

New Nietzsche Studies

The Journal of the Nietzsche Society

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Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1998). ix-xi; 283 pp, with index.

Alexander Nehamas is an excellent scholar and the reader is invariably provided with insight and perspectives that make this book well worth reading (for example, his rendering of Nietzsche's perspectivism is the best I have read). I say this despite the fact that I do not think he is any more successful in his main thesis, the issue of unique literary self-creation or self-fashioning as the primary goal of a certain type of philosophy, than he was in his earlier *Nietzsche: Life As Literature*, which dealt exclusively with Nietzsche in this regard. Nehamas does several things in this new book: Most obviously, he attempts to carry forward and expand the main thesis of his earlier book. In this new book the emphasis is on Socrates, and Nietzsche is used primarily to show how Socrates (Plato) is successful where Nietzsche is much less so as a good paradigm of the art of living. Nehamas provides a persuasive alternative account of Socratic irony to that of Gregory Vlastos in which Nehamas draws upon the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Kierkegaard to give an insightful analysis of various forms of irony. The outcome is a conception of Socratic irony that renders Socrates a more powerful model for unique self-fashioning because Socrates remains enigmatic and cannot be copied. Nehamas provides an insightful account of Platonic irony, the relationship of Plato to his audience and his literary figure of Socrates. In this account, Socrates remains an enigma to the author Plato himself. Thus the powerful ironic silence of Socrates is preserved and enhanced. In the last half, Nehamas attempts to show how three practitioners of the "Art of Living," Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault, practice this art stimulated by Socrates and to what extent each succeeds. Nehamas's judgment seems to be that, with some reservations, Foucault succeeds, Montaigne does also but to a lesser degree. In contrast, under the scrutiny of Nehamas's interpretation of Socrates, Nietzsche, (with whom Nehamas has just as ambivalent a relationship as he says Nietzsche has with Socrates) is judged, to have missed the mark in his quest for inimitable self-creation. This, of course would then allow us to maintain Socrates as the all-time champion self-creator and best model for others, partly due to Nehamas's persuasive account of Socrates's ironic and enigmatic "silence" and partly due to Nehamas's misreading of Nietzsche to which I return below.

Nehamas identifies two main approaches to philosophy in the Socratic tradition. One avoids personal style and idiosyncrasy as much as possible and aims theoretically to provide answers to general and important questions. The issue is how well-reasoned and convincing these answers are. Much of this tradition, especially from Plato, has attempted to move toward and dis-

cover universal truths, especially moral ones, for all people at all times and places. The other tradition, philosophy as the art of living, Nehamas calls "aestheticist." Its central task is the creation of uniqueness of character in which the writer is often both creator and creature. It also appeals to reason to answer philosophical questions and also aims at truth, but truth in the service of how one should live, what kind of person one can become. The former type of philosophy is a theoretical and intellectual accomplishment. The latter is a personal literary and philosophical accomplishment of self-creation. It is largely a matter of style in creating a psychological and interpretive unity of character, rather than merely logical coherence. Philosophers of the first type typically see philosophers of the second type as more properly belonging to literature, history, or anthropology. For Nehamas, however, because those who practice philosophy as an art of living construct their personalities through the investigation, criticism, and the production of philosophical views that arise from the same Socratic tradition as the theoretical approach, it truly is a genuine part of that tradition. Nehamas sees both types as legitimate and wishes to promote the art of living and enlarge it. Nehamas lists some of the well-known philosophers of the art of living: Pascal, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Emerson, Thoreau, Wittgenstein, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault. He devotes a chapter each to the last three and discusses the relationship of each to Socrates and to the art of living.

Nehamas devotes the first half of his book to Socratic and Platonic irony, the relation of the reader to the character Socrates and his interlocutors and to their creator, Plato. This double relationship (each of which turns out to have multiple layers) is very rich and ultimately shows how Plato's Socrates is such an enigmatic and powerful role model for the self-creation of others. In his opening chapter, Nehamas uses Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* to reveal how irony can be effectively used, as it was by Plato in his early dialogues, to induce self-deception in the reader. The reader identifies with the hero Hans Castorp, as the reader of Plato's early Dialogues identifies with Socrates, but both characters are impossible to understand once and for all. In Platonic irony, the reader is drawn into siding with Socrates against his interlocutors, only to commit the same error of not following through with a serious pursuit of their own virtue, self-care, and self-creation. Though I enjoyed some of this chapter, I was left uncertain by the time I had finished the book what it had accomplished with regard to the overall task of the book. Nehamas could have given a much shorter treatment of Mann to this end without writing what seems to be sometimes a gratuitous display of prowess in literary interpretation.

In chapter two, Nehamas reveals Platonic irony as the ultimate background of the early dialogues. Plato's gaze is one we cannot see as he

watches the doubly ironic situation he has created and drawn the reader into. The reader is drawn to identify with Socrates against his interlocutors who are the victims of Socratic irony. The reader is lured into a state of confident ignorance that is no less self-deceived than that of Socrates' interlocutors. This confidence is instilled by lulling the reader into believing that he or she knows better than Socrates' interlocutors what Socrates' point is, his outlook on life. But Plato then forces us to see that in spite of the agreement with Socrates' uncompromising demand to devote our lives to the pursuit of reason and virtue, we remain ultimately indifferent to it. The *elenchus*, Socrates' method of examining the arguments of others, is being practiced not only on Socrates' interlocutors, to whom we are made to feel superior, but doubly so on us because of the false sense of superiority. The arrogant innocence of the characters in the dialogues finally reveals a general human condition of ignorance (as depicted in the "Allegory of the Cave" in the *Republic*). As we watch Socrates manipulate his interlocutors, we ourselves are being manipulated by Plato. But if irony presupposes superiority to the victim, as Nehamas suggests, then ironists seem particularly vulnerable to irony. Is Socrates himself a victim of Platonic irony and is Plato himself a victim of his own and Socratic irony in this regard? These are very interesting issues Nehamas raises and leaves the reader to ponder.

Nehamas challenges the more traditional distinction that irony is either deceit in its older form or it is a form of refined honesty as developed by Socrates. For Vlastos, according to Nehamas, deceit and Socratic irony exclude one another. "Successful irony is honesty that is accompanied by a slightly mocking smile. But the mockery, in the form of depreciation, is directed at oneself" (53). Nehamas acknowledges this form of irony but argues that the case is much richer with Socrates. For Nehamas, irony is neither overt deceit nor honesty. He challenges the conception of irony exemplified in Vlastos' account, in which irony is viewed as saying the contrary of what is intended. Instead Nehamas sees Socratic irony as a form of silence, a condition in which the reader is left only with the sense that Socrates meant something other than what he said, what we are left to ponder. Nehamas agrees with Kierkegaard that Socrates has left nothing by which a later age can judge him. Socrates remains inscrutable and therefore cannot be imitated. He can only serve to stimulate others to pursue their own virtue and self-creation, which is at the heart of philosophy as the art of living.

Two things separate Socrates from those who followed his example. First, he wrote nothing. He comes to us as a literary figure, a creature in Plato's works (and a few other ancient writers) and is not an author. Nietzsche, for example, on the other hand, is both creator and creature, writer and literary figure (given Nehamas's view). Second, we know much less about the life of

Socrates than we do about later philosophers of the art of living. We know very little of how Socrates achieved his unity of self, what actual life struggles he encountered and overcame. There are no letters, no notes, nothing to indicate the actual path he might have taken. We only have the literary figure already fully developed in Plato's dialogues without biography, fully engaged in his pursuit of virtue and his role of gadfly to the Athenians. This means that when we aspire to achieve a life worth living as Socrates did and apparently achieved, we are working out our own self-creation with Socrates as an inspiring model, but whose character cannot be replicated. That, of course, is the power of such a model, if the goal is inimitable self-creation. However, the final opposition that Nehamas proposes between Socrates and Nietzsche, for example, is tenuous because of these differences. The opposition is between Plato and Nietzsche the authors and what they have created, in *both* cases, finally enigmatic characters that cannot be reduced to the historical Socrates or the historical Nietzsche. Nor can the authors be reduced to their characters, though the characters are very suggestive of the various developing perspectives of the authors. Irony in both cases keeps the works of the authors powerfully provocative. I think Nehamas is persuasive in his arguments that Plato is ironic about both Socrates' interlocutors and about the reader of his dialogues, even about Socrates himself (as opposed to Vlastos' reading where Socratic irony always aims at the truth). In his chapter on Nietzsche, however, Nehamas does not do enough with the fact that Nietzsche parodies Zarathustra constantly while at the same time putting forward serious perspectives that are immediately challenged by the parody. The reader is drawn into a sympathetic participation in the drama of Zarathustra's quest, only to finally have the entire quest turn out to be a parody of the quest for truth and salvation, even if through a new Dionysian this worldly "truth." The reader is left to create and pursue his or her own "salvation" (or salvation from the pursuit of salvation and emancipation from the pursuit and achievement of emancipation). Plato seriously tests the ideal of Socrates, but does not parody this to the extent Nietzsche does Zarathustra. It is interesting to remember that Plato at least appears to become ever more dogmatic as his work progresses into its middle and later phases. Nietzsche, if anything, became more iconoclastic (*Twilight of the Idols*, *Antichrist*, *Ecce Homo*) and it is thus quite consistent that the later Nietzsche might take a different stance on Socrates, which Nehamas calls ambivalence. Nietzsche is fully aware that he is attacking Plato through Plato's literary figure of Socrates. Perhaps Nietzsche did not pay enough attention to what Nehamas calls Socratic silence. Or perhaps Nietzsche simply decided to use Socratic irony, especially the irony of paying the debt to the god Asclepius for the "good" fortune of leaving life, to reiterate Nietzsche's contention that a denigration of life and its sacredness, is a sign of decadence. Perhaps he was

merely using a creative interpretation of Socrates to show that even a sacred cow such as "Socratic virtue" can be challenged in the service of emancipation from the prison of one's convictions.

His chapter on Nietzsche in *The Art of Living* is perhaps the best — and the worst — chapter in the book. At its best, Nehamas gives an account of perspectivism that is, in my view, unsurpassed in the literature on Nietzsche. He also recognizes a strong similarity between Nietzsche's conception of truth and Donald Davidson's. At its worst, this chapter carries forward a misunderstanding of Nietzsche that was developed in his *Nietzsche: Life As Literature*. Nehamas's earlier book successfully challenges many of the prevailing interpretations of Nietzsche, but provides an interpretation that is in part at least as questionable as those it challenges. Nehamas sees Nietzsche's styles of writing and his attempt to create himself as an ideal literary character as symptoms of a number of physical and intellectual weaknesses. For example, Nehamas claims that Nietzsche is "intellectually unable to engage in long, sustained argument" and that Nietzsche "makes up for this shortcoming by returning to the same issues again and again in his writings" (231). For Nehamas, Socrates is the picture of robust health and Nietzsche is the chronic weakling who tries to make up for this by creating a fictional healthy literary version of himself. This is supposed to be a kind of inimitable model for others, instead of Socrates, whom the later Nietzsche sees as a decadent, sick of life and thankful to be leaving it.

Nehamas's *own* ambivalence toward Nietzsche comes through strongly in his new book. Nietzsche has had an immense influence on Nehamas, who seeks his own self-creation in response to Nietzsche's styles that carry out the theme of self-overcoming and self-creation. Having rendered his hero Socrates enigmatic and inimitable, and having supposedly captured Nietzsche's failed project of unique literary self-creation, Nehamas would both undermine Nietzsche's criticisms of the hero Socrates and at the same time expose Nietzsche's supposed weaknesses in his person, his intellectual capacity, and in his failure to be inimitable. This would allow Nehamas to escape the shadow of Nietzsche in the pursuit of his own self-fashioning. I don't think he succeeds in this, primarily because his aestheticist interpretation of Nietzsche makes little sense in light of Nietzsche's own aestheticism and in light of Nietzsche's central motif of the possibility of human transformation to a different attitude toward life, a different way of living for which self-creation and shifts in perspective are a means, not ends in themselves, as Nehamas argues.

Nehamas's and Nietzsche's "aestheticisms" are glaringly at odds. Nehamas's version aims at a perfectly unified literary character, oneself as perfectly coherent object of art. Nietzsche's aestheticism is one of creative

self-overcoming and unfinished subjectivity. There is nothing unified or whole except that an attitude toward one's life is profoundly transformed. For Nietzsche, what is uniquely individual about an author can only be indicated, not finally captured, unified, and made whole in his or her work. But there is something the text conveys beyond the mere reflection of the psychology of its author. The question and task remains for any interpreter of a text whether "the text disappears under the interpretation" (BGE 38) Nietzsche is deeply concerned with doing justice to the text and despite the hyperbole of his famous remark "there are no facts only interpretations" (WP 481) says elsewhere that what we need is an art of exegesis, "the art of reading well — of reading *facts* without falsifying them by interpretations" (AC 52). For Nietzsche, philology is essentially reading "without losing caution, patience, delicacy, in the desire to understand. Philology as *ephexis* [undecisiveness] in interpretation" (*ibid.*). "*Ephexis*" implies remaining open and letting the text continue to speak without coming to any final conclusions (TI, Germans, 6). "This is what great works require" (GS 102) Since self-creation through narration (written or not) is what we all do in some measure, then the net result would be that Nehamas has not said anything distinctive about Nietzsche, except that Nietzsche was a genius in carrying out his own self-narration/creation. Nehamas's interpretation borders on committing the genetic fallacy. We cannot reduce Nietzsche to his works or vice versa. We do not explain or explain away Nietzsche's insights about life and human consciousness by reducing his works to expressions of the author's genius in compensating for his weaknesses. In other words, even if Nehamas were right, the central question would remain: What has Nietzsche discovered about what it is to be human and conscious? The question here is to what extent have Nietzsche's texts been buried under Nehamas's interpretation?

Nietzsche is concerned with a kind of attitude, not so much whether he gets Socrates right or not. If Nietzsche turned out to be wrong about Socrates, it would make no difference at all to what he is driving at. Even if Socrates was not the unrecovered decadent Nietzsche saw him as, an "uncompleted nihilist," and even if Nietzsche was wrong about himself as being the "first completed nihilist" or recovered decadent, nothing has been changed regarding Nietzsche's intricate and extremely revealing diagnosis of human self-deception and escapism and the possibility of a profound self-overcoming and transformation. Nietzsche's themes of "metamorphosis," "second innocence," "active forgetting, and "great health" point to this change in one's attitude and relation to life and one's past.

If Nehamas is right in his psycho-historical/literary account, Nietzsche's work would be the result of colossal self-deception and rationalization of

weaknesses instead of the work of a master psychologist who "had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any other man who ever lived or was ever likely to live."¹ Nehamas's account marginalizes Nietzsche's most important motif of transformation of consciousness, a radical change in one's relation to oneself, one's beliefs, and one's attitude toward life expressed in Nietzsche's *amor fati*.

This transformation has not been explained away or properly acknowledged even if Nehamas were right about Nietzsche himself. The successful outcome of Nietzsche's version of the art of living is a transformation in consciousness whether Nietzsche achieved it or not. This would not be at the price of self-deception or as a result of the need to create a literary version of oneself one can live with and fully embrace. Nietzsche makes it difficult to hold on to our illusions, our convictions, and thus forces any reader who takes Nietzsche's work seriously enough to recreate himself or herself in the process of examining these convictions. One must have beliefs to live, but it is the relationship to these beliefs that makes all the difference. It is a difference in attitude, an attitude toward life, a felt sense of taking life as sacred rather than our beliefs, which are always fallible, mutable, and in the service of our needs which are a manifestation of life itself.

Nietzsche *can* be seen as a kind of ascetic priest as Nehamas says and as Nietzsche himself admits. But he is one who, through his own asceticism of the soul, is able to harvest the fruit of uncanny depth of insight into human motivation. This new type of ascetic (priest) is spending the stored creative currency of many generations of asceticism in order to create a new vision of human possibility: The possibility of overcoming *ressentiment*, the possibility of emancipation from the desire for salvation (a sign of decadence) and the desire for revenge (the greatest sickness of the soul). What a wonderful irony that Nietzsche rails against the very type that he is, a type to be overcome. But, of course, one of Nietzsche's central themes is self-overcoming. Nietzsche saw life as a continual process of risking and overcoming that which we rely on to preserve ourselves, i.e., our truths. Nietzsche says in the *Nachlaß*, "A very popular error: having the courage of one's convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one's convictions!!!" The traditional ascetic priest would risk anything *but* this.

Nehamas has tried to weave together two different strands of argument, one about irony and one about self-fashioning and sees the first as crucial to the second. It appears that the first was not sufficient to establish some of what he attempted in the second. Since writing oneself into history as a unique unified whole is the stated goal of philosophical self-fashioning, one

¹A remark by Freud according to Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. II, (New York: Basic Books, 1953), p. 344.

would have to conclude that Nehamas's own book, though impressive, is not a unified whole and thus not successful as a high example of the art of living. Nehamas is particularly taken with Nietzsche's "ambivalence" toward Socrates. But his own ambivalence toward Nietzsche is an issue Nehamas does not confront, largely due to his misreading of Nietzsche's aestheticism and central motif of transformation of human consciousness. Nehamas's approach will not likely be looked upon favorably by those with a commitment to liberal or communitarian social political views. It will seem far too focused on the individual. Nehamas would respond, as Nietzsche does as well, that it is such unique individuals who are in a kind of creative dialectical relationship with their societies such that their own self-creation provides a powerful source of impetus for doing good not only for themselves, but for society at large. When one is busily engaged in a truly humbling process of self-questioning and self-overcoming, there is little motivation to lord it over others, personally, politically, economically, or militarily. The lives of Buddha, Socrates, and Jesus are obvious examples (regardless what distortions others fashion from their lives).

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Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, *Nietzsche His Philosophy of Contradictions and the Contradictions of His Philosophy*, translated by David J. Parent. University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 1999. xviii, 246 pp.

This translation makes available to the English speaking world one of the most influential works in recent German-language Nietzsche studies by addition to the original 1971 edition of *Nietzsche: Seine Philosophie der Gegensätze und die Gegensätze Seiner Philosophie*, this volume also contains translations of two later essays by Wolfgang Müller-Lauter: "Nietzsche's 'Doctrine' of the Will to Power," which originally appeared as "Nietzsche's 'Lehre' vom Willen zur Macht" in *Nietzsche-Studien* 3 (1974): 1-60 and "The Organism as Inner Struggle," which first appeared as "Der Organismus als Innerer Kampf: Der Einfluss von Wilhelm Roux auf Friedrich Nietzsche" in *Nietzsche-Studien* 7 (1978): 189-223, 233-35. The late David J. Parent's translation is to be applauded as both convincing and readable.

The point of departure for Müller-Lauter's interpretation is a detailed and sustained account of Nietzsche's thought of will to power. In contrast to readings of will to power which construe it as a metaphysical ground or principle, Müller-Lauter demonstrates how the meaning of will to power

represents a challenge to traditional metaphysical conceptions of will. Müller-Lauter begins by illustrating how Nietzsche's understanding of will to power must be seen to encompass a sense of contradiction which is more primordial than the binary oppositions of logic. This more original sense of opposition is described as the quality of relation between a multiplicity of conflicting wills to power. Rather than *the* will to power conceived as a unitary ground, Müller-Lauter locates the meaning of will to power as the quality of relation pertaining between a multiplicity of wills to power.

The distinction between the will to power and wills to power plays an important role in Müller-Lauter's reading. However, this shift to interpret the meaning of will to power as the relational quality of difference between a plurality of wills to power does not simply replace the unitary conception of will to power with that of a given multiplicity. Rather, Müller-Lauter's account is radical in that it does not accept the multiplicity of wills to power as a manifold of atomistic givens but rather thinks the inter-relational character of each individual will to power as irreducibly constitutive of its being. It is then only in light of this irreducible interplay that the meaning of will to power is to be conceived: "The quality, 'will to power,' is not a real unity; this unity exists neither in any way for itself, nor is it ever the 'ground of being.' There is a 'real' unity only as organization and interplay of power-quanta" (133). Müller-Lauter's reading of this irreducible differentiation between wills to power as the essential quality of will to power provides the basis for examining the role of will within the other major themes of Nietzsche's thought. In the following six chapters Müller-Lauter productively unfolds the implications of his reading of will to power for Nietzsche's understanding of history, nihilism, the overman and the eternal recurrence.

While Müller-Lauter's reading of will to power retains significance for contemporary Nietzsche scholarship, some English speaking readers might have questions regarding Müller-Lauter's methodological preference for selecting quotes from Nietzsche's texts without reservation as to specific context or period in Nietzsche's thought. Additionally, as Richard Schacht points out in his foreword, this text should be seen as a response to the Heideggerian reading of Nietzsche. However, Müller-Lauter repeats this methodology and employs selections from Heidegger's extensive writings upon Nietzsche without respect to significant transformations in Heidegger's relation to Nietzsche.

Müller-Lauter's critique of the Heideggerian reading as inappropriately essentializing the quality of will to power is presented as valid for all of Heidegger's reflections on Nietzsche. While such a critique can be substantiated in Heidegger's later Nietzsche lectures, this account greatly underestimates the subtlety of Heidegger's understanding of the meaning of will

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