

DIONYSOS

NIETZSCHE CONTRA NIETZSCHE

an essay in lyrical philosophy



By JACK LINDSAY

*With reproductions from works by Peter-Paul Rubens
and Norman Lindsay, Titian and Turner, Francesco
Goya and William Blake and the Hellenes*

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NIETZSCHE AND RELIGIOUSNESS

THE FEW INTELLIGENT MEN WHO HAVE WRITTEN ON NIETZSCHE* HAVE all been struck by the strange schisms in his mind. They have seen that at no point was he satisfied to exchange theological dogma for rationalistic complacency. It is quite obvious, indeed, that he preferred a violent Christian to a mild agnostic; for the former, by stimulating one's anger, enriched also one's love, while the latter was nothing at all. Though Nietzsche's desire stormed heights beyond all horizons of the Christian, yet since all forces interlock in the concrete universal the Christian's conviction of reality could become, in the transvaluations of contemptuous consciousness, Nietzsche's conviction. Life exists, while it forces Paul to hate it. But left to the detecting ear-trumpets of Herbert Spencer, the heart would soon cease to beat.

If then by a religious conviction one defines any feeling of reality—for I do not admit the scientific or metaphysical approach to be able to establish contact with substance—Nietzsche's philosophy is undoubtedly primarily religious. But one must be careful how one uses such a befouled term.

If we are able, at this date, to conceive religion as only secondarily ethical, then I admit the definition. Otherwise not. There were moral sanctions involved by the Hellenic religion, I admit—but, despite the efforts of anthropologists to enthrone Themis and to ferret out a social genesis for orgiastic ceremony, I fail to see in the worship of Apollo, Dionysos, Aphrodite or Demeter, any ethical or social importance whatever. And I consider these to be the emotional centres of Hellenic adoration. It was their worship which provoked those individual ecstasies and loves that make the distinction between religion itself and mere religious sanctions.†

The Hellene, it seems to me, while finding indeed many moral implications in the divine ordinations, yet saw them pre-eminently

* Janko Lavrin (*Nietzsche and Modern Consciousness*) is typical.

† That there are more strands than this in the Orphic and Pythagorean rites I am aware, but my analysis remains broadly true of the Hellene.

as manifestations of beautiful and irrational energy. He could delight in the Dionysian travailing of earth with no thought of the christian's universe of moral uniformity.

That the symbology of the Mysteries afforded more discipline for the spirit than this wondering absorption of delight, I am aware, but only later, under the pressure of the conquering Eastern consciousness, did moral schemata of salvation assume prominence. The Hellene, as citizen, had his duties towards the Zeus of starry space and moral justice; but as *mystes* he touched a different world of responsibilities. Then the symbol of Immortality appeared, with its emblem of regeneration in fecundity and coition. The whole emphasis was on the ruthless, self-creative continuity of life, not on a First Cause, but on myself copulating. If a man could not become part of life, if he made of his will a canker by trivial selfishness or injustice, he must bear the banging-about the outraged tides would give him; but ultimately there is no more moral significance in his suffering than there is in the fact that the plane will jar the hand when forced against the grain of the wood. For his pain arises, primarily, because he has tied a knot in energy, not because he has transgressed law. I am aware I use a different idiom than would speak in his consciousness; but the fact would be the same. Take the Hellenic word for sin: *ἀμαρτία*: an error, a miss, a mistake, a failure to carry out the divine *Know Thyself*—not a disobeying of Sinai's bye-laws.

I see the Hellenic Mysteries as a worshipping of the generative principle which the simple soul did not seek to comprehend more than as something which fed him with blood and pleasure and food, and with which he had somehow to establish harmonious relations. What Plato saw in it all the *Symposion* is there to tell us.

In the sense, then, of the Mysteries, all great art is religious, all dynamic thought is religious, since it seeks to realise an actual harmony between individual desire and blind energy. All thought which is *not* religious, in this sense, is in the same category as time-tables and grocers' bills.

But the East, unable to sustain effort with its corollary of suffering, inverted this active religious principle and made out of it either a social code of good manners (Confucius) with consequent ancestor-worship—or varying forms of nihilism in which, instead of seeking a

vital concord between energy and form, the individual found a method of harmonious self-dispersal. That is, he did not merely tie irrational knots in the vast stream of irrationality, but essayed to sink back into an abstract equipoise at the centre: to disintegrate the dynamic dualism which is the principle of all energy.

Christianity arrived between these two systems and ruined both. It disturbed the patient ebb of the suffering feminine soul of the East, while it blasted the European balance on the antithetical symbols of Love.

Where the East saw Life as suffering seeking to escape itself, and the Hellene saw Life as energy seeking to know itself, the christian introduced the abstraction of the Buddhist into the dynamic world of the Hellene, and the result was Sin.

The result was centuries of terror.

Through the Renaissance it was possible for the creator to accept, or rather dismiss, the reigning religion without question, because he could proceed with his expression, his worshipping of reality, unimpeded by it. Rubens and Titian did not find the Roman Catholic Church sap their effort, simply because they were interested only in the immediate images of love. But now that their definition of love has forced *awareness* of love upon us, we find it impossible to accept that compromise.

One sees the growing tide of rebellion in the second phase of the Renaissance. It begins with Blake (who was pure antichrist despite his unfortunate naïve use of christian symbols in his attack on *actual* christianity) and Voltaire, the revolting humanism of intellectual laughter. In Keats, in Byron, in Heine, we see it widening. Nietzsche settled it once for all.

But this only means that the problem of religion now arrives more insistently than ever. With the passing of christian faith that provided an intellectual scaffolding for men like Rubens and Titian, behind which they could unconcernedly build their palaces, we must find a return to the Eleusinian Mysteries, deepened and enriched, but nevertheless crying the same acceptance of life and love, the same Faith.* Otherwise we are damned to a smug hell of rationalism,

* It is probable that the extreme suffering which repeatedly burst on Shakespeare was the result of his loss of automatic faith (owing to Marlowe's influence, and his own mind's sceptical workings)—for, with the material at his disposal, he could not possibly have

which, for all its claims to pure intellect, must end by seeing intellect overwhelmed by the Eastern consciousness, with its terror of pain and lust for Nirvana—for the pure intellect, by severing the umbilical cord of the dualistic harmony which is energy, must bring upon itself the nemesis of its abstraction.

The people's effort to find some faith in the continuity of life by means of spiritualism and theosophy is but the crude expression of this deep need now besetting all mind. We must find a religion of some kind; and it remains with us whether we become free spirits, with anthems from *Zarathustra*, with *The Ninth Symphony* as our mass, *Rheingold* as our *Genesis*, *Siegfried* as our *New Testament*, *Tristan* and *Antony* as our sacraments, and the Beethoven chamber-music as our confessional—or be submerged in another and worse torrent of barbarism.

This is no appeal for an organised religion. The mass of inert man is too huge; and to try to set up some esoteric synagogue for the elect, quite apart from being ineffably ridiculous, is impracticable, since all such organisations must degenerate into a Rosicrucian secret society or a vapid theosophy.

Our religion, if we are to achieve it, must be a bond of love, which we express humanly within the radius of our personal experience as a sympathy for all life vitally expressing itself, but religiously in our love for all art or thought which acclaims the subtle energies of beauty's antithesis—which accepts, with delicate imageries of love, the ruthless lust of life.

arrived at any deeper intellectual conviction than *The readiness is all*. This is all he had to fall back on when the moments of immediate conviction of life's significant energy passed. He could merely trust to the deep tides of his passion to sweep, in their rhythmic ecstasy, all doubt and fear aside. Why *Antony and Cleopatra* is his greatest work is because, being so concretely based in love, it also achieves Faith. He believes not merely states that:

Eternity was in our lips and eyes,
Bliss in our brows bent; none of our parts so poor
But was a race of heaven.

And that:

The stroke of death is as a lover's pinch,
Which hurts, and is desired.

I think the world is one-tenth too tired, and nine-tenths too primitive, for this religion. It does not matter. When the cataclysm comes, we shall be safe. Nietzsche is our prophet, and while we walk the crests of space with Zarathustra the whole surface of earth can crack up into the burning slime it is, but our feet will not notice the tremor.

*This is the End, and so this Book is dead.
Am I sorry to see it fall
into inertia? It means nothing now.
I read it and I say:
What Voice is this speaking from the Dead,
so far away,
so humourlessly the plangent mockeries call—
Truth, here is Truth: a stone . . .
Still I must toil for my sour daily bread,
another Music willows in my head,
another Girl to kiss, and Drunkenness
blurs larger Moons across and a sharper Stress
dulling my brain . . . I look about and ask:
Where are the gods who made this book for Mask?
and all the fierce Hosts rising because I sow
the Dragon's Fangs in fields barren long ago?
Where are they now? I ask;
but I am still alone.*