
himself—with a snake—which afterwards proves to be the idea of eternal recurrence—crawling down his gullet. The shepherd at Zarathustra’s bidding bites the head off and spits it out. So Zarathustra masters the fearful thought.

Even if this central anomaly could be resolved, the work remains intellectually uncomfortable, oscillating continually between a crude simplification and a baffling subtlety. For the former there is the section called “Von alten und jungen Weiblein,” for the latter that called “Vom bleichen Verbrecher.” Either kind may be justifiable in its degree, but the uneasy shifting from the one to the other is not justifiable. The only plausible, the only trustworthy intellectuality is that which remains one and the same in texture, no matter what it is dealing with, so that we can recognise and identify it at every point, as we can with Plato or Pascal or Goethe or with Nietzsche, too, in any of his normal books. Here and here only he fails us in this indispensable earnest of intellectual balance. If the idea of eternal recurrence stands like a disconcerting rock in the flowing current of Zarathustra, the current, we shall also find, is itself disconcerting; now fast, now slow; now clear, now turbid.

Poetically there is much the same to be said. The Biblical style of Zarathustra may not be what we would choose for Nietzsche or for any modern mind to express itself in, but it would be going too far to rule it out of court, even if we agree with that recent article in the Mercure de France which claims that Nietzsche lifted the Zarathustra manner from an obscure Masonic book of the earlier nineteenth century and that the famous style is to this extent not even second-hand Biblical but only third. In literature the proof of the pudding is in the flavouring; success and failure cannot be judged a priori. If Nietzsche’s intention was to reach the widest possible audience, breaking down the narrowing wall of indifference that threatened to isolate him altogether—and this must have been part of his intention—the style was legitimate. It is the most widely intelligible and the most readily translatable style known to Western Man and, in so far as Nietzsche was challenging the authority of the Bible, it lent itself to subtle effects as well as to drastic, enabling him to say what he had to say in two ways, directly and indirectly, in
every sentence, putting in his hand both the sledge-hammer of strong assertion and the barb of cunning irony. For his purpose, at once elusive and rhetorical, nothing could be better.

To the effective use of this style the book probably owes its fame. Yet effective as this use is, it never becomes a real mastery like the mastery of Nietzsche’s other prose, because it is never absolutely secure and invulnerable. In some respects the standards or prose, even of poetic prose, are more exacting than those of verse. In verse we tolerate inequalities without denying the prevailing mastery, as for instance in Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth. There is that in the exigencies of metre which excuses them and the supreme moments compensate. This is true of the English tradition, and it is not untrue of the German. But in unmetrical writing the peculiar exigencies are eliminated in favour of a less formal discipline. What we ask of the great prose writer is that at his less formal level he maintain a complete security of expression and this we are accustomed to find. Nietzsche’s normal prose satisfies this standard. The prose mastery of Die fröhliche Wissenschaft is a complete mastery, as complete as that of any of his French models. Can we say this of Zarathustra, in whose first sermon, side by side with that splendid sentence on the child ideal:

Unschuld ist das Kind und Vergessen, ein Neubeginnen, ein Spiel, ein aus sich rollendes Rad, eine erste Bewegung, ein heiliges Ja-Sagen.

(“A child is innocence and forgetting, a beginning, a play, a wheel that rolls itself, a first movement, a sacred acceptance.”)

We find also this:

Oder ist es das: in schmutziges Wasser steigen, wenn es das Wasser der Wahrheit ist, und kalte Frösche und heisse Kröten nicht von sich weisen.

(“Or is it this: to go down into dirty water, if it is the water of truth, and not shrink from cold frogs and hot toads.”)

Something of this crudeness, which is neither truly Biblical nor truly Nietzschean, dogs him all the way through this perplexing volume. In Von der Menschen-Klugheit, towards the end of Book II we read again:

Aus euren Wildkatzen müssen erst Tiger geworden sein und aus euren Giftkräutern Krokokide; denn der gute Jäger soll eine gute Jagd haben.

(“Your wild-cats must become tigers and your poisonous toads crocodiles; for the good hunter must have a good hunt.”)
No wonder he felt uncomfortable about Zarathustra afterwards, and even confessed in the text itself that he was stumbling and stuttering as poets do and was ashamed of playing the poet's part:


It is not my intention to demolish Zarathustra, but merely to insist that both intellectually and poetically it is a highly vulnerable work, and that the fusion of his powers which Nietzsche attempts here is not wholly successful. If there is any true marrying of intellect and poetry it must be looked for in the simpler passages; no sooner does his native subtlety re-assert itself than there is a compromise, usually at the expense of intellect. It is noteworthy that the supreme moments of Zarathustra are almost pure poetry of the Nietzeschean sort: Die Sieben Siegel and das Nachtlied. Die Sieben Siegel is a pean to the idea of eternal recurrence, but exactly as in the case of das trunkne Lied the idea itself does not get into the words and is only there for those who know from the context what to look for. For how should the uninformed reader divine Nietzsche's meaning when he reads the famous refrain:

Oh wie sollte ich nicht nach der Ewigkeit brünstig sein und nach dem hochzeitlichen Ring der Ringe,—dem Ring der Wiederkunft.

The poetic afflatus—as always with Nietzsche—has blown the idea away and expressed only Nietzsche's enthusiasm for it. Goethe would have got it clear and imperishable, as he did time and again.

Das Nachtlied rises clear of all complications. It comes as near as Nietzsche ever came in non-metrical form to the spirit of his finest lyrics, and may be regarded as one of them. There is no message; all is pure mood and nerve; it is Beethoven done in words:


Ein Ungestilltes, Unstillbares ist in mir; das will laut werden. Eine Begierde nach Liebe ist in mir, die redet selber die Sprache der Liebe.
‘It is night: now all well-springs speak louder and my soul is a well-spring.
‘It is night: now all the songs of lover awaken. And my soul is the song of a lover.
‘There is something unstilled in me, that cannot be stilled, it must be spoken. There is a desire for love in me that speaks the language of love.
‘I am light, O that I were dark. But this is my solitude that I am girded with light.
‘O that I were dark and nocturnal. How I would suck at the breasts of light.
‘But I live in my own light. I drink back into myself the flames that break forth from me.
‘I do not know the happiness of them that take. And often I have dreamed that stealing must be more blissful than taking.’

If the key to Zarathustra lies in its supreme moments, the inference must be that behind the rhetorical purpose of popularising his message there was the deeper purpose—unrecognised or not fully recognised by Nietzsche—of unbosoming himself, of setting down intimate moods of suffering and exaltation that his aristocratic nature would have suppressed, if it had known what was happening. Such an interpretation would accord well with the text in which the private and confessional note soon begins to obtrude on the homiletic and ends by supplanting it altogether in the extraordinary fourth and final book. To show this would require ampler treatment. I can only affirm it here and point out that the impulse to write thus for emotional release is a poetic impulse. And in this light there is in Zarathustra a poem, the most extended of Nietzsche’s poems, hiding—often uncomfortably hiding—behind an avowed rhetoric. Once more, but now on a larger scale, poetry and intellect in Nietzsche demonstrate their fundamental incompatibility. Harnessed to the Oriental chariot of Zarathustra, each puts the other out of
its true stride, save for a few paces here and there in the long course.

The bearing of this analysis on the problem of Nietzsche may not be slight. The desire to integrate the personality, to co-ordinate its various potentialities, must exist in all men and in all artists to some extent; in the German mind it is peculiarly strong—the chief source of that problematical strain in the German poets and writers. The search for unity as the problem of character recurs as a sort of keynote in German literature from Goethe who mastered the problem to Gerhart Hauptmann and Thomas Mann and others who—relatively—failed. Nietzsche was alive to all this, but chiefly in others. Whether he saw it in himself or not, the cleavage is there in the body of his works, offering perhaps a more trustworthy clue to his peculiar tension of character than all the researches of the biographers and the psychiatrists.