BOOK SUMMARY

Five Prefaces to Five Unwritten Books

by Friedrich Nietzsche

Five short prefaces that open paths into Nietzsche’s early thinking.

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Key ideas

1. **The pathos of truth.** The philosopher's pride in possessing eternal truth is fragile, since knowledge alone may not be something humans can live by.
2. **Education as culture.** Real education calls for calm, patient readers and serious teachers, not quick reforms or new state regulations.
3. **The cost of culture.** In The Greek State Nietzsche argues, disturbingly, that high culture has rested on slavery, war and the violence of States.
4. **Homeric competition.** Greek excellence grew from the good Eris, a culture of rivalry that ostracism protected by preventing any single winner.
5. **Seeds of later work.** These short prefaces sketch ideas Nietzsche later developed in On Truth and Lies and the Untimely Meditations.

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CHAPTER 1

On the Pathos of Truth

At Christmas 1872 Nietzsche gave Cosima Wagner a handwritten gift: five short prefaces to books he had not written and, as it turned out, never would. They were not published in his lifetime. Each preface opens a large theme from his early years in Basel, and together they form a compact map of his thinking between The Birth of Tragedy and the Untimely Meditations. The first, On the Pathos of Truth, begins with a question about fame. Is the desire for fame only the sweetest morsel of our self-love, or does it point to something more serious?

Nietzsche's answer is that great individuals experience certain moments as so elevated that they demand to last forever. Such moments form a chain across the centuries, a mountain range of human greatness, and the great feel bound to everyone who has stood on those heights before them. Against this longing stands the dull resistance of ordinary life, which wants nothing to last and lives only in the present. The pursuit of fame, on this view, is a struggle to keep greatness alive against forgetting. Fame, understood this way, is less vanity than loyalty to the heights.

The philosopher is the most extreme case. Nietzsche takes Heraclitus as his example: a proud, solitary thinker who needed no audience, who felt that what he had seen would be true for all time, and who regarded the opinions of others with indifference. The philosopher's pathos is a pathos of truth, the conviction of possessing something eternal. Yet Nietzsche raises a disturbing possibility. What if the truth the philosopher seeks is not a comfort at all, but something human beings cannot bear, and what if illusion is necessary for life?

The preface ends with a fable that Nietzsche would reuse a few months later at the start of his essay On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense. In some remote corner of the universe, clever animals on a small star invented knowing; it was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of world history, and after nature drew a few breaths the star cooled and the animals had to die. The fable deflates the philosopher's pride in truth. Placed beside Nietzsche's praise of art in this period, it suggests that knowledge alone cannot justify life, a theme he had already pursued in The Birth of Tragedy.

CHAPTER 2

Thoughts on the Future of Our Educational Institutions

The second preface belongs to the lectures On the Future of Our Educational Institutions, which Nietzsche had given in Basel earlier in 1872 and was still hoping to turn into a book. It describes the reader he wants. Such a reader must be calm and read without haste; he must not keep interposing his own personality and his own idea of culture; and he must not expect, at the end, a set of new formulas or a reform plan for schools. Nietzsche promises no tables of rules, only a view from a height.

He addresses the few who still have time: people who have not been swept into the hurry of the age, who do not judge everything by the time it saves or wastes, and who go on thinking about a book long after they have put it down. Anyone who thinks the problem of education can be solved by a quick reform or a new state regulation, he warns, has misunderstood it. The trouble lies deeper, in the culture itself. Such readers, he says, read between the lines and reflect on what they have read for the pleasure of it, not in order to write a review or another book.

He also asks the reader to recognise the specific barbarism of the nineteenth century, and to be so highly educated that he can think little of his own education. The preface closes by summoning the lonely and contemplative people who suffer from the corruption of the German spirit, and presents the book as their herald. It is a short text, but it captures the tone of the lectures: impatient with institutions, hopeful about a small number of serious readers, and convinced that education is a question of culture rather than of administration.

Read alongside the lectures, the preface shows what Nietzsche thought his educational critique was for. It was not a policy proposal but a call to a certain kind of person, one who could resist the pressures of utility, speed and public opinion. That idea of a reader and a teacher who stand apart from their time would return, in a sharper form, in Schopenhauer as Educator two years later. It also helps explain why Nietzsche framed the lectures as an overheard conversation rather than a treatise: he wanted to draw readers into a way of thinking, not hand them conclusions.

CHAPTER 3

The Greek State

The third preface is the most provocative and the most disturbing to modern readers. Nietzsche argues that the Greeks did not need the comforting modern ideas of the dignity of man and the dignity of labour. To them, work was a disgrace, a necessity that people who had to labour for their bread could not escape. Modern societies, he claims, hide the same harsh reality behind flattering slogans, while the Greeks looked at it honestly. Here, as in much of his early work, Nietzsche presents the Greeks as more clear-sighted than the moderns about the hard conditions of life.

From this he draws his central and deliberately shocking thesis: slavery belongs to the essence of a culture. For a small number of people to be free to create art and thought, he argues, a large majority must be bound to toil in their service. Culture, on this view, rests on suffering that its beneficiaries do not share. Nietzsche presents this as a cruel truth rather than something to celebrate, and he warns that modern movements promising equality will either fail or destroy culture. Readers should take the argument as he states it, without softening it: it is an open defence of hierarchy and forced labour as conditions of high culture.

He then turns to the origins of the State. States, he argues, are born in violence and conquest, and the State is the iron clamp that forces society together and makes possible the kind of protected space in which culture can grow. War, in his account, is as necessary to the State as the slave is to society, and the military genius can stand alongside the artistic genius. He contrasts the Greek State, which served culture, with modern politics driven by money and by liberal optimism. He presents this not as an ideal but as what he takes to be the historical record.

The preface ends with Plato's Republic, which Nietzsche reads as a profound image of the State as the means of producing genius. His criticism is that Plato placed only the genius of wisdom and knowledge at the summit of his ideal state, and excluded the inspired artist. The essay's themes of hierarchy, war and the conditions of culture would remain central to Nietzsche's thought, and they are among the most controversial parts of his legacy. Nietzsche admired Plato's boldness while insisting, as he had in The Birth of Tragedy, on the supreme rank of art.

CHAPTER 4

The Relation of Schopenhauer's Philosophy to a German Culture

The fourth preface is the shortest. Writing a little more than a year after the German victory over France and the founding of the German Empire, Nietzsche attacks the self-satisfaction of German educated society. Military and political success, he suggests, has been mistaken for cultural achievement, and the comfortable, complacent educated German now believes he possesses a culture he has never earned. The danger, he implies, is that a people will confuse the power of its armies with the depth of its spirit and stop striving for culture altogether. The gap between political success and cultural quality would occupy him for years.

Against this mood he sets Schopenhauer, the philosopher who had shaped his early thought. Schopenhauer's seriousness about suffering, his intellectual independence and his refusal of easy optimism make him, for Nietzsche at this time, a teacher who could help Germans build a real culture rather than celebrate an imaginary one. Philosophy, on this view, is not an academic specialty but a force for educating a people. What Germany needed, in this view, was not more learning but a philosophy that could change how people live and what they value.

The preface is a sketch rather than an argument, and it is best read as a seed of later work. Its contempt for complacent German culture grows into the first Untimely Meditation, the attack on David Strauss of 1873, and its picture of Schopenhauer as a model of the independent thinker becomes the subject of Schopenhauer as Educator in 1874. By the late 1870s Nietzsche would break with Schopenhauer's pessimism, but the demand that philosophy shape a culture stayed with him. The preface is thus a small window onto a turning point.

CHAPTER 5

Homer’s Contest

The fifth and most often read preface begins by rejecting a comfortable division between human beings and nature. When we speak of humanity, Nietzsche says, we imagine that what makes us human separates us from nature. In fact the most humane qualities and the most terrible ones grow from the same root. The Greeks, the most humane people of antiquity, also show a streak of cruelty: Nietzsche recalls Achilles dragging Hector’s body behind his chariot and the pleasure in savage victory that runs through Greek history and myth. Cruelty, in his account, is not an aberration but part of what the Greeks had to master.

The question is how the Greeks turned this destructive drive into culture. His answer comes from Hesiod’s Works and Days, which distinguishes two goddesses of strife, two Erides. One leads people into war and mutual destruction. The other, the good Eris, drives them to compete: the potter envies the potter, the singer the singer, and each tries to outdo the other. The Greeks, Nietzsche argues, honoured envy and ambition of this second kind, and their whole culture, from athletics to poetry, drama and politics, was organised as a contest.

This explains, he suggests, the Greek practice of ostracism. Its original purpose was not to punish wrongdoing but to remove anyone so outstanding that the contest would end. He cites the Ephesians who banished Hermodorus with the words that no one among them should be the best. Competition needed several geniuses to keep each other in check; a single overwhelming figure would destroy the game, and with it the source of Greek excellence. The point of ostracism, on this reading, was to preserve a balance of powers in which every talent had to unfold through struggle with others. Nietzsche treats this as the secret of Greek education, in which young people were raised to compete in ways that served their city.

When the contest broke down, the result was arrogance and ruin. Nietzsche points to Miltiades, the victor of Marathon, who afterwards, without any rival to measure himself against, used his position to pursue a private grudge against Paros and ended in disgrace. Athens and Sparta, he suggests, fell in similar ways once they stood unrivalled. Homer’s Contest thus offers a theory of culture as disciplined rivalry, and its picture of creative competition anticipates themes that run through Nietzsche’s later work. For Nietzsche, a culture stays healthy only while its greatest talents still have equals to strive against.

About Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844 in Röcken, a village near Leipzig in Prussian Saxony, the son of a Lutheran pastor who died when Friedrich was four. He studied theology and then classical philology at Bonn and Leipzig, and in 1869, at just 24 and before he had formally completed his doctorate, he was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. There he became a close friend of Richard Wagner, whose music and cultural ambitions shaped his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, in 1872.

Chronic illness forced Nietzsche to give up his professorship in 1879. For the next decade he lived on a small pension, moving between the Swiss Alps, the Italian Riviera and Turin, and wrote the books for which he is best known: Daybreak, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morality and the works of 1888. In January 1889 he suffered a mental collapse in Turin from which he never recovered, and he died in Weimar on 25 August 1900.

After his collapse his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, took control of his papers and published selections from his notebooks, most famously The Will to Power, shaping his reputation in ways later scholars rejected. The critical edition by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari restored his texts. His ideas about the death of God, the will to power, eternal recurrence, the Übermensch and the genealogy of values went on to influence existentialism, psychoanalysis, modern literature and much of twentieth-century philosophy.

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