

A Rejected Prophet—Nietzsche Revisited

I HAVE been re-reading Nietzsche—not the whole of his collected works, but such books as I happen to possess. You may consider this an unprofitable occupation for one's idle hours at a time when one ought not to have any idle hours; but I think differently.

During the Four Years' War (I mean the 1914-1918 affair, the overture to the present symphony) everybody read about Nietzsche, and almost everybody who wrote at all wrote about him. He was suddenly discovered to be an immensely significant figure. Somebody spoke of "the Euro-Nietzschean War," because it was supposed that he was the inspirer of the German people, that it was his ideas which had poisoned their minds, and that it was for his conception of life that Germany was fighting. And so there gradually grew up in the popular mind a Nietzsche legend; and many people who had never read a line of his writing spoke of him familiarly as if they knew all about him.

What was this legendary Nietzsche like? Briefly, he was a German professor of something or other who died in a lunatic asylum, and who while he was still at large

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wrote a number of mad books. In these books he raved about a being whom he called the super-man. Of the super-man the best-known fact was that he was a "blonde beast." He was so superior to ordinary humanity that it was his right, and his duty, to trample on everybody who was not a super-man. He was the embodiment of the "will to be powerful," which is the supreme human motive. He was an entirely pitiless person, pity being a Christian virtue, and the Christian morality being only fit for slaves and weaklings. "One commandment give I unto you," he said, "says Nietzsche's mouthpiece, Zarathustra. In a word, when the Germans committed any particularly hateful atrocity, we believed they were doing as Nietzsche had taught them to do. They were behaving like Nietzschean super-men.

Re-reading Nietzsche today, I can see much that is rather loathsome in him, and much that is silly; but I can also see much that is wise, and some things that only a man of genius could have written. I can see that the legendary figure we used to write about was not, after all, very like the real man. I can see, moreover, that whatever else he was, he was a consummate master of words; and I find it impossible to believe that mastery of words was ever given to a stupid person. If this were the time and the place, I could set before you a number of aphorisms of his which

the place, I could set before you a number of aphorisms of his which could only have come from a poet-philosopher of a high order. But my present point is that we have misunderstood him if we have taken him as the apostle of modern German ideas. He was not that sort of person at all.

The truth is that Nietzsche had the greatest contempt for modern Germany, that is, for the new spirit which he saw growing up in the Fatherland after the Franco-Prussian war. That contempt deepened into hatred; and that hatred became so intense, so overpowering, that his mind never very well balanced, gave way. The new Germany drove him mad.

When he was young, he was an ardent follower of Schopenhauer, and of Wagner, who turned Schopenhauer's philosophy into music. But when he saw clearly what that philosophy implied, he quarrelled with Wagner first and later wrote a vigorous attack on Schopenhauer.

I am afraid it is not possible to put the facts in a nutshell without distorting them; but I must try. At the core of Schopenhauer's philosophy is a denial of the value of individuality. The individual, the separate human being, is nothing; he is merely a puppet by means of which Nature preserves the species and hands on the Ideas which the Universe, with infinite labor, has brought into being. Our duty is to foster a state of mind in which all sense of individuality is lost. The ideal man, the saint, is he who loses himself in the totality of things, and who relentlessly stifles all the impulses that go to the making of the individual life. "Suppress the Ego," might have been this philosopher's slogan. (Wagner's "Parsifal" was, according to Nietzsche, merely Schopenhauer's doctrine of the saint in dramatic form.)

All this ran clean counter to everything that was deepest in Nietzsche's mind. Not "Suppress the Ego," but "Assert the Ego," was his supreme commandment. All growth and progress of the race had been due, and could alone be due, to individuals. "Dare to be a Daniel, dare to stand alone," says the old hymn—perhaps the only hymn that Nietzsche would have applauded.

Rightly or wrongly he connected with the popularity of Schopenhauer's philosophy the new spirit which he saw emerging among his fellow-countrymen; and he gnashed his teeth at it. He saw, and denounced, a growing servility, docility, imitativeness, uniformity of character, the gradual weakening of a sense of individual responsibility, a failure of courage to stand on one's own feet and defy the crowd for the sake of what one saw to be true. He drew attention to the fact that the period was becoming more and more sterile in great men. The individual lost himself in the mass, did what he was told, shed all

individual lost himself in the mass, did what he was told, shed all sense of personal responsibility, and mistook this irresponsibility for freedom.

Looking for the causes of the decay of the national character, he found the chief cause in the education system. No one dared stand up against a powerful public opinion and the accepted standards of value; those standards of value were established by the education system, which taught that the individual was nothing and the State everything, and which produced men serviceable to the State but, in themselves, mere machines.

This was, to Nietzsche, utterly bad and hateful. Anything that thrust the individual into a secondary position and that prevented him from growing to his full stature as a man; anything that trained the individual to be an instrument, and that cared for his welfare only in so far as it was necessary to make him an efficient instrument was hostile to true education and must, in the end, be hostile to the State itself.

Against all this he preached a different standard of value, and a very different system of education, a system which would develop a sense of individual initiative, a sense of responsibility for one's own life, a readiness to stand alone. "This was what he meant by his frequent command to 'live dangerously'." A system which meant the dominance of the State and the maiming of the individual would, in the end, produce a hateful country. His prophecy has come true.

The aim of political wisdom is to discover a just balance between the claims of the individual and the claims of the society in which the individual has to play his part. Suppress the claims of society, and you get a nation of egotists, of self-seekers, which in the hour of testing will inevitably go down before a nation whose members are ready to give everything, including their lives, for their country. On the other hand, suppress the claims of the individual and you get the steady deterioration of the national character.

Nietzsche is the fiery prophet of individualism, and it is obvious that his teaching is of no particular use to people of the British stock. To preach individualism to people like us is to bring coals to Newcastle; we have too much of it in our blood. He over-emphasised the virtues on which we have long placed too much emphasis.

On the other hand, he was the prophet needed by Germany. If the Germans had taken to heart his central doctrine—instead of concentrating as they did, on his insane glorification of ruthlessness and brutality—they might have become a less docile people, a little less ready to swallow whatever Hitler ordered them to swallow.

It may be replied that they would have thereby become a less efficient fighting machine; and that is need-

have thereby become a less efficient fighting machine; and that is probably true—in the short run, but not in the long run. In the long run, the greatness of a nation depends on the characters of the individuals composing it. Its strength, even as a fighting machine, comes in the end from the strength, intelligence, valor and self-reliance of the separate men and women in it.

Let us be just to this German teacher. Germany will go down, as he foresaw, because a false philosophy has poisoned the springs of the national character; a philosophy against which he thundered anathemas in vain.