Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)

Nietzsche was born in Röcken, the Prussian province of Saxony, on October 15th, 1844. His father died when Nietzsche was five years old, hence, his childhood was spent with his mother, sister and two maiden aunts. At fourteen the young Nietzsche was awarded a scholarship to enter the preparatory school, Schulpforta, with the intent of training for the clergy. He excelled in religious studies, German literature, and classical studies. He also began to suffer from migraine headaches, an ailment that would trouble him for most of his adult life. He graduated in 1864, and continued studies in theology and classical philology and the University of Bonn. However, he soon gave up theology and transferred to Leipzig, where he was introduced to the works of Kant, the composer Richard Wagner and Schopenhauer and his recent text, *The World as Will and Idea*.

Although Nietzsche served in the army in 1868 his appointment was cut short by illness. However, he was thought to be a brilliant student, and rather than return to the army, the University of Basel called him to the chair of classical philology at the age of 24, even though arrangements to award him a doctorate had to be made shortly thereafter. Then during the Franco-Prussian war, he served as a medical orderly for a brief period, returning this time to Basel in ill-health, and though he managed to teach there from 1869-79, he was again forced by his health to retire.

It was in Basel that Nietzsche became a close friend of Richard Wagner, the second part of *The Birth of Tragedy* is devoted to Wagner's music. With the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* in 1872 Nietzsche returned to Basel to lecture. Upon Nietzsche's rise to celebrity, he sought to bring his friend along, and together, they managed to convince the government to fund the construction of the Bayreuth theatre, built to feature Wagner's work. The theatre was completed in 1876, and Wagner's self-proclaimed masterpiece, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, was performed for the Emperor. Much to his despair, Nietzsche found that he hated the work, and began to question not only Wagner's work, but Prussian culture in general. His friendship with Wagner ended in 1878, at the time Nietzsche discovered the French Enlightenment. Tensions between the two rose as Wagner disapproved of the French and Nietzsche refused the cult of Wagnerian ideals in Bayreuth, particularly the anti-Semitism it propagated.

Nietzsche encountered more adversities in his life, the rejection of Lou Andreas-Salomé to his proposal of marriage, along with his ongoing resistance to Prussian citizenship (which he had given up in 1869), provoked a withdrawal of Nietzsche. He remained stateless for the rest of his life, preferring the life of a tourist-scholar and spending his time writing in boarding houses -the summers in Switzerland and the winters in Italy. During this time he published nine books, between 1872 and 1888, while preparing four others for publication.

In his first published book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geist der Musik* (*The Birth of Tragedy*), he diagnosed that human beings are subject to Dionysian instincts — unconscious desires, impulses, or overwhelmingly self-destructive tendencies. Nietzsche pointed out that the Greeks had opposed Apollonian principles of sobriety and rationale to such destructive drives. These became to major principles in his future work, the Dionysian and Apollonian, one of chaos, dream and intoxication, the other one of order and the lending of form. These Nietzsche associated with an aesthetic disposition in which life be viewed as a work of art. He demonstrated that the Greeks had theorized the relation of the two principles in which art is a willed illusion and is composed of both form-giving and intoxication, and thus, art offers one a vantage point of life. Therefore, life itself becomes recognizable as unknowable in terms of an ultimate truth, as proposed by an idealist metaphysics.

*Also Sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) was formally published first in three parts in 1883-1884 and 1892. Central in his thinking is the notion of the will to power, the eternal return and radical nihilism, which together negotiate pain, suffering and contradiction as expressions of existence and its actual tensions instead of objectionable phenomena. Nietzsche opposed ideas of the progress of the human species as theorized by Darwin, preferring instead the idea of an eternal recurrence with an accompanying positive power of heroic suffering. The ideal of 'man' for Nietzsche is to be overcome along with all idealism, as such concepts bear no correspondence to reality. Zarathustra is the figure of the 'higher' man, and his thought is poetic. This superman rejects faith and morality upon the assumption that either "God is dead," or that his role in human development ended shortly after Creation. Nietzsche believed that an ideal society should form its own morality outside of religious morality, suggesting even that the use of Judeo-Christian morality was often the cause of the avoidance of decisive actions or
the acceptance of our fundamental existence in the material world. The failure to live, take risks and decisive actions is a failure to realize actual human potential — for nothing exists beyond life.

His most influential work, *The Will to Power*, published posthumously in 1901, was based on a series of notes in his journals and contains his strongest oppositions to idealism. This anti-idealistic stance not only had an influence on thinkers such as Bataille, but continued to shape the thought of existentialists, post-modernists and post-structuralists well into the 20th century. The work is a continuation of key principles of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The will to power is foundational to his anti-idealistic stance; it is an affirmation of life, a vision of the world itself as a will to power. The implications are profound — all simplistic oppositions between subject and object, between will and apathy, being and nothingness are divisions *within the world as will to power itself*. There is nothing else besides, and identity itself is to be constructed in the plurality of forces for which there is no unity of reality behind appearance. Following Kant's thought on the necessary affirmation of values, Nietzsche saw the revaluation of values as the equivalent of making values within the play of forces of the will to power.

Near the end of his life, Nietzsche's productivity ended in January 1889, when he suffered a mental breakdown upon seeing a coachman cruelly whipping his horse -this drama had him sobbing with his arms around the beast's neck. He was housed in an asylum at first, then placed in the care of his family. During his illness he was mostly pleasant, engaging in conversation when he was more lucid. However, his health deteriorated, and in the final decade of his life he was generally dysfunctional, dying in 1900 in Weimar. His sister Elisabeth secured the rights to his literary works as yet unpublished, and edited them for publication, although sometimes in rather disjointed form. To further complicate matters, Elisabeth was married to a prominent member of the German anti-Semitic movement, which Nietzsche loathed; the supposed nature of his influence of Nazism served to make the interpretation of his texts difficult. He rejected biological racism and German nationalism, writing "every great crime against culture for the last four hundred years lies on their conscience." His ideas were first championed by the Danish critic, Georg Brandes, who lectured on Nietzsche in Copenhagen in 1888. Nietzsche's work has influenced among others Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, André Malraux, André Gide, Albert Camus, Rainer Maria Rilke, Stefan George, Sigmund Freud, and Jean Paul Sartre.