

INTRODUCTION



THE QUICKENED AND THE DEAD

Are our most violent poltergeists
Books?

gnashing their shelves
smashing things in the dark

they leave a greenish tombish
smell on our reading fingers

they make us musty
and bereft.

—Dorothy Porter¹

More than most philosophers, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche commands a following of readers who attempt, each in his or her own manner, to perpetuate his legacy. Many of these thinkers have dedicated a great deal of their lives not only to reading and interpreting Nietzsche's texts, but also attempting to actualize "the event" his writings only envisage: the revaluation of values, wherein philosophers forge their truths from strength, rather than in the spirit of life-negation. Nietzsche's writings are attractive to contemporary philosophers for a number of reasons, each of which reflects a different interpretation of what it is *to be* a contemporary philosopher; or more specifically, a philosopher of Nietzsche's future. Nietzsche is readily appropriated by conservative philosophers, who identify "the leveling" of culture with the attempt to improve access to education for women, ethnic minorities, and those who are otherwise systematically disadvantaged.² There is thus a conservative strain within Nietzsche's work—for instance, his appeal to Greek culture and Roman Imperialism³—which clearly resonates with an intolerance for the ideal of "equality for all" that many contemporary academics, indeed, many Nietzscheans, would laud.

Nietzsche's "perspectivism" attracts a different constituency of less-conservative readers, attempting to make room for a polyvalent conception of truth in the wake of the collapse of a singular (biblical) authority through which knowledge is grounded. Indeed, in the light of his truth perspectivism, Nietzsche is often remembered as the grandfather of postmodernism by both foes and advocates of this new creed. Thinkers of the Left (most notably the French philosophers Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault) have been assiduous scholars of Nietzsche, drawing from his critique of the metaphysics of presence—this in spite (or perhaps because) of the fact that Nietzsche roundly criticized Socialism, anarchism, and democracy, in favor of a new "cosmopolitan" politics. Surprisingly, for many acquainted with Nietzsche, in recent years some feminists have also utilized his critique of Liberalism in order to promote a "Feminism of difference,"⁴ which would operate beyond an essentializing discourse on "Woman," or the assumption of a victim status.⁵ In the background of the reader's engagement with Nietzsche lurks the Nazi appropriation of his texts: the justification of anti-Semitism and a fascist style of government that, in the early part of the 20th century, drew upon Nietzsche as one of its key intellectual figures.⁶

Undoubtedly, each of these interpretations has a foundation in Nietzsche's text, and so can be elaborated with reference to it. The question remains, How does Nietzsche appeal to so many, with such diverse—in some cases even opposed—interests? And (how) are his readers able to keep their own concerns separate from, and unpolluted by, the threads within Nietzsche's writing that promote a view they would oppose? especially that "dark art" of Nietzschean scholarship, which—however easily it is now denounced—once used his thought to support National Socialism. Since his death over a century ago, Nietzsche has drawn a following that would be the envy of any philosopher, and renown that crosses disciplinary boundaries, extending even beyond the academy. Many of Nietzsche's readers feel themselves sharing an intimacy with him through his writing; that his words appeal to them personally, even exclusively. What is it about Nietzsche's philosophy that generates these effects upon his readers, and allows him to gain a purchase upon them? And how is his text able to attract such a diversity of interlocutors? Nietzsche's philosophy must be read in the context of the profound effect it exerts upon his most committed readers: those who see themselves to fulfill a role that his text indicates, charged with responsibility for nurturing his philosophical and cultural project to its fruition.

This book seeks to examine precisely how Nietzsche's reader comes to

form an attachment to his texts, to the extent even of becoming his champion against “misinterpretation.” Significantly, in virtue of this connection with the reader, Nietzsche’s writing *enacts* what psychoanalytic theory attempts merely to explain: the subject’s assumption of its social function. Whereas a growing body of literature charts Sigmund Freud’s conceptual debt to Nietzsche,⁷ little has been written about what this influence can tell us about Nietzsche’s philosophy. We can read therein precursors to Freud’s understanding of the unconscious, repression, sublimation, the superego, and the importance of dreams. Yet reading beyond this catalogue of concepts, we find that Nietzsche—always well aware of rhetorical strategy and his engagement with the reader—*employed* these insights in his writings and did not simply describe or prefigure them. Moreover, alongside his musings about will to power and its vicissitudes, Nietzsche also observed human relationships, albeit in quick aphorisms that are often treated as asides rather than as key to his philosophical approach and message. When he writes in *Human, All Too Human*, “Everyone bears within him a picture of woman derived from his mother,”⁸ for instance, Nietzsche calls upon us to reflect not only upon his life or our own, but on the very conditions through which subjectivity comes to be. That the subject is not born of a vacuum, but rather has a prehistory and a relation to others (principally their parents) that characterizes how they are then able to engage with the world, is a knowledge that Nietzsche brings to the writing of his text: not only in terms of its content, but his mode of address to the various subjects who come to read his philosophy.

In the light of this, psychoanalytic theory will be drawn upon throughout this study in order to interrogate the relation Nietzsche devises between his text and its reader. Indeed, it will be argued that the relation to Nietzsche is often so pregnant with affect because Nietzsche recapitulates for the reader’s subjectivity a role initially played by one’s parents. Thinking through Nietzsche’s relation to the reader, functionally, as a *parental* relation allows us to account for the sense of ambivalence often felt by his readers. Who has not cringed upon hearing his or her father or mother speak out of turn, and struggled to establish a distance from these first objects of love? There are, likewise, moments for many of Nietzsche’s readers when—notwithstanding their attraction to his writing—he strikes a sour note: through an unkind word about feminists or Jews or vegetarians, for instance. Furthermore, a foremost goal for Nietzsche is to give birth to philosophers in whom he engenders, like any good parent, a range of values, truths, and affects. Reading Nietzsche in terms of the parental role thus helps to explain how the relation to his

text comes to be so abiding and formative for the reader, and particularly where they would seem to have good reason to be repelled by him. Curiously, Nietzsche's philosophy especially attracts those whom it expressly excludes: women and feminists, Jewish scholars, and theorists of the political Left. I will argue that such exclusion is in fact key to how Nietzsche's text is able to *include* (or "interpellate")⁹ the reader within its terms. Psychoanalytic theory of the kind elaborated after Freud by Jacques Lacan, Melanie Klein, and, in recent years, Slavoj Žižek, is especially pertinent to examining the intersubjective dynamics of exclusion and interpellation. Drawing upon this theory, then, I will argue that the psychodynamics of inclusion and exclusion—constitutive of subjectivity, and first enacted within the family—is masterfully reiterated by Nietzsche in crafting his address to the reader.

The work of exclusion in Nietzsche's philosophy participates in a broader dynamic between readers and texts, which we can figure as a relation of mourning. After Barthes,¹⁰ Foucault,¹¹ Derrida,¹² and Plato,¹³ it is understood that writing is experienced in the absence of its author; and the act of reading involves a necromantic art of resurrecting the author—the particular interpretation constructing a presence in lieu of them actually being able to speak for themselves. Nietzsche's writing exploits this relation of reader to text, by amplifying this sense of loss. Stating that he was "born posthumously," Nietzsche pronounces himself dead to the reader, so that reading his philosophy is tinged with an affect of grief. Hence the title *Dead Letters to Nietzsche*. *The Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* offers two explanations for the expression *dead letters*: the first refers to a law that "has lost its force or authority without being formally abolished." This meaning, however, belies the real force of the dead letter, which is only apparently dead, but in fact lies in wait for the transgressor, continuing implicitly to check the actions of those whom it proscribes. As with, for instance, the sodomy laws, the dead letter is kept on the books as a reminder to some of their marginality with respect to the rest. Thus, it continues to exert the force of interpellation, and is by no means truly, but only nominally "dead." The second sense of the term refers to "a letter that is undeliverable and unreturnable by the post office." Not only does the dead letter fail to reach its destination, but it also cannot be returned to its sender: it has no place, and is able only to circulate aimlessly. Both definitions apply to the reader's relation to Nietzsche, not only because his text is sown with ambiguously empowered permissions and penalties to subjugate its reader, but also, the reader's address to Nietzsche must always miss its mark. Nietzsche has no fixed address, no position to

which he can be brought to account. The best the commentator can do is to mark the address as *poste restante*, for there are fleeting moments when the interpretation appears “to reach” Nietzsche: to elucidate something of his meaning. Yet, as I will argue, the purpose of his text is principally to incite the reader’s attachment, and in order to achieve this it is the reader who, like the dead letter, is displaced: or moreover, must find her or his position in relation to Nietzsche by being in two places at once—both inside and *outside*, excluded by, his text.

In a second sense, the theme of death suffuses the reader’s relation to Nietzsche insofar as she or he invokes his name to her or his own ends, thus seeking “to raise him from the dead” in order to do one’s bidding. To this extent, again, reading philosophy can be seen as a variety of the necromantic arts. The reader does not simply address a text—a particular configuration of words on a page—but also the phantom author he or she believes to have preceded the text, and who equally is generated by an engagement with it. The reader conjures the author’s presence, but only “in spirit.” Reading philosophy is like a thought-experiment by means of which the specter of the philosopher, as a unitary will, is produced. The reader is thereby able to set into motion a kind of improvisation upon Nietzsche’s philosophy—utilizing it as a tool for thinking about Left politics, feminism, or their own identity, and thereby drawing from Nietzsche judgments that perhaps have only the barest relation to what he actually wrote. Yet by deploying the philosopher’s name in support of one’s own goal, the reader is still limited to the field in which this name is already received, and indeed, must carry the baggage of past interpretations and “misinterpretations” of his philosophy. Nietzsche’s final, immortal power over the reader is this invocation of his name. The “Nietzschean,” curiously devoted to overseeing the fate of that name, brings “Nietzsche” back to life, but only as a name, an authority, or the paternal law (which itself is only a dead letter).

Thirdly, this book sets out to show how the effect of “quickenings” activated in the encounter with Nietzsche works also in reverse: that Nietzsche’s writing brings to life *in its reader* a certain kind of subjectivity, the purpose of which is to service his philosophical task. The rhetorical charge of Nietzsche’s writing is to provoke a variety of responses from his audience, each of which performs a different function for his cultural critique and eventual goal of revaluation. Significantly, Nietzsche’s readers often model themselves upon a particular ideal proffered by his philosophy, from the rugged philosopher or creative artist, to the noble legislator. And it is their ultimate *failure*

adequately to embody this ideal that gives birth to the Nietzschean subject, in the split between the ideal and the specter of its botched approximation (“the higher type” and its ape “the last man”; “the philosopher of the future” and “the scholar,” and so forth). In his Nietzsche-inspired “The Second Coming,” William Butler Yeats writes:

*The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

Nietzsche’s philosophy engenders many different responses and identifications not through simple carelessness, but for a reason. For, as Nietzsche saw things, to wake from the nightmare of nihilism indicated in Yeats’s poem, humanity’s various proclivities would need to have become radicalized. Some types would have to exhaust themselves and dissipate—experience a down-going, in Nietzsche’s parlance—and some would need to come into their own, hence experiencing a culmination of their forces, and “overcoming” the confines of modern subjectivity. Nietzsche attempts with his philosophy to perform the cultural function of precipitating this “rank ordering” of humanity, according to his own array of identifications: from noble to slave, philosopher–artist to last man. By means of its peculiar rhetorical features, Nietzsche’s text selects “the quick” from “the dead,” deploying its own mobile (zombie) army of commentators to wage his culture war.

Dead Letters to Nietzsche addresses itself to the manner in which Nietzsche’s texts affect readers in their subjectivity: producing in them a sense of belonging to his philosophical project, and thus investing them with a duty to it. In this book I argue that Nietzsche’s text avails itself to the reader as a place in which she sees her most ideal image reflected (as the ideal reader, for instance, or the philosopher of the future). But moreover, Nietzsche’s writing invokes in the reader a feeling of excess: of finding oneself *outside* the text’s range, and falling short of its ideal. In comprehending the forces that tend to produce this relation, I draw upon psychoanalytic theory, but I am aware that this use might be viewed by some as contentious. As indicated above, Nietzsche’s philosophy, arguably, anticipates psychoanalysis, and so for this reason his text is particularly amenable to its perspective. Yet more than this,

the tools psychoanalysis provides are well honed for the kind of relation Nietzsche's text establishes with its reader. For this reason, I ask my readers to put aside reservations about psychoanalytic theory, at least provisionally, for the purpose of what I feel to be a particularly fruitful interrogation of Nietzsche's relation to his commentators. Above all, the book seeks to show that Nietzsche's philosophy incites "the split" (between the ideal and its excess) through which, according to psychoanalysis, subjectivity is constituted. This split is achieved by Nietzsche's constant references to his *good* and *bad* readers: to those who fall within his philosophy's sphere of reference, and those whose "bad" interpretations of his writings exclude them from this sphere. Nietzsche's text, it will be argued, thus also presents itself as a place in which the abandoned (or repressed) part of the reader's self is kept hidden, only to be revealed in those most disorienting, uncanny passages of the text with which the reader cannot identify (that are even felt to be dangerous in their ambiguity since they appear to open out to something completely "other"). Particularly the "Nazi" interpretation of Nietzsche exemplifies for his readers this dark and excluded identification: an identification that they both recognize and deny.

The book will proceed first by outlining the relation between Nietzsche's philosophy and its claim upon the reader, in chapters 1 and 2. Perhaps more than other philosophers, Nietzsche requires a readership to take responsibility for his project. The purpose of his text was thus in part to recruit the reader to his program of the reevaluation of values. Nietzsche's philosophy performs this recruitment—or "interpellation" of the reader—immanently, by the dual means of both its structure and its content. On the one hand, Nietzsche's critique of the mediocrity and nihilism of modern culture is substantial, and continues to resonate with many intellectuals today. These concerns alone apparently motivate his readers' allegiance to him. On the other hand, however, it will be argued that this connection to Nietzsche is also *structurally* overdetermined, the reader's place already having been written into his philosophy. In effect, the text interpellates the reader in relation to various "figures of excess": identifications that are either impossibly ideal or abject, such as "the philosopher of the future," "the blond beast," "we wise ones," or else the slavish "last man." To this extent, readers are initiated into Nietzsche's philosophy by means of its own ideological apparatus, which they internalize through reading his books. In chapter 1, this idea will be elucidated with regard to Nietzsche's account of the subject. More than provide a simple explanation of the genesis of subjectivity, by means of the

excess remainder, the account of subjectivity also furnishes a specifically “Nietzschean” subject, produced in the relation between the reader and Nietzsche’s philosophy. The purpose of chapter 1 is thus to demonstrate the connection between *what* Nietzsche says of his philosophy and *how* he says it: a relation that is not always straightforward, but is ultimately guided by the concern for *why* he says it. For Nietzsche writes his message strategically, in order to subjugate the reader to his own ends. The recruitment of readers, as agents of his philosophy, is pivotal to the realization of his philosophical project.

Chapter 2 continues to elaborate the rhetorical effects of Nietzsche’s texts with reference to Lacanian theory. In his seminars and *écrits*, Jacques Lacan shows the extent to which the self is already riven by the existence of others: that the subject is not self-contained, but is, rather, dispersed in the world that they inhabit, and through those with whom they live. This living with others that determines subjectivity is, according to Lacan, characterized by a sense of loss—or lack—and a disposition of mourning. Chapter 2, then, develops further our understanding of the interdependency of Nietzsche and his reader in terms of the anxiety and nothingness that characterizes relations to others in general, and is already figured within Nietzsche’s writings.

The possibility of failure to live up to Nietzsche’s demands, and the anxiety such failure provokes, abides within the relation to his philosophy. Chapter 3 considers the *impossibility* of the position of “the good reader” with respect to Nietzsche’s philosophy. I argue that this impossibility, far from limiting the text’s appeal for the reader, however, is what attracts and binds the reader to Nietzsche. This claim is developed through an engagement with two “esoteric” readings of his philosophy furnished by Stanley Rosen and Laurence Lampert. Rosen and Lampert emphasize the selective conceit of Nietzsche’s writing: that many would *misunderstand* and become false prophets of his message, as the price of its reaching only the very few “higher types” for which it was intended. However, it will be argued, because the identification with Nietzsche is always in excess of itself—producing “the bad reader” along with “the ideal reader”—*the higher* position to which these commentators lay claim is untenable: “the bad reader” merely embodying “the good reader’s” projected bad conscience.

In chapter 4 the terrain shifts from a concern for the interpellation of the reader, in (Lacanian) paternal terms, to a preoccupation, and identification, with the abject or excluded (maternal) register of Nietzsche. Here I perform a Kleinian analysis of two interpretations of Nietzsche that circulate about

the figure of madness: David Farrell Krell's *Nietzsche: A Novel*, and Georges Bataille's *On Nietzsche*. The psychoanalytic theorist Melanie Klein refigures anxiety about loss in terms of the psychic violence the preoedipal infant displays toward its mother. The mother plays the role for the infant of "the container" into which it can project "the bad parts" of itself: those aspects of its experience felt as distressing, or painful. Accordingly, I interpret these readers' relations to Nietzsche in terms of his philosophy's capacity for "containing" readers' "excess," which they can experience comfortably only when encountered in the guise of another. In chapter 4, I argue that by contemplating Nietzsche's insanity and subsequent death, Bataille and Krell displace upon Nietzsche discomfort regarding the possibility of their own madness and mortality. Nietzsche thus "contains" for them these most profound anxieties.

Likewise, in chapter 5 I turn to Sarah Kofman's own psychoanalytic engagement with Nietzsche—her interpretation of his corpus in terms of "the family romance"—by subjecting to a Kleinian analysis the relation she enacts to him. In this instance the focal point of her engagement with his text is not madness, so much as the threat of anti-Semitism. I argue that Kofman's own manifest ambivalence about her Jewish identity is modified by the relation to Nietzsche, and especially through her defense of the rectitude of his position toward the Jews. According to my analysis, each commentary outlined above involves a blind spot respecting an abject piece of the self that has been invested in Nietzsche's text, and the attendant negative affect to which the relation with Nietzsche gives rise. Indeed, the intensity of the relation with him is due to this blindness to one's ambivalence regarding such material, and its subsequent displacement onto Nietzsche. Denial motivates the identification with Nietzsche through which the reader is interpellated within his philosophical project.

In the sixth and final chapter, by contrast, I examine a commentary that specifically takes account of the constitutive ambivalence of the relation to Nietzsche, and moreover, demonstrates how his text generates this ambivalence in the reader. In *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, Pierre Klossowski characterizes Nietzsche's writing in corporeal terms, as self-consciously contagious: that is, as purposefully infecting the reader with his own perspective, through a transmission of *bodily* impulses. However, the centerpiece of Klossowski's text on Nietzsche is his interpretation of eternal recurrence as a simulacrum, through which readers encounter their own negativity in Nietzsche's writing. This simulacrum corresponds to the

abject mother of Klein's account, and, as discussed in chapter 2, Lacan's anamorphic death head—a voracious nothingness that threatens, and so also motivates, subjectivity. By demonstrating the centrality of this ambiguity to the doctrine of recurrence, Klossowski reveals what is at stake for Nietzsche's philosophy, and his cooption of the reader: because the destabilization of the reader's subjectivity is Nietzsche's manner of committing them to him, and thus of securing the longevity (if not immortality) of his project. By exposing the figure of recurrence as Nietzsche's apparatus of recruitment, does Klossowski thereby slip its noose, freeing himself from subjugation to Nietzsche's preordained roles and rank-orderings? The aim of this book, finally, is to propose a new direction for Nietzsche scholarship: one through which readers become more conscious of—and perhaps, then, less susceptible to—Nietzsche's power over them. The first and last question to which this book responds is the very possibility of an equal relationship with Nietzsche; and a more creative, and critical, relation to Nietzsche's corpus.