

Great Literary Artists in Nietzsche's Philosophical Duality

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Abstract

The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) makes a comparison between the two novelists Stendhal (1783- 1842) and Gustave Flaubert (1821- 1880) to show how one affirms life in his art while the other denies it. In using a philosophical concept which he derives from Greek mythology, he shows Flaubert's realism as faulty and unhealthy which detracts from him as an artist while Henry Stendhal transcends realism and fulfills Nietzsche's preconditions for great art by being a Dionysian artist. Flaubert fails to create characters with a psychological depth. If the artist does not get into a state of intoxication, he will fail to be creative. He creates characters and comments on their actions objectively without getting involved as an observer to reflect upon these characters, or showing his perspective with regards to their attitudes even at the expense of failing to make the work entertaining. He is ascetic in his approach and therefore nihilistic. He does not affirm life by his art.

Keywords: Flaubert, Stendhal, Nietzsche's nihilism, Dionysian, artistic duality

Life-denying or nihilism in Nietzsche is related to a large extent to the Judo-Christian tradition of duality according to which life is thought of as spirit and matter. The tradition places spirit as the highest value while matter is relegated to a second place. One thinks of the Hereafter and the paradise as the real home for which one has to prepare himself while the soul takes precedence over the matter in this tradition. Desires of the flesh and sensual pleasures are frowned upon and seen as hindering one to reach the ultimate goal. This comes at the expense of ignoring the earthly existence. This concept is at times taken to extremes and one side overtakes the other, which eventually leads to a total denying of life at the expense of a promised utopian life. As a philosopher of instincts, Nietzsche extols and affirms this world rather than the other hidden one. In the course of his discussion, Nietzsche discusses numerous artists whom he believes their works of art are psychologically and physiologically related and intertwined with each other. They reflect to a varying degree Nietzsche's evaluation and artistic vision. Some of them, he believes, affirm life in their art while others negate it. He stresses that a work of art expresses the artist's vision and perspective and through their own vision Nietzsche is

able reflect on their attitude to life and even describe it as being either life-affirming or life-negating “ the inference from the work to the maker, from the deed to the doer, from the ideal to the one who needs it, from the very manner of thinking to the commanding need behind it” (Nietzsche 51). Not only does it reflect the artist’s vision but also reflects the artist’s psychology.

“thoughts are symptoms of certain bodies” (Nietzsche 2). An artist’s value judgements and sentiments are signs of a specific psychology as well physiology. If an artist lacks a healthy vision, his works will be unhealthy too and the opposite is, of course true.

Throughout his work he attaches a lot of importance to the value of affirmation. Indeed a great deal of his work focuses on this central idea “Nietzsche regards the affirmation of life as his defining philosophical achievement”(Reginster 2). Affirming life does not mean turning a blind eye to suffering but presupposes the acceptance of life as it is. His vision of looking at the suffering and loss of mankind is seen as some kind of inevitable necessity that one has to accept in aesthetic contemplation, which in turn entails an aesthetic reconstruction “presenting what is necessary in things as beautiful does not occur without artistic reconstruction and interpretation” (Came 216). But this reconstruction requires “a diluted and hence falsified image of reality” (Came 215). Life’s facts need to be distorted in order to show another beautified side of reality. This acceptance entails accepting the world with its suffering as a whole without ignoring suffering and accepting to say YES to life despite its agony. He even sees this necessary suffering as beautiful. He asserts:

I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be may only negation. And all in all and on the whole: I wish only to be only a Yes-sayer” (Nietzsche 276)

Saying YES to life which emanates from his idolization of power was an obsession for Nietzsche that recurs throughout his work to the point of dividing morality into two types, one is the master morality and the other is the slave morality. Slave morality is that which makes one content and satisfied with what one has. The slave morality seduces one to stay meek and complacent. People with this type of morality will not be able to affirm life. His contention is that a type of a seductive religious morality that may induce the individual to accept the fate of the providence may lead to complacency and hope for a better metaphysical world. But life is good if we affirm it and affirming new values only comes when one is capable of aesthetic transfiguration “one of Nietzsche’s central contentions regarding the practical-existential import of art relates to his idea of aesthetic transfiguration, the capacity of art to alchemize the meaningless sufferings of mere natural existence into the aesthetically magnificent struggle that is human life” (Came 9) He reiterates that life is good only if, upon imagining its return in every detail, we can affirm it as it is” (Nietzsche 341)

He condemns traditional morality and even his tirade against Christianity is, in fact, directed against that type of Christianity that preaches the bliss of another world at the expense of earthly existence. It corrodes the will to life. He demands that a superior individual should never admit of slave morality preaching especially if it divests one of his individuality and turns himself against himself and makes him a passive negating individual. Such individuals who carry such views are nihilistic as they obliterate individuality and negate life. He transposes these views about life-affirming and life-negating onto character types like authors, poets or philosophers. To make this point clear he makes an comparison between the French novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) and Marie-Henri Beyle known by his name Stendhal (1783-1842). He attacks one and praises the other. He critiques Flaubert’s work for trying to be objective. For the sake of absolute objectivity, Flaubert sacrifices his individual style. He obliterates his personal style by seeking depict scenes and characters without expressing his own views about them. He worked laboriously over his works. He would even take a lot of time to finish one page. “he famously avoided the inexact, the abstract, the vaguely inapt expression, and scrupulously eschewed the cliché.” (Gosse 4). He pursued the principle of looking for the right word. He would sometimes spend a whole week to write a single page. He was a perfectionist stylist who chiseled out his words carefully. Nietzsche regarded him nihilistic. He describes him wondering:

is it hatred of life or superabundance of life that has become creative here? In Goethe, for instance, superabundance has become creative, in Flaubert it is hatred: Flaubert, a new edition of Pascal, but as an artist, based on the instinctive judgment: Flaubert is always hateful, the man is nothing, the work is everything... He tortured himself when he wrote, just as Pascal tortured himself when he thought — they both felt unegoistic... ‘selflessness’—that principle of decadence, the will to the end in art as in morality. (Nietzsche 66)

This search of objectivity is doomed as it is a selfless perspective, a way that eventually leads to the end of art and opens the door to slave morality. He lacks the Dionysian superabundance of life, an overflow that creates, fertilizes forces capable of turning desert into beautiful land. He is deemed hostile to life. His lack of perspective signals the annihilation of the individual. It is “the incarnate will to contradiction and anti-nature” of the ascetic ideal (Nietzsche 12). He even considered that Flaubert destroyed his intellect in his attempt to “turn off all the emotions without exception in a vain quest for objectivity, which exemplifies how realism in art can be symptomatic of an unhealthy body” (Nietzsche 12). In his quest of the right word, Flaubert acted against Nietzsche’s principle of the Dionysian intoxication which he regarded as indispensable and a physiological precondition for art: “ Without intoxication to intensify the excitability of the whole machine, there can be no art” (Nietzsche 8). Flaubert failed to live up to Nietzsche’s image of the Dionysian artist as he does not fulfil the conditions of the necessary state of metamorphosis which he regards as:

the essential thing is the ease of metamorphosis, the inability not to react [...] It is impossible for a Dionysian to fail to understand any suggestion, he will not

miss any affective signal, he has the most highly developed instinct for understanding and guessing, just as he possesses the art of communication to the highest degree. He enters into any skin, into any affect: he constantly transforms himself” (Nietzsche 10)

By ignoring his sentiments, Flaubert cannot enter the Dionysian state which means he is unable to “enter into the perspectives of others; ideas, logic, and conscious, dispassionate observation for its own sake are not adequate substitutes.(Le Blevenec, 12). Flaubert fails to create characters with a psychological depth. If the artist does not get into a state of intoxication, he will fail to be creative. In some of his novels, he creates characters and comments on their actions objectively without getting involved as an observer to reflect upon these characters., or showing his perspective with regards to their attitudes even at the expense of failing to make the work entertaining. In some of the protagonists of his novels, he does not even praise, admire or condemn his characters. He excessively gives a full and detailed description of the character without taking a position for or against it. Marie K. Leblevenec comments:

Nietzsche thinks that Flaubert’s impersonal, objective artistic approach is just a sign that Flaubert is running away from his own sentiments due to weakness and bad conscience. He thinks that Flaubert’s “studies ‘from nature’ seem to be to be a bad sign: they show subjugation, weakness, fatalism, — this practice of lying in the dirt in front of petits faits is unworthy of an artist who is whole and complete. (Le Blevenec 14)

Nietzsche regards this as a sign of weakness, and a submission to fatalism and this lack of own interpretation and personal reflection, and denial of sensuality is therefore ascetic and consequently nihilistic:

that will to stand still before the factual, the *factum brutum*, that fatalism of ‘petits faits’ (ce petit fatalisme, as I call it) [...] that renunciation of any interpretation (of forcing, adjusting, shortening, omitting, filling-out, inventing, falsifying and everything else essential to interpretation)—on the whole, this expresses the asceticism of virtue just as well as any denial of sensuality (it is basically just a modus of this denial). (Nietzsche 24)

Against this unhealthy example of an artist, Nietzsche opposes another example which he regards healthy and life-affirming. The French novelist Stendhal was praised by Nietzsche and held in high esteem. He describes the moment of meeting Stendhal as “one of the best accidents of my life,” and “completely invaluable, with his anticipatory psychologist’s eye and his grasp of the facts, a grasp that reminds you of that greatest facticity of all... and finally, not least of all as an honest atheist, a rare species in France” (Nietzsche 33). He exalts him as a master psychologist particularly his psychological depth in his 1830 novel *Le Rouge et Le Noir* and as a perfect aesthete in his 1822 novel *De l’Amour* “who has had perhaps the most thoughtful eyes and ears of all the Frenchmen of this century. (Nietzsche 25). Stendhal defines beauty as “a promise of happiness” which does involve interest as well as the personal perspective of the beholder and

observer. He does not deny sensuality. His concept about beauty is different from that of Schopenhauer and Kant. They both define beauty as that which pleases without interest. Stendhal involves his own perspective, interest and sentiments. This is deemed by Nietzsche to be life-affirming aesthetic contemplation and subjectivity placed against Flaubert's ascetic objectivity. Stendhal's "sensuality is not suspended as soon as we enter the aesthetic condition" (Nietzsche 8). Flaubert's excitement of the will is again placed against Stendhal's extinguishment of the will. Stendhal's healthier psychology is seen as being superior to philosophers or artists giving ascetic definitions of beauty. "he does not have rancour against sensuality"(Nietzsche 7) and this makes him a great artist who can "enter into any skin, into any affect," (Nietzsche 10).

This interesting comparison between the two novelist leads us to Nietzsche's concept of aesthetic-self-styling, artistic distance, and self-reflection to affirm life. This denotes a rejection of nihilism. Life is thought to be the highest value and whoever creates a new value, he then affirms life. A naturalized perspective instead of a religious lens is therefore necessary. Aesthetic self-styling does not mean that one should ignore the reality of existence. But in order to affirm life honesty is thought as necessary. Self-deception about the facts of life is not life-affirmation. It is essential to realize first that life is tragic and full of agony and distress and there is no way to escape that. It is imperative to assert and accept this fact as it is. Affirming comes through acceptance and resistance. Therefore he called truthfulness "our virtue, the last one left to us" (Nietzsche 227). He even reprimands those who do not appreciate honesty and truthfulness :

I do not want to believe it although it is palpable: the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience ...I mean: the great majority of people does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and live accordingly, without having first given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con, and without even troubling themselves such reasons afterwards. (Nietzsche 324)

Art can hide the terrible truths of existence. It is a mask that makes life bearable. Neither truthfulness nor art as an illusion are ignored by Nietzsche. Accepting life as it is as a first step and then turning the self into an aesthetic phenomenon is the second.

Those who value honesty are described as being courageous and a mark of having a virtuous character. Such people enjoy resolution and spiritual power while those who entertain themselves by the illusion of biblical faith bestowed on them by a certain alleged blessing have only wishful thinking that eventually does not stand scrutiny as it is cognitively corrupt. But he never takes an extreme side as he regards illusion as also indispensable to live well. Illusion through art is indispensable. He regarded art from an early age as indispensable indeed irreplaceable. It is a source of transcendent lessons. It helps us create value. He even goes so as to affirm that art is a cure to alleviate the terrible truths of life:

every art, every philosophy can be considered a cure and aid in the service of growing or declining life: it always presupposes suffering and sufferers. But

there are two types of sufferers: those who suffer from a superabundance of life — they want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic outlook and insight into life — then, those who suffer from an impoverishment of life and demand quiet, stillness, calm seas or else intoxication, paroxysm, stupor from art and philosophy. Revenge against life itself — the most voluptuous type of intoxication for people who are impoverished in this way! (Nietzsche 49)

He confirms that we should learn from artists “ how to make things beautiful, attractive, desirable, for ourselves when they are not” (Nietzsche 299). Art provides us with a certain model and gives us the vision to use the same technique beyond art and use them in life itself. “ With them this subtle power usually comes to an end when art ends and life begins, but we want to be the poets of our life” (Nietzsche 299). What makes life admirable and worth living is its aesthetic features. He comments:

The same impulse which calls art into being, as the complement and consummation of existence, seducing one to a continuation of life, was also the cause of the Olympian world which the Hellenic will’ made use of as a transfiguring mirror. Thus do the gods justify the life of man: they themselves live it—the only satisfactory theodicy!” (Nietzsche 92)

An individual’s character and his life has a certain artistic plan with its own moments of sublimity. Art helps the individual form a second nature having gotten rid of all ugliness by reshaping life and character according to a satisfying aesthetic lines. This value of art is opposed to the value of truthfulness. Art saves us from the truth. The truth of existence is disturbing enough to demand a certain degree of respite from the inevitable will to truth. Art alleviates the trouble associated with our will to truth. He says in *The Gay Science*

If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science- the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation-would be utterly unbearable. Honesty would lead to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us avoid such consequences: art as the good will to appearance. (Nietzsche 107)

Nietzsche believed that error and delusion are part of human sensation. His error theory is credited to the cognitive theories of Kant and Schopenhauer. The fact that cognition cannot help us know things as they really led Nietzsche to skepticism that the world is made to suit our cognitive faculties. Our cognitive faculties lead us to delusion and error because seeking truthfulness through rigorous scientific discipline lead us away from satisfying the needs of truthfulness. The value of art is advanced as in opposition to the value of truthfulness.

As such, Nietzsche values autonomy and the independence of “ free spirit” and individuality. They both help affirm life in the face of constraining religious or moral

conventions of the society. His emphasis on individuality is related to the importance he attaches to the natural characteristics of a certain individual which in turn means that for Nietzsche there are “higher men” than others. Valuable individuals are those who “give themselves laws, who create themselves.” (Nietzsche 335). Those individuals who are able to integrate art and artistry with truthfulness in an independent and autonomous way to affirm life and enhance the value of life itself. When aesthetic individual wills are combined together into a mosaic, the primal unity of existence is affirmed. It is only this integration which entails the combination of all the wills of such individuals that lead to the truth. No one can achieve unity singly. He comments:

For this alone is fitting for a philosopher. We have no right to be *single* in anything: we may neither err nor hit upon the truth singly. Rather, with the necessity with which a tree bears its fruit our thoughts grow out of us, our values, our yes’s and no’s and if’s and whether’s- the whole lot related and connected among themselves, witness to one will, one health, one earthly kingdom, one sun. (Nietzsche 2)

“Self-Styling” which is an important force for self-deception is a way to consider weaknesses and strengths by turning the ugly into sublime. (Nietzsche 229). He states that he is “against the slanderers of nature” and that “artists conceal naturalness by shielding his perspective from nature and instead living in the world of dreams” (Nietzsche 294). Distortion of one’s selfhood through aesthetic self-styling helps us reach a transcendent reality that crosses the limits of appearances to reach the underlying reality. In order to move away from the mechanistic, moral and religious constraints, the artist has to promote lies. Christopher Janaway comments:

In the ideal of self-affirmation, things were different: the acceptance of the whole truth of one’s life-what was and is- was to be embraced without flinching, without escape or erasure. But now the self-satisfaction to be attained through artistry consists in actively making one’s character pleasing by falsifying it. We seem to have struck upon a deep-lying vein of ambivalence towards truth in Nietzsche. (Janaway 67)

Nietzsche is obviously arguing for making the self an aesthetic phenomenon. Art is to be viewed as a “deviation from nature” a way to style ourselves into heroes, and “nature is supposed to be contradicted. Here the vulgar attraction of illusion is supposed to give way to a higher attraction” (Nietzsche 80). This aesthetic self-styling and artistic creativity are essential for self-satisfaction in the face of what Nietzsche called “great nausea” of existence.” Art will not replace religion but, but it can provide partial cures for the nausea we are exposed to in a world of honesty and nihilism” (Afzal 2013). Nietzsche often returns to ancient Greeks for their aesthetic idolization of the self and life. He asserts that that the revival of modern culture depends on finding an Greek ideal.

In the modern age, however, the philosopher Michel Foucault shared much of Nietzsche’s aesthetic self-styling and life-affirming in the face of the nausea of existence. He reverted to antiquity to search for an idea. He found in the Greek culture an example

aesthetic self-creating is achieved by making aesthetics of existence an example to be followed by modernity. Greek ethics was to practice freedom in choosing to have a beautiful life. "In Greek ethics people were concerned with their moral conduct, their ethics, and their relations to themselves and to others...what they were worried about, their theme was to constitute a kind of ethics which was an aesthetics of existence. (Foucault "on Genealogy of Ethics" 225). Foucault fashioned "an aesthetics of existence" based on a strategic conception of thinking using the Greek and Roman forms of self-creation. This conception turns out to be a form of artistic ethics. His method revolves around exploring possibilities in the contemporary world of resistance and affirmation in a creative response to oppression based on an analysis of power relation. He therefore had a recourse to an analysis of the Greek and Roman sexual ethics in order to form a self-constitution and through cultivating subjectivity, becoming affirmative and resistive. He looked into the classical period for an ethical course of all the actions that produce pleasure and turned them into rational rituals and codes of conduct. He termed the sum of all those pleasures "aphrodisia". He comments on his work:

My objective has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects. My work has dealt with three modes of objectification, which transform human beings into subjects. The first is the modes of inquiry, which try to give themselves the status of the sciences. In the second part of my work, I have studied the objectivizing of the subject in what I shall call 'dividing practices...' Finally, I have sought to study it is my current work the way a human being turns him – or himself – into a subject. For example, I have chosen the domain of sexuality... Thus it is not power, but the subject; that is the general theme of my research. (Foucault 777)

These actions are unlike in metaphysical Christianity, are forms of conduct judged by their vigor of pleasurable acts and the social demands that such actions exact. The receiver who should take every care in order "attend to oneself is therefore not just a momentary preparation for living; it is a form of living. He calls this attention to living to oneself "the art of "how to live"

Like Nietzsche before him, Foucault believed that the subject can be created and has to be created. It is not a priori in existence. "Basic to [Foucault's] work is the idea that subjectivity is a complex product rather than a preexisting condition" (Prado 10). Self-creation has always been Foucault's major concern and he looked in history for models to be emulated and how subjective self-creation and self- techniques managed to find a place in between *truth* and *power*. Exploring antiquity, he found that their ethics is not based on labelling right and wrong but rather based on self-creating. This idea led Foucault later to conclude that the subject could constitute itself in the face of power relations through means of resistance. Means of resistance means, among other, the resources of self-creation. The subject in this case is not obliged to go always back to Antiquity but can always affirm subjectivity in ways pertinent to the modern age. He did not, however, presuppose that the subject is entirely free but there are always possibilities that are open to us to affirm subjectivity. In this project of future self-transformation of

the subject, “the individual has to displace the standard subjectivity and to stylize his life, until it becomes a work of art. (Nica 33). Foucault believed that human life could be fashioned into a work of art if the individual managed to subject his life to certain criteria of perfection. He wonders if it is difficult for man to turn his life into a work of art:

What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something, which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life? (Foucault 350)

He set out to expound rules a way from Antiquity. His method is to cultivate criticism and philosophy. The individual can always assert his authority against biopolitical domination and chart for him a way of life not in conformity with the biopolitical principles of the authority. He asserts that:

The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love, relationship is true also for life. (Foucault 9)

The aim of Foucault's aesthetics of existence is to attain freedom which he also regards as a condition that self-creation may eventually lead to. If an individual is caught in the crossfire of power relations and domination of the authority, then the task of the aesthetics of existence is to find methods which would “allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination” (Foucault 129).

The Greeks were not so much concerned about following rules and concepts as Kant had proposed. They were after carving out a beautiful existence. What made Foucault; however try to connect this beautiful existence with morality was his notion of man giving his life a beautiful form that makes it pleasurable .He comments:

An ‘aesthetics of existence’ is a way of life whose moral value [depends] on certain formal principles certain formal principles in the use of pleasures, in the way one distributed them, in the limits one observed, in the hierarchy one respected.” (Foucault 89)

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