BOOK SUMMARY

The Gay Science

by Friedrich Nietzsche

Experiments in joyful inquiry after the loss of inherited certainties.

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Key ideas

1. **The death of God.** The collapse of belief in the Christian God removes the foundation of European morality, though most people have not yet noticed.
2. **Eternal recurrence.** Imagining living this exact life again forever tests whether we can affirm our existence as it is, without remainder.
3. **Joyful inquiry.** Knowledge can be pursued as an experiment and an adventure, with laughter, courage and constant self-questioning rather than solemn certainty.
4. **Art as needed illusion.** Art's good will to appearance keeps honesty about the world's errors from turning into disgust and despair.
5. **Become who you are.** Giving style to one's character and loving one's fate turn a life into a work shaped by its own measure.

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Preface to the Second Edition (1886)

The Gay Science first appeared in 1882 with four books and a prelude of rhymes. In 1887 Nietzsche reissued it with a fifth book, an appendix of songs and this preface, dated Ruta near Genoa, autumn 1886. (The English translation used here, by Thomas Common, calls the book The Joyful Wisdom.) The preface explains the book's mood. It is written, Nietzsche says, in the language of the thawing wind: full of wantonness, restlessness, contradiction and April weather. It is the gratitude of a convalescent, the Saturnalia of a spirit that has endured a long, terrible pressure and is suddenly overcome with hope. Behind him lie years of exhaustion, unbelief and pain, and a self-imposed diet of everything bitter in knowledge, which he now calls Romanticism.

The second section turns this personal story into a philosophical question: what happens to thought when it is under the pressure of sickness? Nietzsche suggests that whole philosophies are symptoms of the bodies that produced them. Every philosophy that ranks peace above war, every ethic with a negative idea of happiness, every metaphysics that longs for a final state or a world beyond, invites the suspicion that sickness inspired it. He wonders whether philosophy so far has been merely an interpretation, and a misunderstanding, of the body. He hopes for a philosophical physician who will dare to conclude that philosophy has never really been about truth at all, but about health, future, growth, power and life.

In the third section Nietzsche thanks his illness. A philosopher who has passed through many states of health, he writes, has passed through as many philosophies, and the art of transfiguring each state into thought simply is philosophy. Philosophers are not thinking frogs or recording machines with cold entrails; they must give birth to their thoughts out of pain. Great pain, the long slow kind, is the final liberator of the spirit. He doubts that it makes us better, but he knows it makes us deeper. One emerges with more question marks and a will to question more sternly than ever before. Trust in life is gone, but love of life is still possible; one simply loves differently, as one loves a woman one has doubts about.

The last section describes the taste of the recovered. Coarse pleasures, the noisy art and theatrical passion that the cultured classes enjoy, now repel him. If convalescents need art, it is a mocking, light, divinely serene art for artists. Above all they have lost their youthful madness for truth at any price. They no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veil is pulled off, and they recall a little girl who asked whether God is really everywhere and found it indecent. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not showing her reasons. The Greeks knew how to live: they stopped bravely at the surface, the fold and the skin, and worshipped appearance.

They were superficial out of profundity, and Nietzsche asks whether we, having climbed to the most dangerous peak of modern thought, are not becoming Greeks again.

CHAPTER 1

Prelude: Joke, Cunning and Revenge

Before the first numbered section comes a prelude of sixty-three short poems in German rhymes, titled “Scherz, List und Rache,” here translated as “Jest, Ruse and Revenge” and often rendered “Joke, Cunning and Revenge.” The title echoes a light opera libretto by Goethe. The poems are epigrams, most only a few lines long, and they set the tone for a book that wants to join wisdom and laughter. The first, “Invitation,” asks readers to taste the fare: they will like it more tomorrow and better still the day after. The second, “My Good Luck,” captures the book’s turn from searching to finding: weary of seeking, he taught himself to find.

Many of the rhymes compress ideas the prose will develop. “Undismayed” says to dig where you stand, for below is the well, though those who walk in darkness cry that hell lies below. “Vademecum, Vadetecum,” a pun on “go with me” and “go with yourself,” tells would-be disciples that the way to follow him is to follow themselves faithfully. “The Third Sloughing” imagines the poet as a serpent bursting its skin and hungry for more earth. “For Dancers” finds smooth ice a paradise for a good dancer, and “Excelsior” advises the climber to stop asking how to reach the top and start climbing.

Others are sharper and more personal. “Heraclitism” calls war the origin of happiness and friendship. “The Man of Power Speaks” says never to ask, only to take. “Interpretation” admits that when the poet explains his wisdom he only entangles it, while someone who boldly follows his own course sheds more light on him. “Narrow Souls” declares that he hates souls in which neither good nor evil grows. Several, like “Seneca et hoc genus omne,” mock solemn writers who scribble first and philosophize afterward, and one, “The Pen is Scratching,” laughs at the poet’s own scribbling.

The prelude ends with two of the most quoted poems. “Ecce Homo” describes the poet as a flame that consumes itself and glows, turning everything it touches to light and everything it leaves to ashes. “Star Morality” tells a star, destined for vast spaces, to roll on through darkness without compassion, which would only dim its light, and to obey one law: be pure and bright. These verses are not decoration. They announce the book’s ideal of a cheerful, hard and self-made spirit, and they show Nietzsche trying out the poetic voice he would soon use in Thus Spoke Zarathustra.

CHAPTER 2

Book I: The Comedy of Existence and the Future of Laughter (§1–34)

Book I opens with §1, “The Teachers of the Purpose of Existence,” which serves as an overture to the whole work. Whether he looks at people kindly or unkindly, Nietzsche writes, he finds them all doing one thing: whatever serves the preservation of the human species. Even the most harmful person may be useful to the species, since hatred, malice and greed belong to its strange, wasteful economy. Nobody has yet been able to laugh at himself out of the whole truth, but perhaps laughter has a future. One day, when people understand that the species is everything and the individual nothing, laughter may unite with wisdom, and there may be only a “gay science.”

Meanwhile, Nietzsche says, we still live in the age of tragedy, the age of moralities and religions. Founders of moralities keep appearing to teach that life has a purpose behind it, that it is worth living for some reason. They want us never to laugh at existence or at ourselves. Yet they too serve the species, because they strengthen belief in life. Each time such a hero takes the stage, humanity is convulsed with the feeling that yes, it is worth living, and each time laughter and nature eventually win. Humanity, he concludes, has become a visionary animal that must believe from time to time that it knows why it exists. The tragic teachers and the laughter that corrects them both serve life, and the free spirits, he promises, will also have their time.

The next aphorisms set out the stance of the intellectual conscience. In §2 Nietzsche says that most people lack it: they believe this or that and live by it without first asking for the reasons, and nobody is ashamed of this. What separates higher from lower people, he says, is that the longing for certainty rules in them as their deepest need; to stand amid the uncertainty of existence and not even tremble with the desire to question is what he finds contemptible. In §4 he argues that the strongest and most evil spirits have advanced humanity most, because they rekindled sleeping passions and forced people to set opinion against opinion. Whatever is new is always called evil, since it wants to overturn old boundary stones; only the old is called good. Good people, by contrast, are those who cultivate the old thoughts and bear fruit with them.

Several entries deflate the value placed on consciousness and reason. In §11 Nietzsche calls consciousness the latest and least developed product of the organic, the source of countless mistakes, and says humanity would long since have perished if the preserving bond of the instincts were not far stronger. In §12 he asks whether science aims to give the most pleasure

and least pain, and suggests that pleasure and pain may be so tied together that whoever wants the most of one must accept the most of the other. Science so far is best known for making people colder, more statuesque and more Stoical, but it might turn out to be the great bringer of pain, and with it reveal new starry worlds of joy.

CHAPTER 3

Book I: Power, Love and the Virtues (§13–56)

A sequence of psychological studies in Book I applies the idea of power to everyday feelings. In §13, “The Theory of the Sense of Power,” Nietzsche argues that we exercise power over others by doing them good or doing them harm. Harm is the more sensitive instrument, since pain asks about its cause, but kindness also extends power, by making those who depend on us more content and more loyal. In §14, “What is called Love,” he suggests that greed and love may be the same drive named twice, once disparaged by those who already possess and once glorified by those who still want. Love of neighbor, love of knowledge and the hunger for novelty are all forms of acquisition. Sexual love is the most open: the lover wants unconditional, sole possession of the beloved.

Nietzsche then turns to the virtues themselves. In §21, “To the Teachers of Unselfishness,” he notes that virtues such as diligence, obedience, chastity and justice are praised not for what they do for their owner, but for what they do for others and for society. A real, perfect virtue usually harms the person who has it; the diligent man ruins his eyes and his originality in his work. The praise of virtue is therefore not unselfish at all, but the neighbor’s praise of a useful victim. In §26, “What is Living?”, he gives a stark definition: to live is continually to shed what is about to die in us, to be cruel to whatever grows weak and old. And yet, he adds, old Moses said, “Thou shalt not kill.”

The free spirit’s ethic appears in other entries. In §41, “Against Remorse,” the thinker treats his own actions as experiments and questions meant to give him information, so that success and failure are both answers. In §45 Nietzsche offers a famous portrait of Epicurus gazing at a broad white sea from sunlit rocks, a happiness that only someone who suffered continually could have invented: the happiness of an eye before which the sea of existence has grown calm. In §55 he defines nobility not as self-sacrifice but as a rare and singular measure of value, a passion that makes a person stand alone.

Book I closes with one of Nietzsche’s strangest meditations, §54, “The Consciousness of Appearance.” He writes that he has discovered the whole primeval past of humanity and animal life still thinking, loving and hating within him, and that he has woken in the middle of this dream only to realize that he is dreaming and must go on dreaming in order not to perish, like a sleepwalker. Appearance, for him, is not a mask over some unknown essence. It is the living, working thing itself, and the thinker is one of the masters of ceremony of existence, helping to keep the dream going.

CHAPTER 4

Book II: Realists, Artists and the Cult of the Untrue (§57–107)

Book II opens with a challenge to people who call themselves realists. In §57 Nietzsche tells these sober souls, who believe the world really is as it appears to them, that they are still passionate and dark creatures carrying the valuations of earlier centuries. Every sensation they have still contains a piece of ancient love. In §58, “Only as Creators,” he states one of the key ideas of the book. What things are called matters more than what they are. A name and a reputation, first thrown over a thing like an arbitrary garment, grow into its very body over generations. It would be foolish to think one could destroy the so-called real world merely by exposing these origins. We can destroy only as creators, by making new names and valuations, which in time create new things.

Much of Book II concerns art and the artist. In §59, “We Artists,” Nietzsche notes that lovers prefer not to know about the bodily functions of the beloved, and compares this to the way pious people once refused to know about nature’s mechanism; we artists, he says, still have this capacity to be sleepwalkers on the rooftops of reality. In §80 he observes that the Greeks loved good talking so much that they demanded eloquence even from passion on the stage, accepting the unnaturalness of verse. In §84, “The Origin of Poetry,” he argues that rhythm first served a superstitious utility: it helped people remember prayers, seemed to compel the gods, and soothed the passions, since rhythm is a constraint that makes body and soul fall into step.

A run of aphorisms between §60 and §75 deals with women, love and the sexes. Some are lyrical, like §60, where Nietzsche stands amid crashing surf and sees a silent sailing ship glide past, an image for the effect of women at a distance. Others repeat the generalizations about women common in his time, and modern readers often find them the least convincing part of the book. Book II also contains literary judgments. In §92 he says that good prose is written only face to face with poetry, in a polite and unending war with it. In §98 he praises Shakespeare for honoring Brutus and the independence of soul for which one must be able to sacrifice even one’s dearest friend.

The book ends with §107, “Our Ultimate Gratitude to Art.” If we had not invented art, the cult of the untrue, Nietzsche writes, the insight that science now gives us into the general falseness and error of things would be unbearable; honesty would lead to disgust and suicide. Art, as the good will to appearance, is the counterweight. As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable

to us, and art gives us the eye, the hand and the good conscience to make such a phenomenon of ourselves. Because we are heavy and serious, we need the fool's cap and bells, all exuberant, floating, dancing and mocking art, so that we can stand above morality and even play above it. Anyone still ashamed of himself, he says, does not belong with us.

CHAPTER 5

Book III: The Shadows of God (§108–124)

Book III begins with the most famous three words Nietzsche wrote. In §108, “New Struggles,” he recalls that after the Buddha died, people showed his shadow in a cave for centuries, a vast and terrible shadow. God is dead, Nietzsche writes; but given the way people are, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow is shown. And we, he adds, must still defeat his shadow too. The rest of the opening sequence describes what those shadows are: habits of thought that survive belief in God and keep projecting order, purpose and moral meaning onto a world that has none of them.

The clearest list is in §109, “Let Us Be on Our Guard.” We should beware of thinking the world is a living being, or a machine built for a purpose, or that the regular motions of our solar system are typical of the universe. The general character of the world is chaos for all eternity, not in the sense of lacking necessity but of lacking order, form, beauty and wisdom. We should not call it heartless or unreasonable, perfect or noble; it is unaffected by our aesthetic and moral judgments. There are no laws in nature, only necessities, with no one who commands or obeys. Where there are no purposes, there is also no chance. When, Nietzsche asks, will these shadows of God stop darkening us, so that we can naturalize humanity in a newly redeemed nature?

In §110, “Origin of Knowledge,” he argues that the intellect produced nothing but errors for immense stretches of time, and some proved useful for survival: that there are enduring things, equal things, substances and bodies, that our will is free, that what is good for me is good in itself. Only very late did truth emerge as the weakest form of knowledge. Now the drive to truth and these life-preserving errors fight inside the thinker, and the question becomes an experiment: to what degree can truth be incorporated into life? In §111 he traces logic to the same source: beings who treated similar things as equal survived better than those who saw only differences. In §121 he adds simply that life is no argument; error might be among its conditions.

Morality, too, is reread in this light. In §115 Nietzsche names four errors that have reared humanity: seeing itself as incomplete, ascribing to itself imaginary qualities, placing itself falsely in relation to animals and nature, and constantly inventing new tables of value it took to be eternal. Subtract these errors and you subtract humanity and human dignity. In §116, “Herd Instinct,” every morality is said to rank human drives according to the needs of a community, teaching the individual to be a function of the herd. In §117 he notes that for most of history nothing was more terrible than feeling oneself independent; to be alone was to be punished.

Book III's opening sequence ends with §124: we have left land and boarded ship, burned the bridge behind us and the land too, and nothing is more terrible than infinity.

CHAPTER 6

Book III: The Madman (§125–153)

Section 125, “The Madman,” is the best-known passage in Nietzsche’s work. A madman lights a lantern on a bright morning and runs to the marketplace crying, “I seek God!” Many of the people standing about do not believe in God, and they mock him: has God gotten lost, emigrated, gone on a voyage? The madman jumps among them and says: we have killed him, you and I. He asks how we could drink up the sea, who gave us the sponge to wipe away the horizon, what we did when we unchained the earth from its sun. Are we not straying through infinite nothingness? Has it not grown colder? God is dead, he cries, God remains dead, and we have killed him. How shall the murderers of all murderers comfort themselves?

The madman goes on to ask whether the greatness of the deed is too great for us, and whether we must not become gods ourselves simply to appear worthy of it. Then he falls silent, throws his lantern on the ground and says he has come too early. This tremendous event is still on its way; like lightning and thunder or the light of stars, deeds need time to be seen and heard. Later that day, the story goes, he entered several churches and sang a requiem for God, and when led out he asked what these churches are now, if not the tombs and monuments of God.

The passage is often misread as a triumphant announcement of atheism. In fact the people who mock the madman are already unbelievers; what they lack is any sense of what the loss means. “God is dead” is not a claim about a being who once lived. It is a diagnosis of European culture: belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable, and the values, morals and sense of meaning that rested on it are now without foundation, though almost no one has noticed. Nietzsche returns to this theme in Book V, in §343, where he describes the long collapse that must follow, including the end of European morality.

The aphorisms that follow continue the critique of religion. In §127 Nietzsche traces the belief in a simple, self-evident will to the most ancient religiosity. In §130 he writes that the Christian resolve to find the world ugly and bad has made it ugly and bad, and in §132 that it is now no longer our reason but our taste that decides against Christianity. In §135 and §139 he contrasts the Christian feeling of sin with the Greeks, who knew no such feeling and deified the passions instead of seeking to annihilate them. In §143, one of his most interesting historical arguments, he praises polytheism: the invention of many gods let individuals set up their own ideals and norms, and so prepared the way for free individuality. In §151 he denies Schopenhauer’s claim that religion springs from a metaphysical need, calling that need a later offshoot of religion rather than its source.

CHAPTER 7

Book III: Maxims and the Free Spirit's Catechism (§154–275)

After the madman, Book III breaks into more than a hundred short maxims, many only a sentence long, in the manner of the French moralists. They are brisk and often funny. In §162 egoism is called the perspective law of feeling, by which the near looks large and the distant small. In §173 Nietzsche writes that whoever knows he is profound strives for clarity, while whoever wants to seem profound strives for obscurity, because the crowd thinks everything is deep if it cannot see the bottom. In §179 thoughts are the shadows of our feelings, always darker, emptier and simpler. In §200 to laugh is to rejoice in mischief with a good conscience, and in §265 human truths are simply our irrefutable errors.

Some maxims carry political and social barbs. In §174 parliamentarism means permission to choose among five public opinions, and whoever departs from all five has the whole herd against him. In §175 the most convincing eloquence so far has been the drumbeat. In §219 the purpose of punishment is to improve the one who punishes. Others are portraits of character: the thinker who knows how to take things more simply than they are (§189), the proud man vexed even with those who help him (§198), the envious man who should be given no children because he would envy them (§207). In §259 the serpent in paradise says that good and evil are God's prejudices.

Book III ends with a short catechism, §268 to §275, a series of questions and one-line answers that sums up the book's ethic. What makes one heroic? Going out to meet one's greatest suffering and one's highest hope at the same time. What do you believe in? That the weights of all things must be determined anew. What does your conscience say? "You shall become who you are." Where are your greatest dangers? In pity. What do you love in others? My hopes. Whom do you call bad? Him who always wants to put others to shame. What is most humane? To spare someone shame. And what is the seal of liberation? No longer being ashamed of oneself.

These answers are some of the most compressed statements of Nietzsche's ideal. The phrase "become who you are," borrowed from the Greek poet Pindar, recurs throughout his later work and gives the subtitle to his autobiography Ecce Homo. The warning against pity anticipates his later critique of compassion as a temptation for the higher person. And the closing focus on shame, on not shaming others and on not being ashamed of oneself, links the catechism to the

closing words of §107 and points forward to Book IV, which begins with a vow to stop accusing and to become a yes-sayer.

CHAPTER 8

Book IV, Sanctus Januarius: Amor Fati and Living Dangerously (§276–300)

Book IV is titled Sanctus Januarius, after Saint Januarius of Naples, whose dried blood is said to liquefy each year, and it was written in Genoa in January 1882 after a period of recovery. It opens with a poem thanking the one who with fiery lances has freed the stream of the poet's soul from ice, so that it rushes toward the sea with hope. The first aphorism, §276, "For the New Year," states a resolution. Nietzsche wants to learn more and more to see what is necessary in things as beautiful, and so to be one of those who make things beautiful. "Amor fati," love of fate, is to be his love from now on. He does not want to wage war on the ugly or accuse even the accusers. Looking away will be his only negation. Someday he wishes to be only a yes-sayer.

The book that follows is the warmest and most personal of the five. In §278, "The Thought of Death," Nietzsche watches the crowded streets of Genoa and feels a melancholy happiness: everyone talks as if the future were everything, though soon all will be silent, and the one certainty, death, is the thing people think about least. He wishes he could make the thought of life a hundred times more worth thinking about. In §279, "Star Friendship," he writes of a friend who has become a stranger. They are like two ships whose courses once met and now diverge; their friendship belongs to a higher, invisible orbit, and they should believe in this star friendship even if they must be enemies on earth.

In §283, "Pioneers," Nietzsche welcomes signs of a more manly and warlike age that will carry heroism into knowledge. He calls for silent, solitary, resolute people who seek in everything what must be overcome. The secret of the greatest fruitfulness and enjoyment of existence, he writes, is to live dangerously. Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius; send your ships into uncharted seas. The passage is a call to intellectual adventure as much as anything else, telling the knowing ones to be robbers and conquerors until they can rule and possess, for knowledge will one day reach out for what belongs to it.

Two other aphorisms here are central to Nietzsche's ethics. In §290, "One Thing is Needful," he describes the great and rare art of giving style to one's character: surveying one's strengths and weaknesses and fitting them into an artistic plan, adding second nature here, removing first nature there, concealing ugliness or reinterpreting it as sublime. The one thing needful is that a person attain satisfaction with himself, because whoever is dissatisfied with himself is always ready to take revenge, and the rest of us become his victims. In §299, "What One Should Learn

from Artists," he asks how we can make things beautiful when they are not, and answers with the artist's tricks: distance, framing, partial concealment and the right light. We should be the poets of our lives, beginning with the smallest and most everyday things.

CHAPTER 9

Book IV: Life as an Experiment and the Heaviest Weight (§301–342)

The second half of Book IV moves between reflections on knowledge and intimate scenes from Nietzsche's inner life. In §301, "Illusion of the Contemplative," he says that higher people see and hear more and thus become both happier and unhappier, but are mistaken in thinking themselves mere spectators of the play of life. In fact they are its poets, who continually create the values and colors that the practical people then put to use. In §310, "Will and Wave," he watches waves rush eagerly into the rocks as if seeking a hidden treasure, retreat, and come again, and says: thus live the waves, and thus live we who will. In §319 he notes that founders of religions never examined their experiences with the intellectual conscience, and says that he and his kind want to scrutinize theirs hour by hour like a scientific experiment, to be their own experiments and their own subjects.

In §324, "In Media Vita," Nietzsche writes that life has not disappointed him. On the contrary, it grows richer and more mysterious every year, since the day the great liberator came to him: the thought that life could be an experiment of the knower, not a duty, a fate or a fraud. "Life as a means to knowledge," with that principle in one's heart one can live boldly and even laugh gaily. In §333, "What Does Knowing Mean?", he takes up Spinoza's maxim "not to laugh, not to lament, not to detest, but to understand," and argues that understanding is itself the outcome of a struggle among those very drives. In §335, "Cheers for Physics!", he says we want to become who we are, the new and unique, who give ourselves laws and create ourselves, and for that we must be the best students of everything lawful and necessary in the world.

Near the end of the book Nietzsche turns to Socrates. In §340, "The Dying Socrates," he admires Socrates's courage and wisdom in everything he did, said and did not say. But his last words, "O Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius," offered to the god of healing, mean that life is a long sickness. Socrates, who lived cheerfully and like a soldier, was a pessimist after all and took revenge on life with that veiled phrase. "We must surpass even the Greeks!" Nietzsche writes. The passage sets up the two aphorisms that follow, which offer a different response to life than Socrates's.

Section 341, "The Heaviest Weight," is the first published statement of eternal recurrence. Suppose a demon crept into your loneliest loneliness and told you that you must live this life again, and innumerable times more, with nothing new in it, every pain and joy and thought in the same order, even this spider and this moonlight between the trees. Would you curse the

demon, or have you once had a tremendous moment when you would answer, “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine”? If the thought gained power over you, it would change you or crush you. The question would become the heaviest weight on all your actions, unless you came to love life so much that you craved nothing more than this eternal confirmation. The final aphorism, §342, “Incipit Tragoedia,” then introduces Zarathustra, who leaves his home at thirty, goes into the mountains for ten years, and one morning decides to go down to people again. With it the 1882 edition ended.

CHAPTER 10

Book V, We Fearless Ones: What Our Cheerfulness Means (§343–347)

Book V was added in 1887, five years after the first edition and after Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil and the new prefaces. Its title is “We Fearless Ones,” and its motto comes from the French general Turenne: “You tremble, carcass? You would tremble even more if you knew where I am taking you.” Its first aphorism, §343, “The Meaning of Our Cheerfulness,” returns to the death of God with the clarity of hindsight. The greatest recent event, that belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable, is beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. Most people have not heard the news, still less understood what must now collapse, including the whole of European morality, which was built on that faith.

Yet Nietzsche asks why he and his fellow free spirits feel no fear of the coming eclipse. The effect on them is the opposite of what one might expect: like a new dawn, a relief and a source of courage. At last the horizon seems free again, even if it is not bright. Our ships can put out to sea again, every daring of the knower is allowed again, and the sea, our sea, lies open once more. Perhaps there has never been such an open sea. This is the cheerfulness of the title, a gaiety that comes not from ignorance of danger but from facing it.

In §344, “How We, Too, Are Still Pious,” Nietzsche turns the lens on science itself. Science claims to admit convictions only as hypotheses. But science rests on one unconditional conviction, that truth is more important than anything else, and the will to truth at any price is a moral commitment, a refusal to deceive oneself or others. Where does it come from? Nietzsche’s answer is that even we godless anti-metaphysicians still take our fire from the flame lit by the Christian faith, which was also Plato’s, that God is truth and truth is divine. What if that belief becomes ever less credible, he asks, and God turns out to be our longest lie? The will to truth might even be a concealed will to death.

In §345, “Morality as a Problem,” he complains that no one has yet treated the value of morality as a problem, and he dismisses the historians of morality, especially the English, who unknowingly repeat the Christian prejudice that moral action means self-denial and sympathy. Even if a morality grew out of error, he adds, that would not settle its value; the value of the medicine called morality has never yet been tested. Calling it into question, he says, is exactly the work he and his kind have taken on. It needs thinkers who are personally bound up with

their problems, because great problems demand great love and cannot be grasped with the cold tentacles of impersonal curiosity.

In §346, “Our Question Mark,” he says that he and his kind are no longer bitter unbelievers who must make a faith out of unbelief. What disgusts them now is the attitude of “man against the world,” man as judge who weighs existence and finds it too light. Yet this leaves a hard alternative for the coming generation: either abolish your venerations or abolish yourselves. The first would be nihilism, and the second too. In §347 he adds that the need for belief, for something unconditional to hold on to, is a measure of weakness, and imagines a free spirit who could say farewell to every belief and every wish for certainty, supporting itself on slender ropes and possibilities and dancing even on the edge of abysses. This, Nietzsche says, is the question mark that hangs over his generation.

CHAPTER 11

Book V: Consciousness, Knowledge and the Learned (§348–362)

Book V includes some of Nietzsche's most important theoretical passages. In §349 he argues that the drive for mere self-preservation is a sign of distress, a limitation of the basic drive of life, which aims at the expansion of power and often sacrifices self-preservation for it. He suggests that the consumptive Spinoza, and the natural scientists who followed him into Darwinism's one-sided doctrine of the struggle for existence, mistook a condition of distress for the nature of life. In §353 he distinguishes the two inventions of religious founders: a way of life, which usually exists already, and an interpretation that makes it seem of the highest value. The interpretation is the real invention.

Section 354, "On the Genius of the Species," offers a theory of consciousness. We could think, feel, will and act without any of it becoming conscious, and most of our life does go on that way. Why then consciousness at all? Nietzsche's answer is that it developed under the pressure of the need to communicate. Humans, as the most endangered animals, needed one another, and to make themselves understood they had to know what they felt and lacked. Consciousness is therefore a network connecting people, and conscious thought, which happens in words, is only the smallest and most superficial part of our thinking. The consequence is unsettling: whatever becomes conscious is translated into the perspective of the herd, so that each of us, however much we want to know ourselves, becomes aware only of what is not individual about us.

In §355, "The Origin of Our Concept of Knowledge," Nietzsche overhears someone in the street say that he "knew" him, and asks what people mean by knowledge. Nothing more, he suggests, than reducing something strange to something familiar, so that it no longer troubles us. Philosophers have meant little more. The familiar is what we are used to, which is precisely what is hardest to see as a problem. In §360 he distinguishes two kinds of causes: the stored-up quantity of force that wants to discharge itself, and the trivial occasion that releases it, like a match beside a barrel of gunpowder. Most so-called aims and purposes, he argues, are only matches.

Other aphorisms read European history through this psychology. In §357, "The Old Question: What is German?", Nietzsche credits Leibniz with seeing that consciousness is only an accident of mental representation, Kant with the great question mark he set after causality, and Hegel with introducing the idea of development that prepared the way for Darwin; he calls

Schopenhauer the first avowed and inflexible atheist among German philosophers, who therefore asked the unavoidable question whether existence has any meaning at all. In §358, “The Peasant Revolt of the Spirit,” he describes the Church as a city of ruins, and Luther’s Reformation as the indignation of simple people against something complicated, which, in abolishing confession and giving priests wives, undermined the priesthood itself. In §361 he examines the actor, the instinct for falseness with a good conscience, and in §362 he credits Napoleon, rather than the French Revolution, with giving Europe a new age of war in which men regained the upper hand over the merchant and the philistine.

CHAPTER 12

Book V: Romanticism, Perspective and the Great Health (§363–383)

The last part of Book V includes Nietzsche's settling of accounts with his own past. In §370, "What is Romanticism?", he admits that he once took the philosophical pessimism of his century and German music as signs of overflowing strength, and heard in Wagner the eruption of a long-imprisoned Dionysian force. He was wrong; both were romanticism. All art and philosophy, he now says, serve suffering life, but there are two kinds of sufferers: those who suffer from an overabundance of life, who want a Dionysian art and a tragic view, and those who suffer from impoverished life, who want rest, calm seas and redemption from themselves, or else intoxication and frenzy. Schopenhauer and Wagner answered the second need. The right question about any work, he concludes, is whether hunger or superabundance created it.

In §368, "The Cynic Speaks," he says his objections to Wagner's music are physiological. His foot rebels, because it wants rhythm, dance and march, and his whole body wants music to make life lighter and golden. Nobody takes his finest taste into the theater, he adds; there one becomes people, public and herd. His Wagnerian friend replies that perhaps he is simply not healthy enough for this music. In §373, "Science as Prejudice," he mocks the hope of finding a world that can be fully captured by counting, measuring and weighing. A purely mechanical interpretation of the world might be the most stupid of all, as meaningless as judging a piece of music by how much of it can be counted and expressed in formulas.

The pivotal statement of perspectivism is §374, "Our New Infinite." Can existence be anything but interpretation? Nietzsche says the intellect cannot answer, because it cannot see around its own corner; it sees itself only in its own perspectives. We cannot know whether other kinds of beings might experience time backwards. But we are at least past the absurd arrogance of decreeing that only our perspective is legitimate. The world has become infinite again, in the sense that it may contain infinite interpretations. This should not tempt us to worship the unknown again as a god; too many ungodly, foolish and all-too-human interpretations are possible. In §380 the wanderer adds that to see European morality from outside one must climb above it, as a traveler leaves a city to see how high its towers are.

The book closes with its most visionary passages. In §377, "We Homeless Ones," Nietzsche addresses Europeans who cannot feel at home in their transitional age, who are not liberal and do not work for progress, who do not love "mankind" and are not German enough for the new

nationalism, but who are good Europeans, heirs of millennia of European spirit. They have outgrown Christianity precisely because their ancestors were uncompromisingly Christian, and what drives them out to sea is, once more, a faith. In §382, “The Great Health,” he describes the new health needed by the Argonauts of the ideal: a health one does not merely have but keeps acquiring because one keeps sacrificing it. Before them lies an undiscovered country, and another ideal runs ahead of them: the ideal of a spirit that plays naively, from overflowing power, with everything hitherto called holy. With it, perhaps, “the great seriousness” and the tragedy begin.

Then comes the epilogue, §383. As Nietzsche slowly paints this dark question mark and starts to remind his readers of the forgotten virtues of right reading, the spirits of his own book break into wicked, gnome-like laughter, seize him by the ears and call him to order. Enough of this raven-black music, they cry; it is bright morning, there is soft green ground for dancing, and never was there a better hour to be joyful. Who will sing them a morning song? He agrees. His bagpipe is waiting, and if his voice is a little hoarse, they should remember that they are in the mountains. If they misunderstand the singer, so be it; they can still dance to his piping. What follows are the songs.

CHAPTER 13

Appendix: Songs of Prince Vogelfrei

The 1887 edition ends with an appendix of fourteen poems, the “Songs of Prince Vogelfrei.” The name means “free as a bird,” but in German it also means outlaw, someone whom anyone may kill with impunity. Several of the poems first appeared in the short cycle Idylls from Messina, published in a periodical in 1882 and then reworked. Here they are given in verse translations by Paul V. Cohn and Maude D. Petre. The first, “To Goethe,” parodies the Chorus Mysticus that ends Goethe’s Faust: where Goethe’s chorus says that all things transitory are only symbols, Nietzsche replies that the imperishable is only a poet’s label and that the world is ruled by a cosmic play that makes fools of us all.

Many of the songs are light and comic. In “The Poet’s Call” a woodpecker keeps time with the poet’s verse and mocks him: “Yes, yes, good sir, you are a poet.” “In the South” has the poet resting in a bird’s nest on a branch above the sea, having fled the slow German way of walking for the south. “Beppa the Pious” is a comic song in which a pretty girl explains why God will forgive her young monk, and “Rimus Remedium,” subtitled “a consolation to sick poets,” turns fever and pain into rhyme. Others are tender or strange, like “An Avowal of Love,” addressed to an albatross soaring with motionless wings, and “Song of a Theocritean Goatherd,” a lovesick lament set in a pastoral world.

A few short poems carry real philosophical weight. “Columbus Redivivus” returns to the image of Genoa and the open sea: the poet will trust himself and steer his Genoese ship into the blue, where time and space die at noon and only the eye of infinity watches him. “Sils-Maria” recalls the Swiss village where Nietzsche spent his summers: he sat waiting, beyond good and evil, in a world of lake and noon and time without aim, until suddenly, in this translation, one became two and Zarathustra left his teeming brain (in the German, Zarathustra walked past him). The poem compresses the story of how Thus Spoke Zarathustra came to him into six lines.

The book ends with “A Dancing Song to the Mistral Wind,” addressed to the cold, violent wind of southern France and the Mediterranean. The poet greets the mistral as a brother born of the same womb, races down the cliffs to meet it, and calls on it to sweep the sky clear of hypocrites, preachers and the dismal sick, and of everything that spoils the earth’s gladness. It is a fitting last word for a book that began with the thawing wind of convalescence. The Gay Science closes not with an argument but with a dance, the image Nietzsche had used throughout for a spirit strong enough to be light.

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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