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Notes and Discussions

Nietzsche and Aestheticism

1.

Alexander Nehamas's *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*¹ has enjoyed an enthusiastic reception since its publication in 1985. Reviewed in a wide array of scholarly journals and even in the popular press, the book has won praise nearly everywhere and has already earned for Nehamas—at least in the intellectual community at large—the reputation as the preeminent American Nietzsche scholar. At least two features of the book may help explain this phenomenon.

First, Nehamas's Nietzsche is an imaginative synthesis of several important currents in recent Nietzsche commentary, reflecting the influence of writers like Jacques Derrida, Sarah Kofman, Paul De Man, and Richard Rorty. These authors figure, often by name, throughout Nehamas's book; and it is perhaps Nehamas's most important achievement to have offered a reading of Nietzsche that incorporates the insights of these writers while surpassing them all in the philosophical ingenuity with which this style of interpreting Nietzsche is developed. The high profile that many of these thinkers now enjoy on the intellectual landscape accounts in part for the reception accorded the "Nietzsche" they so deeply influenced.

Second, Nehamas has effected this synthesis primarily through the introduction of a novel interpretive rubric: what Nehamas calls "aestheticism."² According to aestheticism, "Nietzsche . . . looks at [the world] as if it were a literary text. And he arrives at many of his views of human beings by generalizing to them ideas and principles that apply almost intuitively to the literary situation, to the creation and interpretation of

¹ (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); all further references will be included in the body of the text. I will cite Nietzsche's texts (by section number) using the standard English-language acronyms: *The Birth of Tragedy* (BT); *Human, All-Too-Human* (HAH); *Daybreak* (D); *The Gay Science* (GS); *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Z); *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE); *On the Genealogy of Morals* (GM); *Twilight of the Idols* (TI); *The Antichrist* (A); *Ecce Homo* (EH); *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (NCW); *The Case of Wagner* (CW); *The Will to Power* (WP). Translations are by Kaufmann or Kaufmann/Hollingdale, except for HAH (trans. Faber & Lehmann) and D (trans. Hollingdale).

² Allan Megill also uses the term "aestheticism" in a related way in his *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); e.g., p. 2: "I am using ["aestheticism"] to refer . . . to an attempt to expand the aesthetic to embrace the whole of reality. To put it another way, I am using it to refer to a tendency to see 'art' or 'language' or 'discourse' or 'text' as constituting the primary realm of human experience." Megill, it should be noted, pursues this theme in Nietzsche less relentlessly and also less artfully than Nehamas.

literary texts and characters" (3). For Nehamas, then, the literary text is Nietzsche's "overarching metaphor" (164), the "model" he "always depended on" (194) in pursuing his philosophical inquiries, "the *single thread* running through" his work.³ And according to at least one commentator, it is through Nehamas's "ingenious employment of an aesthetic model" that he "has dramatically raised the standards of Nietzsche scholarship."⁴

While there is clearly much to admire in Nehamas's book, I should like to raise here a skeptical question about Nehamas's extensive use of this aestheticist model: for aestheticism, I suggest, is actually *not* Nietzsche's view. In the next two sections, I will concentrate on one way in which this problem surfaces: namely, in Nehamas's failure to adduce a *single passage* from Nietzsche in which he actually embraces aestheticism. But the problem is also apparent in Nehamas's attempt to show that aestheticism informs Nietzsche's treatment of different issues: perspectivism, the nature of the self, the will to power, the critique of morality, his positive ethics. In section 4, I shall explore just the last of these, and suggest how aestheticism leads Nehamas to an idiosyncratic reading of Nietzsche's positive views.

2.

Nehamas, as we have seen, claims that "aestheticism" informs all of Nietzsche's philosophical work. He even attempts to show that there is "explicit" textual support for aestheticism: text, that is, where Nietzsche claims this putatively "overarching" device—understanding the world as if it were a literary text—as his own. And, in fact, we should expect nothing less: if aestheticism is really central to Nietzsche's philosophical practice then we should expect him to say so—somewhere. Yet, as I will show below, of the *eight* fragmentary quotes and references that Nehamas invokes as "explicit" support of aestheticism (see 39, 62, 90–91, 227) half are actually *incompatible* with aestheticism, while the remainder allude to art, literature, texts, and interpretation in a way that fails to warrant ascription of an overarching philosophical methodology. Moreover, Nehamas ignores the passages in which Nietzsche identifies his methodology and basic assumptions in essentially naturalistic—not aestheticist—terms.

Before turning to these passages, however, it is important to be clear about what is really at issue. No one disputes that Nietzsche, reflecting no doubt his training as a philologist, often speaks metaphorically of the world as a "text" to be interpreted. Let us call this common Nietzschean way of talking "interpretivism."⁵

³ Emphasis added. This last remark appears on the dust jacket of the book: Nehamas "reveals the single thread running through Nietzsche's views: his thinking of the world on the model of the literary text. . . ."

⁴ Daniel Conway, "Literature as Life: Nietzsche's Positive Morality," *International Studies in Philosophy* 21/2 (1989): 41.

⁵ Nietzsche emphasizes the interpretive character of knowledge because he wants to reject what he identifies as the positivist aspiration of unmediated confrontation with the "facts" about the world. The famous passage (WP, 481), for example, in which Nietzsche asserts that "facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations," is explicitly a critique of "positivism, which halts at phenomena." Thus, Nietzsche's emphasis on interpretive mediation in our knowledge of the world is centrally an *epistemological* thesis, and not a declaration of an overarching methodology. For further

Aestheticism, however, is a stronger thesis; it claims that interpretation of the text of the world is like (a certain sort of) *literary* interpretation in two key respects:

- (i) the world and literary texts are essentially indeterminate, so that both admit of a plurality of conflicting interpretations; and
- (ii) the world and its occupants have features that we ordinarily associate with literary texts and literary characters.

It is these two novel claims that require independent textual support; yet, as I discuss below, Nehamas tends to conflate aestheticism with interpretivism, taking evidence of the latter as support for the former. But the two views are simply not equivalent.

For one thing, Nietzsche understands "interpretation" in the manner of a serious philologist, not a flippant post-modernist:⁶ Nietzsche wants to defend, as he puts it, "the art of reading well—of reading facts without falsifying them by interpretation" (A, 52). Good interpretive practice that does not falsify the "facts" of the text would seem to comprise a very different "art" from that contemplated by aestheticism, which emphasizes "that literary texts can be interpreted *equally well* in vastly different and *deeply incompatible* ways" (3, emphasis added). But if "deeply incompatible" interpretations are "equally" good, then what constraint on interpretation could the text exercise? And what room could there be for the idea of an interpretation "falsifying" the "facts" of the text?

Note, however, that the upshot of this difference between the aestheticist and Nietzschean conceptions of interpretation is only this: namely, that Nietzsche, the non-post-modern philologist, could not have been using the "text" metaphor to support the sort of views Nehamas labels "aestheticism." If Nietzsche held such views—if, for example, he did believe that the world admits of a plurality of *incompatible* interpretations⁷—then we will require other proof. It is simply anachronistic, however, to attribute aestheticism to Nietzsche on the basis of his talk of "texts" and "interpretation"; it is to assume (wrongly) that Nietzsche learned the art of interpretation at the feet of De Man instead of Ritschl.⁸

discussion of what this epistemological thesis amounts to, see my "Perspectivism in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*," in R. Schacht, ed., *Essays on Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morals"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming), especially Section IV [cited hereafter as "Perspectivism"].

⁶ See generally, Hendrik Birus, "Nietzsche's Concept of Interpretation," *Texte* 3 (1984): 87–102, which is a useful counterweight to the various "French" Nietzscheans (though Birus's judgment on some more purely philosophical matters is a bit uneven). One must remember that nineteenth-century Germans had a very different conception of the interpretation of texts than that now popular in literary-theory circles. As M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern point out in *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), German classical scholarship of that period "added a new 'scientific' method" in which the "ancient world, its texts and its history, were submitted to critical analysis with an unprecedented thoroughness, sense of system and concern for evidence that was, in intention at least, dispassionate" (11). They go on to note that Nietzsche's early philological studies "exhibit all the familiar features of nineteenth-century 'scientific' scholarship" (16). Nietzsche, himself, gives expression to such a conception of interpretation and philology in his later work (e.g., A, 59).

⁷ For some arguments that he didn't, see my "Perspectivism."

⁸ Friedrich Ritschl, an eminent German classical philologist, was Nietzsche's mentor during his days as a graduate student.

Aestheticism cannot be conflated with interpretivism for a second reason: Nietzsche simply does *not* interpret the world as though it shared the features of a *literary* text; on the contrary, a recurring theme in his work is that what he is interpreting is a *natural* world with particular sorts of *natural* attributes (e.g., BGE, 230; A, 14). Since this issue goes to the heart of what is problematic about aestheticism, let me pause to consider here two examples of how Nehamas's aestheticism leads him to misconstrue Nietzsche's naturalism.⁹

While Nehamas cites BGE, 230 (on 22) as evidence of Nietzsche's alleged embrace of aestheticism, this passage actually gives clear expression instead to one of Nietzsche's most important philosophical imperatives: naturalism. Nietzsche decries those who stop with "mere appearance . . . masks . . . cloaks, in short, . . . the surface" and contrasts them with "the seeker after knowledge" who argues that "the basic text of *homo natura* must again be recognized":

To translate man back into nature; to become master over the many vain and overly enthusiastic interpretations and connotations that have so far been scrawled and painted over that *eternal basic text* [emphasis added] of *homo natura*; to see to it that man henceforth stands before man as even today, *hardened in the discipline of science* [emphasis added], he stands before the *rest* of nature, with intrepid Oedipus eyes and sealed Odysseus ears, deaf to the siren songs of old metaphysical bird catchers who have been piping at him all too long, "you are more, you are higher, you are of a different origin!"—that may be a strange and insane task, but it is a *task*—who would deny that? *Why did we choose this insane task* [emphasis added]? Or, putting it differently: "why have knowledge at all?"

Nietzsche identifies this agenda for philosophy (with the royal "we") as his task; and the task is to reveal the "eternal basic text": *homo natura*. Nehamas no doubt cites this passage because of Nietzsche's use of the word "text": but it is decidedly a use of "text" unsuited to supporting aestheticism.

On the aestheticist reading, recall, for Nietzsche to treat knowledge of the world as interpretation of a text is to invoke our sense, as Nehamas says, that "literary texts can be interpreted equally well in vastly different and deeply incompatible ways" and thus to suggest that "exactly the same is true of the world itself and all the things within it" (3).

⁹ Nietzsche shares with other broadly "naturalistic" thinkers the ambition of understanding human beings as continuous parts of the natural world order, but he differs markedly in not assigning a privileged place to the prevailing science of the day in this account. He parts company in this respect because: (i) he takes modern science—from physics to psychology—to involve various moral prejudices that ultimately distort its account of the world order and of human beings (though, at the same time, he admires scientific *methods* [e.g., A, 59; see also GM, III, 23]); and (ii) he rejects mechanistic accounts of phenomena. I hope to take up some of the issues Nietzsche's unusual nonreductive naturalism presents elsewhere. For a useful account of the prevailing naturalistic mood in Germany in the latter half of the nineteenth century, see Hans Sluga, *Frege* (London: Routledge, 1980), Chapter 1; for an account of the influence of Friedrich Lange's naturalism on Nietzsche—though one that unnecessarily overstates its case—see George Stack, *Lange and Nietzsche* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983).

But Nietzsche's invocation of "text" in BGE, 230 is not to this effect at all:¹⁰ he asserts that prior claims to "knowledge" (e.g., "metaphysics") have been *superficial* precisely because they have ignored the "eternal basic text" (*ewigen Grundtext*) of man conceived as a natural organism. That this text is eternal *and* basic implies not that it "can be interpreted equally well in vastly different and deeply incompatible ways" but just the opposite: that readings which do not treat man naturalistically misread the text—they "falsify" it. And it is precisely such misreadings of "texts" that Nietzsche the "good philologist" aims to correct.

So the description of the text of *homo natura* as "eternal" and "basic," the contrast with superficial claims to knowledge, and the passage's character as a methodological proclamation, all suggest that Nietzsche wants to establish the proper starting point for knowledge, and in so doing to rule out a whole host of competing and incompatible interpretations of man. These naturalistic ambitions are, it seems, distinctly unaestheticist.

A second and similarly misleading characterization of Nietzsche's view results when Nehamas cites GM, II, 12 to support the proposition that "the will to power manifests itself in offering reinterpretations" (97), and then goes on to suggest, in keeping with aestheticism, that interpretation here should be understood in a "writerly . . . literary way" (98). Now, in GM, II, 12, Nietzsche does say that: "all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous 'meaning' and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated." But note that: (a) Nietzsche does not assimilate interpretation here to *literary* interpretation; that conflation is Nehamas's; and (b) the passage is a description of "events in the *organic* world"—i.e., it proffers an account of natural phenomena. Later in GM, II, 12, Nietzsche complains that the "democratic idiosyncrasy which opposes everything that dominates and wants to dominate" has "already taken charge of all physiology and theory of life" with the result that "the essence of life, its *will to power*, is ignored." Will to power, then, appears here as a naturalistic hypothesis, one designed to put physiology and the "theory of life" (as well as psychology) on the right track (see also, BGE, 13, 23, and the discussion below in section 3, (2)). By assimilating the passage (which he cites without quoting) to literary interpretation Nehamas misrepresents its basic thrust: i.e., to reorient the naturalistic interpretation of man in terms of will to power.¹¹

Interpretivism, then, is *not* aestheticism: first, because Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century philologist, does not view "texts" and "interpretations" in the manner of the twentieth-century post-modernist who seems the more likely proponent of aestheti-

¹⁰ In fact, his use of "text" elsewhere in BGE is not to that effect either: e.g., 22, where he uses "text" as a synonym for "matter of fact" and in contrast with any "perversion of meaning."

¹¹ Maudemarie Clark has recently offered an interesting analysis of Nietzsche's treatment of will to power in his published works. See her *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Chapter 7. Clark argues persuasively that Nietzsche did not hold a "cosmological" doctrine of the will to power (the view that everything is essentially will to power); she argues less persuasively against any explanatory role for some notion of will to power—a role which it seems to me Nietzsche clearly (and rather plausibly) entertained (as the remarks from GM and BGE referred to in the text suggest).

cism; and second, because in his actual philosophical practice, Nietzsche presents himself as interpreting a natural world, a world describable (at least in significant part) in terms of will to power. This is not to deny that Nietzsche thinks both art (though not particularly literature) and aesthetic value standards are extremely important (a point to which I shall return); it is to deny, however, that he holds the unusual view that the natural world and its occupants are best interpreted as though they shared the features of (indeterminate) literary texts and of literary characters.

3.

Let us turn, then, to consider the remaining seven pieces of textual evidence offered by Nehamas as putative proof of Nietzsche's embrace of aestheticism.

(1) Near the end of Chapter 1, Nehamas writes that: "A central theme of this book is Nietzsche's aestheticism, his essential reliance on artistic models for understanding the world and life and for evaluating people and actions. This aestheticism results from his effort to bring style into the center of his own thought and to repeat once more what he took to be the great achievement of the Greeks and Romans: to make of 'the grand style no longer mere art but . . . reality, truth, *life*' (A, 59)" (39). Nehamas cites A, 59 as evidence of Nietzsche's "effort to bring style into the center of his own thought"—an effort that leads, claims Nehamas, to aestheticism. The question, then, is whether Nietzsche's conception of style—more precisely, of the "grand style" of the Greeks and Romans—is hospitable to aestheticism; whether it is, in other words, literary style that is paramount in Nietzsche's mind.

If one turns to the portions of A, 59 that Nehamas does not quote, it seems that it is not. For the aspects of the "grand style" of the ancient world that Nietzsche lauds are, e.g., its "sense for facts" and its "free eye before reality." Nietzsche argues that precisely what distinguished the Greeks and Romans was their capacity to confront *reality*, and to do so by virtue of their "scientific methods." This virtue would seem to be the natural antipode to both (i) a literary style; and (ii) the practice of interpreting "reality" on the model of literary works.¹³

(2) In Chapter 2, Nehamas asserts that: "Nietzsche often construes the world as a text of which our various practices and modes of life are interpretations (see for example BGE, 22, 230)" (62).¹³

BGE, 22 is the famous passage contrasting the physicist's interpretation of the world with Nietzsche's own interpretation of the world as will to power, and which concludes with Nietzsche remarking with respect to his own view: "Supposing that this also is only interpretation—and you will be eager enough to make this objection?—well, so much the better."¹⁴

¹³ It might be objected that in A, 59, Nietzsche also has in mind "the incomparable art of reading well" and thus is, in fact, talking about literary interpretation here. That point may be well taken: but note that what is in play here is plainly the typical nineteenth-century philologist's conception of interpretation—which is not (as discussed earlier) the aestheticist conception.

¹³ For discussion of BGE, 230, see section 2 above.

¹⁴ It is worth noting (as Nehamas does not) that in BGE, 22, Nietzsche calls the physicist's interpretation of the world a "perversion of meaning," involving a "bad mode of interpretation"

The issue, of course, is what we should conclude from this remark. As noted above, interpretivism does *not* collapse into aestheticism. That Nietzsche calls the will to power an “interpretation” is certainly not on its face sufficient to sustain the aestheticist claim, e.g., that there is an appropriate literary analogue for Nietzsche’s conception of will to power. Nietzsche does “interpret” the world—but not as though it had the features of a literary text. Rather, he interprets it as a world with certain *natural* characteristics heretofore poorly grasped—as the surrounding discussion of will to power demonstrates.

For example, in the following section, BGE, 23, Nietzsche suggests that in order to restore psychology as the “queen of the sciences” one must “understand it as . . . *the doctrine of the development of the will to power.*” And in BGE, 13, Nietzsche challenges the physiological claim that “self-preservation . . . [is] the cardinal instinct of an organic being”; to the contrary, Nietzsche asserts that “life is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results.*” It is not clear what literary analogue would illuminate Nietzsche’s claim in these passages that psychology and physiology—as putatively naturalistic sciences—would do better to adopt the will to power hypothesis. In order for these sciences to do more successfully what they try to do—interpret nature *qua* nature—Nietzsche simply proposes they employ a better description of the relevant phenomena, i.e., his notion of will to power.

(3) In Chapter 3, in his most explicit attempt to offer a textual defense of aestheticism, Nehamas writes that: “Nietzsche’s model for the world, for objects, and for people turns out to be the literary text and its components; his model for our relation to the world turns out to be interpretation. It is a model we find explicitly in his writing: ‘Around the hero everything turns into a tragedy; around the demi-god, into a satyr-play; and around God—what? perhaps into “world”?’ (BGE, 150). Nietzsche’s model is startling and paradoxical. And it is nowhere more so than in his writing of ‘the world as a work of art that gives birth to itself’ (WP, 796; cf. 1066)” (90–91). BGE, 150, which Nehamas quotes in its brief entirety, appears in the “Epigrams and Interludes” section of *Beyond Good and Evil*; thus by itself it would hardly constitute sufficient textual support to buttress aestheticism as “the single thread” running through all of Nietzsche’s works.

It is also far from clear that the moral to draw from this aphorism is that Nietzsche believes we should interpret the world as if it were a literary text. If we pursue the suggested analogy of the aphorism, we should say that just as the “hero” and the “demi-god” are the fictional central figures in their respective literary genres, so too God has been the (fictional) central figure in one conception of the “world”—a conception, of course, that Nietzsche repeatedly attacks. Given that, it is not surprising that the “world” in which God figures should be viewed as yet another literary genre, precisely because its view of the world is unreal: as Nietzsche says of Christianity, it lacks “even a single point of contact with reality” (A, 15).

In short, the analogy between the “world” and other literary genres turns on the

and “bad ‘philology’”; he refers to his own preferred view—the world as will to power—as an “opposite . . . mode of interpretation”—presumably meaning it is a “good” interpretation involving “good” philology. For further discussion, see my “Perspectivism.”

issue: In what conception of the "world" is God the central figure (as the hero and the demi-god are central to their respective literary genres)? The answer, of course, is the religious conception of the world. And given what Nietzsche thinks of that (e.g., *A, passim*), it is not surprising that he should treat that conception itself as another literary genre: i.e., as "mere" fiction.

(4) WP, 796 reads in its entirety as follows:

The work of art where it appears without an artist, e.g., as body, as organization (Prussian officer corps, Jesuit order). To what extent the artist is only a preliminary stage.

The world as a work of art that gives birth to itself—

This *may* be the strongest textual support Nehamas invokes on behalf of aestheticism. The passage invites us to think of several entities—the Prussian officer corps, the Jesuit order, and the world—as works of art (though not, however, as works of literature). But the passage does not tell us precisely what this entails—in fact, it is perhaps fair to say that the ultimate point of this passage is bafflingly obscure. Only by quoting the last line out of context can Nehamas imply that it constitutes "explicit" support for aestheticism.

Let me offer, in any event, one plausible reading of this passage.¹⁵ Its general concern is with creative works that occur without a creative *agent*: e.g., a work of art "without an artist." The Prussian officer corps and the Jesuit order are held to be instances of a similar phenomenon: both are institutions that are, in obvious ways, self-maintaining and self-elaborating, yet there is no identifiable locus of agency within these institutions from which this "self-creation" issues—e.g., we cannot say it is this one officer or this one Jesuit who is the casual agency behind the sustenance and development of the organization as a whole.

Nietzsche's provocative suggestion, then, is that the world as a whole is like these organizations in its capacity to maintain itself and develop without there being any identifiable underlying agency at work. The world too, then, is like a "work of art" without an "artist," a creative work without a creator.

Interestingly, in the next section, WP, 797, Nietzsche observes that: "The phenomenon 'artist' is still the most transparent:—to see through it to the basic instincts of power, nature, etc.!" Taking the two passages together, then, the suggestion might be this: The work of art without an artist is possible precisely because the "artist" himself is merely a cover for "the basic instincts of power, nature"; it is these natural instincts in turn that are genuinely creative, but they do not add up to an autonomous, creative agent. So, too, the world then should be understood as sustaining itself and developing through the operation of these natural instincts, instincts that make a creative agent unnecessary.

I do not want to claim that this sketchy interpretation exhausts the meaning of these difficult passages; but it should suggest both (i) that their concern is with the place of creative agency in the world—and it is in this specific respect that the world is

¹⁵ A reading that owes much to perceptive comments by David Hills.

like the authorless work of art—not with aestheticism; and (ii) that they might lend themselves to a more naturalistic construal.

(5) If we turn to WP, 1066, as Nehamas suggests we do for clarification of WP, 796, then we are led even farther away from aestheticism. In WP, 1066, Nietzsche rejects mechanism, and claims instead that “the world may be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force and as a certain definite number of centers of force” which “in the great dice game of existence . . . must pass through a calculable number of combinations”; from this he derives his widely (and rightly) criticized cosmological interpretation of eternal recurrence.¹⁶

Problems with the cosmological version of eternal recurrence aside, the basic thrust of this passage is simply to proffer an alternative theory of the constitution of the world, since “the mechanistic theory stands *refuted*” (emphasis added); this passage does not seem to lend any support to the view that the world is a “work of art.” Rather, Nietzsche claims that: (a) the mechanistic conception of the world is false; and (b) his alternative cosmology is simply a better account of the world-order.¹⁷

(6) In the final chapter of his book, Nehamas writes that: “To be beyond good and evil is to combine all of one’s features and qualities, whatever their traditional moral value, into a controlled and coherent whole. Nietzsche’s conception is *as always* [emphasis added] modeled on his view of literature and the arts. He is so taken by this model that he even turns historical figures into literary characters so that he can attribute to them the unity that he finds essential to greatness.¹⁸ And he is perfectly aware of this dependence: ‘The phenomenon “artist” is the most transparent:—to see through it to the basic instincts of power, nature, etc.! Also those of religion and morality!’ (WP, 797). ‘An anti-metaphysical view of the world—yes, but an artistic one’ (WP, 1048)” (227). These two passages are invoked to support the proposition that Nietzsche’s model for his notion of “beyond good and evil” and the greatness of certain historical figures is the literary text: that he associates each of these claims with appropriate literary analogues.

But why then does Nehamas cite WP, 797? He appears to think that it illustrates Nietzsche’s understanding of the dependence of his treatment of these claims on the literary paradigm. Now if my reading in (4), above, was on target, then WP, 797 is simply irrelevant to Nehamas’s claim here—and Nehamas, surprisingly, quotes this obscure passage without even explaining how it supports his contention.

Worse, WP, 797 may actually argue against Nehamas’s aestheticism. For if the artist

¹⁶ See, e.g., Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), Chapter 7.

¹⁷ For useful discussion, see Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 1983), 169–86 and Chapter 4; Robert Nola, “Nietzsche’s Theory of Truth and Belief,” *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 47 (1987): 525–62.

¹⁸ Nehamas even suggests that in the case of Caesar, Nietzsche is really thinking of Shakespeare’s Caesar (227). This, however, is unlikely, as the following passage nicely illustrates, in which Nietzsche discusses “those enigmatic men predestined for victory and seduction, whose most beautiful expression is found in Alcibiades and Caesar (to whose company I should like to add that *first* European after my taste, the Hohenstaufen Frederick II), and among artists perhaps Leonardo da Vinci” (BGE 200). Given the company Caesar is placed in here, it seems likely that in each case Nietzsche means the real historical figure, not some literary artifact of that person.

is simply yet another ("transparent") manifestation of "the basic instincts of power, nature," then the art work itself must reflect (in some sense) these same instincts. If that is the case, then the "dependence-relation" really runs in the opposite direction: nature is not to be construed artistically; rather the work of art is to be understood naturalistically (as a product of "the basic instincts of power, nature"). Something vaguely like this appears, in fact, to have been Nietzsche's view in his later aesthetic treatises.¹⁹

(7) WP, 1048—which Nehamas quotes in its entirety—is also ambiguous because Nietzsche says nothing here about *what it means* to have an "artistic" view of the world. It could mean Nehamas's aestheticism, but this suggestion confronts two difficulties. First, WP, 1048 speaks only of an "artistic" view of the world, not a "literary" view; but Nehamas's aestheticism contends that it is *literature* in particular that informs Nietzsche's understanding of the world.²⁰ Second, in light of the prominent passages in the work Nietzsche intended to publish expressing a naturalistic methodological agenda (e.g., BGE, 230; A, 14) such scant evidence as an ambiguous one-line remark from the *Nachlass* hardly seems adequate support for aestheticism as the "single thread" running through Nietzsche's works.

There is, in any event, a better way of understanding WP, 1048: for what it could also mean is that one should *evaluate* the world aesthetically, that one should assess its value in broadly aesthetic terms. That reading would be compatible with two Nietzschean themes. First, it would fit Nietzsche's rejection of ordinary *moral* categories as evaluative terms (beyond good and evil, as he says, but *not* beyond good and bad [GM, I, 17]). And second, it is compatible with the appealing suggestion that what Nietzsche values about the "higher men" (who are thwarted by morality) is best described aesthetically: that we do, as Philippa Foot has noted, "find patterns of reaction to exceptional men that would allow us to see here a valuing rather similar to valuing on aesthetic grounds."²¹

In sum, then, the two "best" pieces of textual evidence for aestheticism that

¹⁹ For example, in *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, he declares: "My objections to the music of Wagner are physiological objections: why should I trouble to dress them up in aesthetic formulas? After all, aesthetics is nothing but a kind of applied physiology" ("Where I Offer Objections"; see also CW, Epilogue). Now the philosopher who believes (strange as it may seem) that aesthetics itself is "nothing but" a type of physiology is of course unlikely to think of assimilating the natural world to the literary one.

²⁰ There is, of course, an irony here; for as Steve Burton and Richard Schacht have both reminded me, Nietzsche is far more concerned with *music* than with *literature*.

²¹ See her "Nietzsche: The Revaluation of Values," in R. Solomon, ed., *Nietzsche: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 163. This sort of reading would also fit with the most famous slogan of BT: "existence and the world seem justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon" (24). Thus, the claim is *not* that the world is to be understood as though it shared the features of a work of art; rather it is to be *evaluated* in aesthetic (as opposed to moral) terms. That Nietzsche's real concern is to find an alternative, nonmoral mode of *evaluation* of "existence and the world" comes out most clearly in the "Attempt at a Self-Criticism" that he added to the edition of BT of 1886. To the extent that Nehamas's aestheticism also embraces this claim about aesthetic evaluation (as it sometimes does: e.g., 39), it finds ample textual support; but this is not the aspect of aestheticism that Nehamas emphasizes throughout his study.

Nehamas can find—WP, 796, 1048—are both extremely ambiguous one- and two-sentence aphorisms from the *Nachlass*. This is, at best, dubious authority.²² It would appear, then, that Nehamas has made aestheticism a central theme of his study without being able to locate a *single passage* in which Nietzsche clearly claims this philosophical device—understanding the world as if it were a literary text—as his own.²³

4.

A significant part of the interest and appeal of Nehamas's book is due, of course, to the extremely clever way in which he brings his aestheticist model to bear on various interpretive questions in Nietzsche. Discussing the different sorts of problems this approach presents is beyond the scope of this paper;²⁴ I should like to concentrate, instead, on one particular case, namely, how aestheticism affects Nehamas's reading of Nietzsche's so-called "positive ethics." Since there are already good reasons (as illustrated above) for wondering whether Nietzsche is an aestheticist at all, it may prove

²² Serious doubts about the canonical status of the *Nachlass* have been raised in Bernd Magnus, "The Use and Abuse of *The Will to Power*," in R. Solomon and K. Higgins, eds., *Reading Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). These doubts warrant, in my view, the following interpretive scruple: no view should be attributed to Nietzsche for which the *only* support is in the *Nachlass*. In this light—and ignoring the ambiguity of the passages themselves—Nehamas's reliance on two aphorisms from WP to buttress aestheticism is particularly unpersuasive. (For a different view, however, of the status of the *Nachlass*, see Richard Schacht, "Nietzsche as Colleague," *International Studies in Philosophy* 22/2 [1990]: 59–66.)

²³ I can imagine a final objection on behalf of Nehamas as follows: some of the criticism of aestheticism has depended on citing passages in which Nietzsche invoked science as a paradigm of inquiry. But science on Nietzsche's view (so the objection runs) is itself supposed to be construed on the model of the interpretation of literary texts; therefore, the quoted passages are of a piece with aestheticism.

The problems with this objection are twofold: (i) as noted before, interpretivism, even applied to science, is not enough to support aestheticism; science may be interpretive, but, at its best, it interprets a natural world with particular natural features—not a world that really shares the features of a literary text; (ii) it would strain the reading of the passages at issues—with their contrast of scientific methods with nonscientific ones, their prominent employment of the language of "truth" and "reality"—to suggest that science is really of a piece with literary interpretation *in the aestheticist sense*; to the contrary, these passages seem to depend precisely on the *contrast* between scientific methodologies and standards with nonscientific ones.

Note, too, that: (i) the passages at issue are not from Nietzsche's putatively "positivist" phase (*The Gay Science*); they are from later works like *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Antichrist*; and (ii) Nietzsche is, of course, critical of science, but his criticisms are confined (as noted earlier) largely to two closely related factors: (a) the moral prejudices that infect scientific theories; and (b) what he takes to be bad scientific cosmology (i.e., mechanism). Throughout his career, Nietzsche praises numerous scientific virtues; and he gets considerable mileage himself from the "naturalistic" conception of man explored by the most culturally influential science of his time, physiology.

Consider, finally, this: if the subject matter of the "putatively" naturalistic sciences was really analogous to a literary text what could it mean to construe art naturalistically, as Nietzsche does? If nature is of a piece with art and texts, why would Nietzsche even suggest construing art naturalistically? What would the "reduction" of one to the other amount to if they were essentially alike? These paradoxes are avoided if we refrain from saddling Nietzsche with aestheticism.

²⁴ For some relevant discussion, see my "Perspectivism," as well as two papers I am now preparing for publication: "Beyond Good and Evil" and "Morality in the Pejorative Sense."

even more persuasive to find that as applied to particular views of Nietzsche's, aestheticism in fact produces idiosyncratic results.

Issues related to Nietzsche's positive views are treated throughout Part II of Nehamas's book, which is concerned quite generally with "The Self." Although a number of the claims here strike me as questionable,²⁵ I will confine my attention to what I take to be Nehamas's two central interpretive contentions:

- (i) that the ideal person for Nietzsche is like the ideal literary character: "coherent"; and
- (ii) that Nietzsche neither prescribes nor describes the ideal person: rather he *exemplifies* such a person and life through his own writings.

²⁵ Here are just two examples, which warrant at least some brief comment:

(1) Nehamas claims that while the self on Nietzsche's view involves a "paradoxical interplay between creation and discovery" (168), it is ultimately the case that "the self, even if it is to be at some point discovered, must *first* be created" (174, emphasis added). Yet Nehamas defends this claim with a quotation that is chopped at a rather misleading point: "The people who 'want to become those they are' are precisely 'human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who *create themselves*' (GS, 335)" (174, Nehamas's italics). GS, 335 continues, however, as follows: "To that end [of creating ourselves] we must become the best learners and *discoverers* of everything that is *lawful and necessary* [emphases added] in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be able to be *creators* in this sense. . . ." This suggests, then, that to be a creator "in this sense" is different than being a creator in Nehamas's sense. "Creation" for Nietzsche is explicitly dependent on *discovering first* what is "lawful and necessary": that is, discovering (as the preceding parts of GS, 335 suggest) the lawful mechanisms underlying and determining our actions, including, presumably, our "self-creating" actions. The puzzle this presents, of course, is in what sense such "lawful" actions could constitute self-creation? And it is this puzzle that is obscured by the way Nehamas has presented the issue. (A similar puzzle is presented by Nietzsche's account of "self-mastery" in D, 109; I try to resolve them both in a paper I am now writing on "The Paradox of Fatalism and Self-Creation in Nietzsche.")

(2) The alternative to Nehamas's view, as he is well aware, is to see Nietzsche as thinking of the self as essentially fixed by particular natural and largely immutable properties. As one recent commentator has aptly put it: "Nietzsche believed the individual to be . . . the bearer of innate drives and valuations, that can be neither created nor destroyed. At best these drives may be reordered, rearranged, and coordinated, stimulated or subordinated." As a result: "The self is not so much created as unfolded." Leslie Paul Thiele, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of the Soul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 207, 215. Now Nehamas tries to resist this sort of view by arguing, in part, that such a reading is incompatible with Nietzsche's "general denial of the idea of a reality that underlies appearance" (173). But this sort of response rests on a confusion. Nietzsche's rejection of the appearance-reality distinction is a rejection of the *metaphysical* distinction between the "merely" sensible realm and a suprasensible reality (as drawn, e.g., by Kant; see TI, "How the True World Finally Became a Fable"); it is certainly *not* a rejection of the difference between superficial phenomena (like consciousness) and underlying constitutive phenomena (like the "drives" or the "body"; e.g., Z, "On the Despisers of the Body"; EH, II, 9)—where the latter are in principal knowable (and not metaphysically off-limits, like the thing-in-itself). Nehamas himself cites the passage from Z (251 n. 6), but mischaracterizes Nietzsche's view there as being that those who "despise" the body do so because of "the belief that they do have a stable self." Worries about a stable self, however, are Nehamas's, not Nietzsche's; for Nietzsche says simply that the mistake of those who despise the body is not to realize that "behind [sense and spirit] still lies the self," i.e. the "body."

The connection of the first of these two claims with aestheticism should be apparent; but what of the second? Nehamas's idea, I take it, is that not only does Nietzsche look to the notion of a "literary character" as a model for his conception of the ideal life, but that he also illustrates such an ideal life by "creat[ing] a[n ideal] character out of himself" (233). The literary character, then, on Nehamas's account, has proved not only to be Nietzsche's paradigm for the ideal person, but to be what Nietzsche himself *becomes* in order to offer this ideal life as a model for his readers.

Nehamas's proposal here is certainly ingenious; but it is, I think, quite doubtful that there are any *textual* grounds for thinking these aestheticist views are Nietzsche's. I shall try to illustrate these doubts in what follows.

(A) According to Nehamas, Nietzsche "assimilates the ideal person to an ideal literary character and the ideal life to an ideal story" (165). This is because ideal literary characters have "coherence which Nietzsche *insists* is essential for people as well" (166, emphasis added). Surprisingly, Nehamas cites no text in support of either of these claims. (Where, one wonders, does Nietzsche "insist" any of this?) One passage that might seem related is GS, 290—the famous passage on "giving style" to one's character—but even there Nietzsche does not suggest that "style" is either: (a) primarily a "literary" matter (one gives style centrally "through long practice and daily work at it," i.e., through living a certain way); or (b) that it consists simply in "coherence." (Even in the literary context, of course, there is surely more to style than coherence!) Nehamas, then, has proffered no textual grounds for the strong claim that Nietzsche "insists" that "coherence . . . is essential for people";²⁶ nor any for the claim that Nietzsche models his ideal person on the ideal (i.e., "coherent") literary character.

(B) According to Nehamas, "Nietzsche's texts . . . do not describe . . . his ideal character" (232).²⁷ Yet it seems, to the contrary, that Nietzsche repeatedly describes his ideal character—and even says that he is doing so; for example, he writes:

²⁶ It is clear in the context of Nehamas's discussion what motivates this emphasis on coherence; for what Nehamas is really worried about is that "someone might achieve Nietzsche's ideal life and still be nothing short of repugnant" (167). The aestheticist model here saves Nehamas's Nietzsche from simply being the advocate of the "morally repulsive" (167), for "a literary character . . . may be a perfect character but (represent) a dreadful person"; but if we assume that Nietzsche "looks at people as if they were literary characters," then "we may be able to explain why he is so willing . . . to leave the content of his ideal life unspecified" (166). Again, there seem to be no textual grounds for attributing this view to Nietzsche; and, in any event, one might wonder whether a worry about "moral repugnance" could be a Nietzschean worry. Although Nehamas is hardly the worst offender on this score, it is nonetheless troubling to see that moral indignation and judgment sometimes intrude into and distort his reading of Nietzsche's texts (e.g., 75, 206, 215). One suspects that Nietzsche himself would have expected as much.

²⁷ I agree with Nehamas that Nietzsche does not offer prescriptions in any familiar sense (though see Richard Schacht's perceptive comments on this point in his *Nietzsche*, 475). I do not agree, though, that Nietzsche's positive views are "banal" (see 221–22); and I note that Nehamas illustrates this arrogant assertion not with any quotes from Nietzsche but rather with a quote in which Arthur Danto gives an uncharitable description of Nietzsche's view. It seems to me, however, that Nietzsche's actual descriptions of the types he admires and holds up as ideals are quite evocative and compelling.

What is it, fundamentally, that allows us to recognize *who has turned out well*? That a well-turned-out person pleases our senses, that he is carved from wood that is hard, delicate, and at the same time that smells good. He has a taste only for what is good for him; his pleasure, his delight cease where the measure of what is good for him is transgressed. He guesses what remedies avail against what is harmful; he exploits bad accidents to his advantage; what does not kill him makes him stronger. Instinctively, he collects from everything he sees, hears, lives through, *his sum*: he is a principle of selection, he discards much. He is always in his own company, whether he associates with books, human beings, or landscapes: he honors by *choosing*, by *admitting*, by *trusting*. He reacts slowly to all kinds of stimuli, with that slowness which long caution and delicate pride have bred in him: he examines the stimulus that approaches him, he is far from meeting it halfway. He believes neither in "misfortune" nor in "guilt": he comes to terms with himself, with others; he knows how to *forget*—he is strong enough; hence everything *must* turn out for his best.

Well then, I am the *opposite* of a decadent, for I have just described myself. (EH, II, 2)

Note that here Nietzsche says explicitly (and contrary to Nehamas's contention) that he has just "*described*" a well-turned-out person (an "ideal" person)—namely, himself. His work is full of comparably evocative descriptions²⁸—making Nehamas's denial of their existence rather startling.

(C) Since Nietzsche, on Nehamas's account, neither prescribes nor describes his ideal person, how then *does* he convey his positive views to his readers? Nehamas proposes the following answer: Nietzsche simply "produce[s] a perfect instance" of his ideal character (230), *namely, Nietzsche himself*, "the character" that all his books "exemplify" and "constitute" (232–33): "Nietzsche created a[n] ideal] character out of himself" (233). Again, however, Nehamas points to no text which would suggest that this is, in fact, how Nietzsche conceived his positive project. Moreover, this proposal depends on a problematic reading of Nietzsche's final work, his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*.

According to Nehamas, the way Nietzsche finally makes himself into this ideal character is, "after having written all these other books," he writes "*Ecce Homo* . . . this self-referential book in which Nietzsche can be said with equal justice to invent or to discover himself, and in which the character who speaks to us is the author who has created him and who is in turn a character created by or implicit in all the books that were written by the author who is writing this one" (196). Let me suggest two grounds for skepticism about this interpretive proposal. First, it fails to take into account the central theme of *Ecce Homo*, namely, that Nietzsche attributes his being an "ideal" or "well-turned-out" person to his being an essentially healthy organism (and *not* to his having simply written in such a way as to exemplify an "ideal" person). As Nietzsche puts it most simply: "I took myself in hand, I made myself healthy again: the condition for this—every physiologist would admit that—is *that one be healthy at bottom*" (EH, I, 2).²⁹ Similarly, he begins his autobiography by saying: "The good fortune of my exis-

²⁸ See, e.g., D, 201; GS, 55; BGE, 287; WP, 943.

²⁹ Note that this passage is then followed by the description of a well-turned-out person, quoted above in the text.

tence . . . lies in its fatality" (EH, I, 1); and then continues by explaining (in part) that: "My blood moves slowly. Nobody has every discovered any fever in me. . . . There is altogether no sign of any local degeneration; no organically conditioned stomach complaint, however profound the weakness of my gastric system may be as a consequence of over-all exhaustion" (EH, I, 1). For Nietzsche, then, his being a "well-turned-out" person is importantly the product of "natural" facts and not, it seems, of a literary endeavor.³⁰

But secondly, Nehamas's proposal that Nietzsche finally constitutes himself as an ideal "character" by writing *Ecce Homo* has a quite bizarre result. For since Nietzsche's having a positive view at all depends on his having in fact completed all his works through *Ecce Homo* (so that he was properly exemplified in them), it would seem then that for Nietzsche to have had a positive view at the start of his career—or at *any point prior* to *Ecce Homo*—would require that he have *anticipated* writing the series of books culminating with *Ecce Homo* that he actually wrote!³¹ Since: (a) this supposition is surely implausible; and (b) Nehamas has produced no textual reasons for construing Nietzsche as he suggests; it seems likely that Nehamas's cleverly articulated aestheticist proposal does not, in fact, capture *Nietzsche's* view.³²

Aestheticism, then, has run up against two difficulties: on the one hand, there appears to be no text in which Nietzsche embraces it; and on the other hand, in at least one case of applying aestheticism, we have seen that the results are hardly promising. This suggests, perhaps, that Nehamas would have done well to heed this early admoni-

³⁰ Throughout EH, Nietzsche is obviously having a bit of fun with these themes as well. Nonetheless, it is a mistake to write off—as, e.g., Nehamas (see 120) and Paul De Man (*Allegories of Reading* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979], 119) do—Nietzsche's interest in physiological matters. Nietzsche himself remarks on the "blunder" that he "became a philologist—why not at least a physician or something else that opens one's eyes?" (EH, II, 2). And, of course, the language of physiology is simply omnipresent in Nietzsche's mature work. Here, again, a more historically sensitive reading of Nietzsche would take into account the profound influence on German intellectual life in general (and Nietzsche in particular) of physiology in the late nineteenth century. See, again Hans Sluga, *Frege*, Chapter 1.

³¹ Even if we construe Nehamas's claim less strongly, so that it says only that Nietzsche constitutes himself as an ideal character through some number of his books (if not all of them right through EH), we still confront the problem that this view must suppose that Nietzsche *anticipated* writing at least some number of books in order to properly constitute himself as a literary character. What evidence, one wonders, is there that Nietzsche thought anything like this?

³² This, of course, also suggests that Nehamas's now well-known suggestion that the narrator of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*—"who creates himself, out of everything that has happened to him, in his own writing" (188)—is the right model for Nietzsche's conception of self-creation, is untenable. In fact, if we look at what Nietzsche says about Goethe—who, as Nehamas notes, was Nietzsche's model of someone who created himself (188)—it would seem that the Proust analogy gets things backwards. For on Nietzsche's account, Goethe's self-creation appears to have involved *living a certain way*, rather than creating himself through *writing*. And it was this "practical" self-creation that was a precondition of his great artistic achievement—and not (as in the case of Proust's narrator) a product of it (see TI, IX, 49–50). As Daniel Conway has put it: "Nietzsche urges us to admire Goethe *not* (primarily) for his creation of Werther and Faust, but for his *self-creation*, of which all else is derivative." "Overcoming the *Übermensch*: Nietzsche's Revaluation of Values," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 20 (1989): 218.

tion of Nietzsche's: "Art proceeds from man's natural *ignorance* about his interior (in body and character): it is not for physicists and philosophers" (HAH, 160).

5.

I have concentrated in this essay only on a negative thesis: namely, that there are reasons to doubt whether Nehamas has made an adequate case for the view that Nietzsche is an aestheticist in his sense. In doing this, I have obviously had to ignore much of what makes *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* an interesting and admirable book. There are, for example, many really fine discussions of particular topics—for example, Nietzsche's conception of genealogy (109–13), the ascetic priest (122), and the eternal recurrence (151–57)—that have no equal anywhere in the voluminous literature on Nietzsche. Yet the skepticism I have advocated about whether aestheticism is, in fact, a genuine Nietzschean theme leads me to suspect the following: that further examination of the sort carried out here will show that other important portions of this always intelligent but sometimes idiosyncratic book are not really about Nietzsche.⁵⁵

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