



## Nietzsche: Looking right, reading left

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## Nietzsche: Looking right, reading left

The far right appropriates a Nietzsche invented out of its own fantasies, likewise the left in its critique of these appropriations, battles a projection cobbled in response to that of the far right. If centrist visions likewise exist, many, for want of likely suspects, relegate these to the left. Indeed, in their lead contribution to their collection on *The Far Right, Education, and Violence*, Michael Peters and Tina Besley point out that the cottage industry of Nietzsche misappropriations, especially those kipped to the right, has been booming for more than a century (Peters & Besley, 2020, p. 5; cf. Alloa, 2017; Illing, 2018; Kellner, 2019).

Beyond the pell-mell of misreadings and prototypically 'Nazi' bowdlerization under Hitler, Peters and Besley rightly point out that what they name the "pedagogical problem" (Peters & Besley, 2020, p. 10) can be located at the heart of such a political free for all, on the right as on the left. MacIntyre in his *After Virtue* helpfully identified these 'left' Nietzschean readings, by name: listing Kathryn Pyne Parsons, Tracy Burr Strong, and [James] Miller (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 114). It should be pointed out that none of the thinkers named are egregiously left, if what is meant by left is a thinker like Theodor Adorno or, still more Nietzschean, Alfred Schmidt (see Schmidt, 1963). (I refer the reader to my discussion(s) of Nietzsche and Marx for a sense of some of the generic troubles here, for example Babich 2017a, and most recently Babich, 2021 in addition to the range of contributions to Payne & Roberts, 2020). Yet MacIntyre even as he coins some of its terms, seems to sidestep this ongoing debate, as he writes in all mainstream candor:

The *Übermensch* and the Sartrian Existentialist-cum-Marxist belong in the pages of a philosophical bestiary rather than in serious discussion. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 22)

That said, qua book, MacIntyre's *After Virtue* is bifurcated by a central chapter: "Nietzsche or Aristotle?" (109ff.), with a final chapter breaking out what can seem a signal contrast, complete with disjoint and conjoint italicized flags: "After Virtue: Nietzsche or Aristotle, Trotsky and St. Benedict" (256ff., cf. Babich and Bateman, 2017).

Part of the problem is to identify the left. The right, self-announced, is easy enough and the right has already branded anything it opposes as 'left.' And some part of the challenge derives from a literally party line on the matter, thus leftists exclude fellow travelers. Arendt notes that Walter Benjamin was discounted by his friends, Max Horkheimer and Adorno as "undialectic," ensconced in "materialist categories" (cited in Arendt, 1968, p. 10). And things are, if anything, worse when it comes to Nietzsche. Perhaps this is changing: there was a conference of the Nietzsche-Kolleg on the topic of Nietzsche and Marx held in Weimar on the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2018, one of the last conferences attended by the decidedly left (and just as decidedly Lukácsian), Ágnes Heller (Babich, 2020, 2021).

The problem is that the right defines the left and the left seems to have little purchase in the political realm. Thus one may recall both of US Presidential Candidate, Bernie Sanders' two failed bids for the nomination, consider the fate of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, and think of Slavoj Žižek's oft quoted, and perhaps as often under-analysed, comment on Trump and the election. As Sven Lütticken reminds us without going so far as to mention the word revolution:

As long as people feel they are being made to plead guilty in a moralistic show trial rather than included in an emancipatory project, what passes for the Left will continue to deserve co-producer credit for the altright. (2019, p. 68)

For their part, Peters and Besley begin with Umberto Eco's literalistic and handy guide to "Ur-Fascism" (Umberto's popularity as author of how-to cheat sheets for writing dissertations remains high to this day: Eco, 2015) which they gloss as Eco's "Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt" (Peters & Besley, 2020, p. 11; cf. Eco, 1995), noting that, not Nietzsche *bien entendu*, but the "Nazi gnosis was nourished by traditionalist, syncretistic occult elements." (Peters & Besley, 2020, p. 11) And Eco would surely know. In his *own text*, Eco reflects on the fascist aesthetic that lent so much to Milan, while saving the name designer houses (Armani et al.) from scandal. In the course of his very discursive index, apart from his conclusion, rightly highlighted by Peters and Belsey, Eco reminds us that what we call democracy has long been gutted in political effect/efficacy: "Having lost their power of delegation, citizens do not act; they are only called on to play the role of the People. Thus the People is only a theatrical fiction." (Eco, 1995, p. 13). At this point, it will do to note that the name 'Nietzsche' does not appear in Eco's own list unless it be assumed by metonymic riff, beginning, perhaps, with the word, "Eternal."

The list itself is revealing as Peters and Belsey unpack this and as it amounts to bookshelf scoping — nor may it be forgotten that for all his own bibliomania, Eco was neither a classicist nor a Nietzschean nor, as such, a hermeneutic thinker but a medievalist and this scholastic orientation makes all the difference.

Hugo Drochon, whom Peters and Besley note as well, is more salient, telling us: "Why Nietzsche has once again become an inspiration for the far-right." (cited Peters & Besley, 2020, p. 13) The claim could well have been taken from the tabloids: not a reading *per se*, just an allusion, not even via a word such that it can begin to feel as if we are tacking through Nietzsche's own six-point 'History of an Illusion or Why the True World Became a Fairytale.' Enter, on cue, both the linguist Steven Pinker and the psychologist Jordan Peterson along with Peterson's University of Toronto colleague, as Drochon tells us, Ronald Beiner, who has just this summer 2020 continued in the good spirit of warning readers against Heidegger and Nietzsche, channeling a few predecessors and (almost) one song: *Dangerous Minds* (Beiner, 2020).

This is a truncated list. Nearly everyone would seem to have something to say about just what Nietzsche is responsible for in the political realm. Thus there are a range of experts on Nietzsche and the political, with Foucault for impact, see Owen, 1997 and Saar, 2007, but also the will to power overall, Gerhardt, 1996; and, in terms of 'transfiguration,' Strong 1975/2000, and more recently his 2012, pp. 57–90, quite among a large range of other theorists.

As Strong points out in an essay featured in the classic Cambridge Nietzsche companion edition, there are a number of preliminary questions to be asked:

First, many political reading of Nietzsche do exist: what is their legitimacy? Second, of all, or perhaps like all, great thinkers, Nietzsche has been claimed by a very wide range of would-be disciples. ... Thus we must also ask: What is it about Nietzsche that permits such use? (Strong, 1996, p. 126)

If the currently popular instauration of the problem of the far-right appropriation of Nietzsche is that they are not reading Nietzsche, what cannot be imagined is that a reading correcting that misreading will be any kind of remedy. Thus Strong notes that Nietzsche shares the distinction of wide and diverse influence with other philosophers (1996, pp. 127–128). To this it should be added that, as the name 'National Socialism' perhaps underscores, Hitler also read Karl Marx (this is very complicated, but see Lütticken, 2018 and see, on the side of critical theory, Fetscher, 1999). And the Nazis also read the Stoics (this is a crucial aspect of MacIntyre's reflections, 1984, 170f. and see Miller 2002). Contemporary, i.e., analytically minded scholars of neo-Stoicism can be appalled to find that some have connected their enthusiasms with those of Jordan Peterson — but see on Stoicism precisely as a 'façade,' June, 2014, drawing on Spotts, 2002. Further, owing to Lutheranism at the very least, the same Nazis also knew their St. Augustine,

who, this we may suppose ourselves to know, was no fascist, as Eco emphasizes above, there underlining the essentially dissonant syncretism that is: “Saint Augustine and Stonehenge—that is a symptom of Ur-Fascism” (Eco, 1995; cf. Lahman, 2010). Additionally, the same Nazis read Kant as Arendt (1963) reminds us (cf. Halberstam, 1988; Laustsen & Ugilt 2007). For his part, MacIntyre underscores the practical challenge of *After Virtue*, asking, and one is advised to note the cadence, “what would be involved, what was in fact involved in the moral re-education” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 180) of a “devoted and intelligent” Nazi with “the virtue of courage” (179). Finally, although this is no kind of complete list, the Nazis also read the Bible (a reading MacIntyre not incorrectly associates with Nietzsche’s reading [170], cf., Heschel, 2008).

Beyond pointing out that reading Nietzsche tends not to be an academic strong suit (most scholars, like the general public, save themselves all kinds of trouble by supposing they need not read much Nietzsche to know just what to think of him), it should be underlined that a good part of the fault of this ‘easy’ reading of Nietzsche has to be ascribed to Nietzsche and the very curious thing that he managed to do in writing “for everybody and for no one.” This is his *fait accompli*, as he once put it in the subtitle of a book he seemingly wrote in a fit of pique, a pique extended throughout three installments: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, with a fourth part Nietzsche struggled, unsuccessfully, to recall from public view.

Nietzsche was aware that he was not understood. Later he would see this, with grim insight as his fate, a fate he, in the good spirit of his own *amor fati*, adopted for his own part: *non legor, non legar*.

It is significant that Nietzsche uses Latin to say, *I am not read, I will not be read*. To the same extent, Nietzsche wrote in such a fashion that, as I have argued (2006), the reader unwilling to read and think through his texts might indeed make off with whatever set of candlesticks he likes, confidently presented with the gift, because, quite as Nietzsche reminds us, no one gets anything out of anything, books included, Nietzsche’s books we might underscore especially included, than he or she brings to them. What you are not related to, you cannot dream of understanding. But Nietzsche’s deflating insight, it is a piece of perfect pedagogy, is that the reader has to be given something and once possessed of that he will never once question his own cleverness or imagine that the text might present difficulties in being understood.

No more than others on the same theme, Beiner does not write about the difficulties of Nietzsche’s reflections on ancient tragedy (or rhythm or poetic/poietic modes, or indeed his epistemological focus, see per contra Schmidt, 1963), and neither, although both are admirable theorists, does Drochon (2016). Instead it is presumed that Nietzsche is there for the taking, and that, here they both share Nietzsche’s reflection to this extent, the inclinations of the reader will determine what they make away with in the end.

Crucially in this respect, Guy Elgat can begin his own popular reflection, locating our current human and political condition, with the observation that Nietzsche ‘is back.’ (Elgat, 2017). Full stop, almost as if the author were letting us know that contra long standing reports of his death, Elvis had never left the building. Elgat’s purpose is rather to take his reading by the middle of his first real sentence, to Trumpism.

Here, I am reminding the reader that Nietzsche had his own projects, that these can be worth reading beyond pretty much any account of Nietzsche and the far right in particular (no one is very serious for all kinds of good reasons about the left, not least because the left is steeped in the eternal return not of fascism but what is just as durable and that is Hegelianism; see more generally, Žižek, 2012). But the general public and scholars alike tend not to be interested in any of that, instead they prefer a caricature, the most recognizable figure on Monty Python’s 1972 television sketch, *The Philosopher’s Football Match*. This is Nietzsche, the mascot: a name and no more. To this extent, if Beiner asserts that one needs to shore up the academy against the French Nietzscheans and Heideggerians (as if either group ever had much purchase in the first place), it is significant that the established academy has no place for Nietzsche. Not now, not ever. Hence, if Elgat mentions Princeton (to invoke Walter Kaufmann) and if Kaufmann’s once

upon a time assistant, Alexander Nehamas, has long eclipsed Kaufmann by any measure, one of the reasons is that Nehamas continued the analytic tactic of tracking Nietzsche through a well-placed, perfectly qualifying two letter word: *as*. Danto wrote *Nietzsche as Philosopher* in 1965 and that pretty much let Nietzsche have a place of a kind, as if and as it were, at the philosophical table, but shades of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, with *Life as Literature*, Nietzsche would be set to the side of those to be read via metaphor, leaving analytic philosophy intact with all its problems, 'trolley' and other, and there Nietzsche has remained. Although some professors at the 'best' schools, I have already named most of them, which should tell the reader something, do 'work' on Nietzsche, for the most part scholars fence with a construct of Nietzsche borrowed from a sophomore class they may or may not have actually attended, and they write about this and they teach this. Their students learn what they are taught and pronounce themselves (anti- or pro-, it can go either way) Nietzschean. To this extent, there is no wonder that the best recent books seem to be popularizing accounts, detailing details about the man and exactly not about the thinker. See in addition to Prideaux, 2018, her Nietzsche biography: *I am Dynamite* along with other texts that take Nietzsche along for a walk, as it were, all the while actually talking about other thinkers (Emerson, say), other traditions, etc. This new popularity is not limited to Nietzsche, as we may note recalling *The Existentialist Café* and most recently, Jacques Derrida, as perhaps his time has come to be rehabilitated for analytic colonialization, Peter Salmon's 2020 *An Event, Perhaps*.

What is wanted here is a clear characterization of what the far right appropriates from Nietzsche, because, of course, they can, and also because the left does not care to, and not less, because more than a generation of failing to read Nietzsche from the side of the text as such, the "New Nietzsche" as the continental philosopher David Blair Allison titled it (1977), has left students and readers singularly unprepared and thus unguarded. One takes Nietzsche 'in fact' to be and to have said and to have meant just what one effectively assumes to be fascist or Nazi sentiments about the weak, about women, about the Jews and armed with this one knows that he is either the man for the far right, from Trump and Co to more cliché visions of incel anger associated with men's rights groups and such like, think Peterson but also think some of the points made by John Faithful Hamer in his podcast interview with the author (Hamer, 2019) as well as Hamer's more consistent go to reference to Nassim Nicholas Taleb.

That wide range, its agonistics, and its self-involvement, makes it easy to quote Alan Rickman's pop review refrain in Peter Barnes' 1980 revue adaptation of Frank Wedekind's *The Devil Himself* (not as memorable or as brief as Rickman's 'Obviously' of Snape yore),

I groan on my bed ...

I feel dead ...

Oh Christ, what a picture,

I grit my teeth and reach for Nietzsche. (Babich, 2017b, p. 401)

This is rotgut — unless, of course, as Barnes himself would underline, Rickman is reading it — or else it is the adolescent angst some have argued as being inseparable from the far right, but why one finds this last I cannot say. Barnes' playwright's lines seem to have been borrowed less from the 'Devil' than Nietzsche himself: *The Gay Science, Songs from Prince Vogelfrei*, quoting as Nietzsche *himself* borrows the words of a similarly blighted goatherd in the voice/spirit of the ancient Greek lyric poet, Archilochus (cf. here: Babich, 2019, p. 95).

An insidious set of associations follow Nietzsche's name, all enhanced by excerpt style, Reddit-ready quotes, Nietzsche teaches us that God is dead and people who do not believe in God pretend to be shocked by this. So too, Nietzsche is the philosopher of the will to power and people concerned with political terror and transhumanism and thus concerned with power above all, are fond of regarding this Nietzsche as their mascot/antipode. For in America, and we may think of Rickman's criminal businessman from the 1989 film *Die Hard*, power has a single

signifier and that is money. That may be expressed in the vulgar trappings of the signifiers of power (it is not for nothing that Lacan's barred subject is a dollar sign), in the case of Trump dangerously and politically real in the case of Clinton (and Bush and Obama and that means *and* Biden). Nietzsche himself underlines this focus on money *and* the economy, writing contra "shopkeeper's gold" in his *Zarathustra* that "whatever has its price has little value." The banal is often what one means to refer to when speaking of the left and the right, and perhaps for this reason Nietzsche's influence has to be modulated contra misinterpretation and cliché. In any case, Nietzsche remains associated with Nazism and not less with the image of Hitler (Golomb, 2019, and cf. Babich, 2017b, p. 392).

The comedian Ricky Gervais has a YouTube riff on Nietzsche and Hitler in a dialogue set in hell (and where else could it be set?). There Hitler gushes over Nietzsche with every fanboy cliché imaginable: loves 'all' his work, 'will to power,' 'kill all the Jews,' corresponding to nothing Nietzsche ever said. That's the joke for Gervais (2009) and Gervais who recently reminded Hollywood of its own predilections at the last Golden Globes, 6 January 2020, is his own phenomenon. But all that is the stuff of pop culture be it in the US, Canada, Australia/New Zealand, and certainly in Ireland and the UK: in all these loci (is one not surprised that I have not named Germany, which hardly means that this cannot be found, just as it can be found in Russia, see on this last: Polyakova & Sineokaya, 2017), Nietzsche persists as poster child for fascism (see on this Bull, 2011; Ferry & Renaut, 1997). To this extent, in order to understand the appeal of Nietzsche for the far right one must understand one's own projections (the legacy of the cold war as this frames philosophy in many ways) and one's own want of history, just to remember Aristotle. Overall the untold story is the dominion of Lukács in what counts as today's 'critical theory' (Lukács, 1953): this is Habermas and his epigones and the result has excluded Nietzsche on left as on the right.

To this extent, Stephen Aschheim, an analytic historian of ideas argues — and as has been argued by many others before and since — that Nietzsche is 'ideologically' co-responsible for National Socialism. This is 'the' Nietzsche legacy in Germany, as the author traces this over an entire century, just to recall the point we began with above, here: "1890–1990" (Aschheim, 1994). The philosopher Berel Lang is still more exigent, rightly so, on the matter of authorial responsibility which he takes to include misinterpretation (Lang, 2002), a point rendered even more significant given Nietzsche's own plays upon and with readerly reception. Thus, in a variation on the notion of the authorial fallacy, the intentions of an author, however contrary, could neither abrogate nor annul the question of influence. Thus reading across a century of more or less right movements in Germany, Aschheim recollects Ferdinand Tönnies, 1897 study of the 'Nietzsche cult' in Germany to reflect the trajectory of the first half of the twentieth century.

But just as Adorno would depart in 1968—leaving the left utterly defenseless—it was Jürgen Habermas who characterized Nietzsche as the effective ticketmaster to the dizzying turntable of the supposed 'postmodern' (see Habermas, 1985. On Habermas see Strong, 1996, pp. 132–133; and cf. Dallmayr, 2004 and the other contributions to Babich 2004 collection, and for a counterpoint re Horkheimer, Swindal, 1999, as well as, overall, Georg, 2019). It would require a cadre of still-to-date largely unread scholars from the former GDR to offer a different take, but this view has yet to be received (see Krause, 2006 along with the other contributions to Backhaus & Drechsler, 2006 in addition to Martin, 2003 as well as Große, 2010 and Maffei, 2007). In addition to Habermas's reflections, in addition to a range of cold-war associations with Nietzsche, associations that are often limited to sheerly nominal metonymy without substance, must be added Nietzsche's connection with Heidegger in order to review or even to begin to assess the rightist appropriations of his thought (see for a start the contributions to Babich, Denker, & Zaborowski, 2012 as well as Babich, 2019).

Thus one student Nietzsche club at University College London has been banned as we were told years ago (Huffington Post, 2014), as a "'fascist, sexist, homophobic' society." Today, and at the time, it was hard to be too, too shocked. Indeed in the era of Covid-19 restrictions, the very

idea of a student club doing anything at all can induce a certain nostalgia: in the interim, *everything* has been banned. No fraternization in numbers that were once a minimum (formerly as defined by university bylaws) just to constitute a club, and in the UK, if you happen to be from separate households, no eye contact.

Nietzsche clubs can have the tendencies or characteristics that they do because philosophical colleagues, sometimes including those who claim expertise, use caricatures of Nietzsche, cavalierly imprecise and, often because they are sure that there is no substance in any case, and so they untuck this caricature and use it to ask questions in doctoral examinations and as a foil in published books on other subjects, and sometimes in books about Nietzsche. And as Nietzsche once said using an example that frustrates easy assimilation, when it comes to the difference between an original and a copy—a caricature—most of us prefer the copy/caricature. The point Nietzsche makes speaks to our prejudices inasmuch as the original, be it a human being, a painting, or a text as such, is too complicated, too distinct from or different from what we suppose ourselves to know of it in advance. These are our prejudices and they get in the way and they stay in the way.

It is thus difficult to untangle the Nietzsche who insisted that he did not want his readers to take him for what he was not—"I am one thing," he wrote in his *Ecce Homo*, "my writings are another."

Now one way to characterize analytic philosophy is via its almost allergy to reading texts, actually reading them at any length or in any detail, which is accordingly left to as homeopathic an engagement as possible. It does not matter which author, which text, could be Kant, could be Aristotle, could be Descartes, could be Plato or Nietzsche, one will not need to read it as much as to set it in connection with one or another -ism, one or another problem, and then to say whether it offers anything and proceed, for the most part, to talk about the -ism. The -ism is said, like Aristotle's Being, in many ways, like MacIntyre's emotivism, or one may speak of naturalism say, or what used to be realism. Alternately one may trace connections with the Gettier problem or whatever other name problem. The task of reading the text to connect with such a style of reading is subsequently outsourced to a subtribe of analytic philosophy, the history of philosophy, and words like apriorism and perfectionism rule these readings as well.

This works in the current climate: in general, the philosophic expert will not be minded to read the texts themselves (something Nietzsche for his own part thought essential), and when bits are quoted out of context, it is short work to do pretty much whatever one likes with the excerpts. The same liberty with reference to, say, 'naturalism,' holds if one happens to be of a mind to be susceptible to the ethical allure of the Trolley Problem. Thus before she wrote *The Existentialist Café*, Sarah Bakewell, herself trained in the analytic tradition, published a review of two books on this analytic problem, "Clang Went the Trolley," alluding to both the Judy Garland song and the August 9, 1945 bomb, "nicknamed Fat Man" (Bakewell, 2013). In the same way, just war theory is all about this, but so too are other sales pitches of the 'far right.'

Above I noted that Nietzsche is surely to blame for the way he writes. But what is most important is that Nietzsche was keen on reading and held that his readers should have to have read everything he wrote, all of it, many times, and then, this is probably his most intimately aspired version of the eternal return, he might have thought that one could then start again: *da capo* all the way through to the end. Even then one would still be making up something of him out of one's own image, so Nietzsche claimed.

Because Nietzsche thought about reading, as this is always about language and truth, he never veered from his conviction that what you bring to a text is just what you get out of it.

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