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THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA

The Philosophy Classic

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

With an Introduction by
DIRK R. JOHNSON



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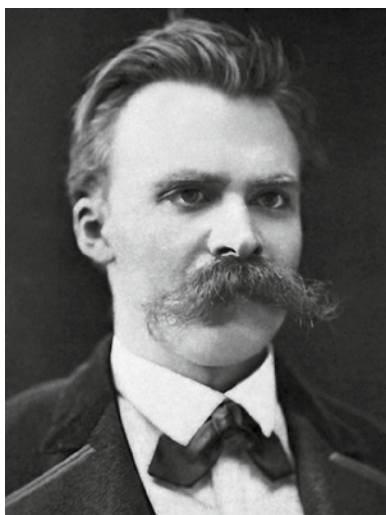
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AN INTRODUCTION

Dirk R. Johnson



Friedrich Nietzsche c. 1875, by German photographer and portrait painter Friedrich Hermann Hartmann.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra arrived like a lightning bolt in the history of Western literature and thought. Nothing Nietzsche had written prior to *Zarathustra* foreshadowed the ambition of this endeavor. He himself commented on its singularity: the combined acuity of two hundred years, he claimed,

could not have guessed that the same author of his earlier work was the visionary of *Zarathustra*.¹

It stands out in its combination of poetry, narrative, parody, self-mockery, grandeur, and sublimity, all while leaving its possible messages and intentions hidden from view. *Zarathustra* was a leap beyond anything else Nietzsche had written, but it was also a break from the history of philosophy. One need only contrast its enigmatic nature with that of the work of Nietzsche's immediate predecessor, Immanuel Kant.

Its quality of mystery has intrigued and confused interpreters. What is *Zarathustra* about? What is its goal? Does it *have* one? Does it appeal to a future higher humanity or is it merely self-indulgent, reveling in its own allusiveness, playfulness, and literary perfection?

Part of its enduring appeal is that it leaves these questions unanswered, intentionally. At the same time, its suggestiveness has motivated intrepid readers to try to decipher its mysteries and unravel its riddles. Like a Rorschach test, it invites its readers to make sense of its countless metaphors, symbols, and images. It is intimately connected with the spirit of the time that it reflects, yet rejects that spirit, and wishes to speak to and overcome it.

For this very reason, every generation approaches the text with fresh eyes and sensibilities. While the first generation of readers saw in it a blueprint for a future humanity, a more recent generation may be drawn to its playful, open-ended, and resonant language. Indeed, first-time readers are often transported or overwhelmed by its evocative images and metaphors. There are those who only read *Zarathustra* among Nietzsche's writings, and who consider it their favorite work. Others have the opposite reaction

¹ *Ecce Homo*, "Why I am so Clever" 4.

and appreciate Nietzsche's other texts while shunning the visionary *Zarathustra*.

Zarathustra is indeed difficult to interpret. This task of understanding is further complicated if one is unaware of the rest of Nietzsche's philosophy. While first-time readers *can* appreciate it without knowledge of those writings, they should approach the work with guarded enthusiasm and caution as well as humility. Especially if one considers that Nietzsche regarded his entire philosophical work to be a running commentary to his greatest masterpiece: *Zarathustra*.

WHO IS ZARATHUSTRA?

The historical Zarathustra was a legendary Iranian religious figure. Living approximately in the second millennium BCE, he is considered the world's first prophet. During the Enlightenment, both Voltaire and Mozart treated him as a noble, tolerant forerunner of a pre-Christian religion. In his comic opera, *The Magic Flute*, Mozart incorporated a version of Zarathustra – or *Zoroaster*, in his more common designation. Their cultural example may have served as one inspiration.

The vagueness of the historical figure must have equally attracted Nietzsche. The fact that little was known about him, and yet he assumed a mythic stature, allowed Nietzsche to utilize the character of Zarathustra to awaken grander associations and aspirations. At the same time, he could fill the empty vessel with his philosophical content. In that way, he channeled the mythic quality of the legendary prophet and placed him into a modern setting that reflected the ambivalences and tensions of his times.

Above all, Nietzsche directed his readers' attention to the major reason he had chosen the figure. Nietzsche stated that Zarathustra was the first to have seen the struggle of good and evil as the true wheel of human history – morality as a form of metaphysics. Since he had created the fateful error, he would have to be the first to recognize his mistake.²

For Nietzsche's purposes, and our understanding of the text, it is irrelevant if Zarathustra could be made responsible for such a momentous historical event. It was only important that Nietzsche used him for his personal objective of discovering the error of morality.

If *Zarathustra* is *about anything*, then, it is about the uncovering, and his protagonist's personal overcoming, of historical morality – that fateful error.

NIETZSCHE'S EARLY YEARS

All roads did *not* lead to *Zarathustra*. Nietzsche's early career as a student of philology paved the way for a future vocation as a professor. By all accounts, he was a promising scholar of antiquity. He received a position at the University of Basel, in 1869, at the precocious age of twenty-four, solely based on a recommendation from his mentor. His academic future was set.

Then the unexpected happened: Nietzsche published a controversial interpretation of the ancient world, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). This text turned the mainstream views of the Hellenic age on their head. It was an ambitious reconfiguration influenced by his friendship with Richard Wagner. Nietzsche had met Wagner as a student in Leipzig, in 1868,

² *Ecce Homo*, "Why I am a Destiny" 3.

and the composer enlisted him in his project of cultural rejuvenation.

In trying to establish an intellectual grounding for Wagner's enterprise, Nietzsche challenged the consensus verdict on ancient Greece. The traditional view was that the culture was the product of noble, ethically superior individuals. He suggested instead a darker undercurrent. He uncovered two conflicting forces at work: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. While the Apollonian reflected the sober and rational side of Greek life, the Dionysian flipside of their being tended toward irrational excess. The result of that productive tension was Attic tragedy, the cultural height of ancient Greece.

Two insights here were of great importance connected to Nietzsche's later *Zarathustra*. One was the study's focus on the Greek god Dionysus and his profound significance for the ancient world. The other was Nietzsche's suggestion that ancient Greek tragedy was at its highest point when it was killed off by Socrates. He could not grasp the deeper significance of the tragic worldview, and his rationalism undermined the basis for tragic art.

Despite its undisputed brilliance, *The Birth of Tragedy* elicited a fierce backlash among academic colleagues. They criticized it for its overarching speculations and its lack of scholarly grounding. An academic review by a young, up-and-coming scholar damaged Nietzsche's reputation. It led him to distance himself from his profession and ultimately to retire from it completely.

The disappointment with the opposition to his first work, along with recurring ill health, were the main factors that led him to relinquish his position at Basel. But another overriding factor was the cooling of his relationship with Wagner and his disenchantment with their shared cultural ideal.

Nietzsche now regarded his earlier commitments, both to his profession and to Wagner, as a false start and a distraction from his own preoccupations and concerns.

WANDERING YEARS

Nietzsche now embarked on a ten-year (1879–1888) itinerant lifestyle that took him further away from his native Germany and to a range of European locales: Sils in Switzerland, Nice in France, Genoa and Turin in Italy. All the while he read widely. Aside from the ancients, whose works, as a scholar of antiquity, he already knew well, he added to the list more contemporary literature, such as the French moralists and novelists, English moralists, and Russian authors, as well as classical works of European literature.

Nietzsche also began to examine specialized scientific treatises on physiology and biology, and other texts dealing with the wider natural sciences. Most of all, he was intrigued by literature emerging on the question of morality and human development. Darwin was the hidden reference point for these naturalist investigations.

His reading at the time reflects the two sides of Nietzsche's complex nature. On the one side he was drawn to the cultural tradition of ancient Greece as well as the cultural output of the West. Since his youth, he had dabbled in literary production, writing mocking sketches as well as drafts for plays. He was also well versed in the rich German musical tradition. He was an accomplished pianist, though his own compositions are not highly regarded today. (Later, he suggested that the entire *Zarathustra* should be considered music.³) And throughout his life he wrote poetry. Having

³ *Ecce Homo*, "Also Sprach Zarathustra" 1.

grown up in an intensely fertile cultural period, Nietzsche always harbored an ambition to make his mark on culture.

On the other side, there was a probing, scientifically inclined intellect that could get to the heart of the matter with incredible vigor and precision. This part of his nature was sharpened further by his rigorous philological studies, which trained him to parse ancient texts with a cool, analytical mind. Nietzsche's boundless curiosity also drew him to the advances in a wider range of academic disciplines, including the natural sciences. These gave him both a greater field of content as well as exposing him to new methods and insights into the areas that interested him most – above all, history, philosophy, religion, and the arts.

Despite having grown up in a religious household – his father was a Lutheran pastor – Nietzsche had come a long way from his childhood roots. Deciding early on to pursue an academic career in philology (displeasing his pious mother, who had wanted him to study theology), Nietzsche had taken gradual, though decisive, steps away from his Christian upbringing. He later claimed that his childhood faith had just slipped away, and he had encountered no struggle with it. It is an illuminating remark from a thinker whose masterpiece would initiate a radical break with Christianity.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST MORALITY

Nietzsche later stated that with the second book of his itinerant life, *Daybreak* (1881), he embarked on a campaign against morality.⁴ All three books from those years – the latter text, along with the earlier *Human, All-Too-Human* (1878)

⁴ *Ecce Homo*, "Daybreak" 1.

and the subsequent *The Gay Science* (1882) – present bold new investigations into human history, culture, society, political life, and religion.

These works reveal traces of progressive Enlightenment thought. They explore humanity from a non-religious, humanistic point of view. Nietzsche probed into the cultural rituals and behaviors of humankind and presented rational, naturalistic accounts for many of our practices and cultural institutions. In this period, Nietzsche employed the symbol of the free thinker to characterize his philosophizing.

DARWINIAN NATURALISM

Nietzsche started writing these works in the late 1870s. By that point, Charles Darwin's findings were already disseminated – *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859 – and had achieved widespread scientific acceptance in Germany.

It is clear from reading his texts of this period that naturalistic investigations into human history and development had influenced his thinking. Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1870), where Darwin applied his theory of evolution to man's moral development, gave Nietzsche additional context. He could now draw from a wider range of studies promoting Darwinian theories in relation to humankind.

But Nietzsche was beginning to introduce original perspectives that deviated from the theories of Darwin and others. Above all, he speculated on the specific question of morality and offered alternative hypotheses concerning its origins and dissemination. Instead of treating morality as a historical given, he had become interested in how belief in morality had arisen and how it had displaced other non-moral perspectives. He speculated about what belief

in morality could reveal about the individual who espoused it. This eventually led him to establish a dual history for morality: a master morality versus a slave morality.

Whereas the master morality adhered to values promoting health, vitality, and affirmation of life, slave morality looked with suspicion at examples of human thriving and excellence. It was an important distinction, which he explored further in his most influential post-*Zarathustra* work, the *Genealogy of Morality* (1887). Nietzsche's fundamental insight was that morality did not derive from a transcendent source, but was simply the product of a worldly power struggle.

Nietzsche's critical view of morality led him to suspect a literary tradition that had unquestioningly accepted the moral point of view as the only one. He also started to distrust the scientific rhetoric that was being applied to man and his place in nature. He believed it to be a rhetoric colored by an implicit moralism.

At this point, Nietzsche had reached a critical juncture: either to continue to write within a tradition he had intellectually undermined and which he felt to be spiritually bankrupt, or nihilistic – or to break free from the spiritual and linguistic stranglehold of the moral tradition.

It is here where the idea for *Zarathustra* came to him – or rather, as he later stated, it *overtook* him.⁵

THE BIRTH OF ZARATHUSTRA

The main inspiration for *Zarathustra* was the thought of the “eternal return” – the idea that universe is cyclical and

⁵ *Ecce Homo*, “Zarathustra” 1.

that everything that happens is destined to endlessly recur. Nietzsche claimed to have thrown the idea onto paper in Silvaplana, Switzerland, in August 1881 – “6,000 feet beyond people and time.”⁶

Another inspiration was more earthbound: a young Russian woman named Lou Salomé, to whom he had been introduced in Rome in April 1882.

Nietzsche was intrigued by Salomé and began to court her. He aspired to win the intelligent young woman over to his philosophy, but Salomé proved to be too independent. The breakdown of their passionate friendship, by late 1882, precipitated a crisis in his family. His scheming sister Elisabeth had become jealous of Salomé and plotted against them.

Nietzsche was thrown into emotional turmoil. The affair had dashed his last hope for an intimate partnership. But it triggered an intense outpouring of his creative energies. *Zarathustra* was born in a series of short, inspired bursts each lasting ten days, according to Nietzsche.⁷ The known facts concerning its composition bear out his claim.

PUBLICATION

Zarathustra is comprised of four parts and a prologue. *Zarathustra I* was published in August 1883 in a print run of 1,000 copies.⁸ The book, and its subsequent parts, sold

⁶ *Ecce Homo*, “Zarathustra” 1.

⁷ *Ecce Homo*, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” 4.

⁸ For the publication history of *Zarathustra* see William H. Schaberg, *The Nietzsche Canon*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, 87–119.

even more poorly than his previous works. He designated it a poetic work, and it departed in style and content from his earlier writings.

Before *Zarathustra I* was even published, Nietzsche was working on a second part. In the summer of 1883, during a three-month stay in Sils, Nietzsche completed *Zarathustra II* within two weeks, in July 1883. He sent the manuscript to his publisher and received page proofs in September 1883. It too was printed in a run of 1,000 copies.

He was now busy at work on *Zarathustra III*. He completed the manuscript no later than January 1884, and it appeared in April, once again in a run of 1,000 copies. The design and format of all three volumes were the same – in blue card covers with red ink. The title page listed the book's title and publisher within a lined marginal border. The only distinction between volumes was the inclusion of a number to indicate the respective parts.

In February 1885, Nietzsche announced to a friend that he had completed a fourth (and final) part. Unlike the other three, he self-published the final part. It was printed in a limited run of just forty-five copies, and he distributed nine of them to select friends in April 1885. It is unclear what happened to the remaining stock.

All four parts of *Zarathustra* are today printed together as a single volume, and there is a unity that underlies them. But it is important to keep in mind that the fourth part came as a later addition not intended for the public, while the first three published parts represented a finished whole.

THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA – OUTLINE

Zarathustra opens with a prologue in ten sections that sets the stage for its narrative. It introduces the protagonist – a

man who has lived ten years alone in the mountains and now wants to descend to impart his wisdom to the people (Prologue 1).

Arriving as a prophet in a town, Zarathustra presents the ideal of the *Übermensch* to a crowd on a marketplace (Prologue 3). This higher being will transcend our present conception of man and will become the new meaning of the earth. He will be as superior to our current man as man now is in relation to the ape. (In English, *Übermensch* is variously translated as "Superman," "Overman," "Uberman," "Superhuman," or "Overhuman.")

Zarathustra then contrasts his vision of the *Übermensch* with the reality of the "last" man (Prologue 5). This last man shuns risk and seeks only comfort and conformity. He is like a flea that has overrun the earth with his mediocrity. Despite Zarathustra's disgust with the vision of the last man, the people in the town end by mocking his ideal and clamoring for the last man instead.

Nietzsche then inserts a dramatic interlude with a tight-rope walker. He is there to offer the raucous crowd some entertainment (Prologue 6). While crossing over to the other side, the tightrope walker is pushed off by a scheming jester and falls to his death. The crowd is indifferent, but Zarathustra is moved by his plight. Fearful of the mood in the town, he sneaks out at night and buries the body (Prologue 8). Though the tightrope walker was scorned by the crowd, Zarathustra considers him a soulmate who made a vocation out of danger.

The next morning, Zarathustra has a sudden insight. He will no longer preach to the crowd but will seek solitary companions to lure away from the masses. These individuals will become his future target audience (Prologue 9). Zarathustra now embarks on a journey to find sensitive, alienated souls receptive to his superhuman ideal (Prologue 10).

In the space of ten short sections, Zarathustra has undergone a major pivot. No longer a message for humankind, the ideal of the *Übermensch* has now been narrowed down to a secret promise for a select few.

PART ONE

Part One is made up of 22 speeches or discourses. There is little dramatic action. Rather, Zarathustra declares in grandiose terms his views on various topics – friendship, the modern state, war, women, suicide, chastity, the scholarly life, and so on.

Most of these speeches do not suggest any correctives or concrete alternatives but critique aspects of modern society. There is a chord of cynicism in Zarathustra's words, reflective of someone who has suffered from life, but there is also deep longing.

In Part One, Nietzsche recapitulates many perspectives from his previous works. It is the end product of his free-thinking middle years, where he had systematically unmasked the ideals of society. Nietzsche bundles these insights and themes into the separate sections of the text. However, they reveal a common undercurrent: skepticism towards all ideals upheld by modern society.

At the conclusion of Part One, Zarathustra departs from his followers. He enjoins them to forget him and go their own way. It is a curious ending. He has lured solitary individuals away from the masses – and mass thinking – but then offers them nothing concrete to embrace. His original vision of a transcendent human type remains diffuse and undefined.

PART TWO

In Part Two Zarathustra decides to return to his followers. Still animated by his superhuman ideal, he resumes with his speeches critical of society.

But Nietzsche now inserts more introspective sections. They hint at a deeper sense of melancholy and reveal a more human, relatable side to Zarathustra. He loses his prophetic aura and certitude and confronts a lingering spirit of heaviness and gravity.

THE THREE SONGS

In the midway point of Part Two, there are the three "Song" sections: "The Night Song," "The Dance Song," and "The Grave Song." In "The Night Song," Zarathustra compares his yearning soul to a gushing night time fountain. He transfigures the pain of his solitude into a poem of exquisite beauty. Zarathustra revels in his own independence but remains cut off from the world around him.

The section initiates a transition. While Zarathustra first sought converts to the *Übermensch*, he now retreats into himself and finds solace in an unfulfilled yearning.

This mood continues and deepens in "The Dance Song." Zarathustra encounters a group of girls frolicking in a woodland enclave. Though enchanted, his mood darkens, and he complains about a spirit of gravity. Two (metaphoric) women vie for his attention: Life and Wisdom. While Life is seductive and tries to pull him back into life, Wisdom beckons him to uncover life's mysteries.

In "The Grave Song," Zarathustra lashes out at his enemies. They are the figures in his childhood that ruined his immediacy and naiveté towards life by (dis)orienting him to false (Christian) ideals. They sullied his spontaneous childlike affirmation of life.

This deep-rooted suspicion toward life stands at the core of his personal spirit of gravity. It always threatens to pull Zarathustra away from life and towards false, otherworldly ideals, and it triggers a residual disgust with the world.

THE SOOTHSAYER AND THE STILLEST HOUR

In “The Soothsayer,” Zarathustra relates a mysterious dream to his disciples. In it, a black coffin bursts open and spews forth “a thousand caricatures of children, angels, owls, fools, and child-sized butterflies.”

The dream reveals an underlying psychic tension and a gnawing ambivalence. Whereas he first descended to humankind in the role of self-assured prophet, he must now acknowledge the graves of his past that impede his way to the goal of affirmation of life as it is.

In the closing section of Part Two, entitled “The Stillest Hour,” Zarathustra relates how a night time voice whispers to him to confront what he already knows. In prior sections, he had revealed greater vulnerability and signs of emotional turmoil. But he had not garnered the strength or courage to excavate the deeper meanings of his moods.

PART THREE

Part Three opens with Zarathustra’s ascending a treacherous mountain path (“The Wanderer”). He is ready to scale his “ultimate peak.”

THE VISION AND THE ENIGMA

In this section, Nietzsche first hints at his famous notion of the eternal return. Voyaging on a ship, he relates a story to sailors onboard. It is in the form of a riddle, and Zarathustra

suggests that the sailors are in the best position to guess its meaning.

In his parable, Zarathustra strides through a gloomy landscape in defiance of the spirit of gravity. He discovers a dwarf straddling his shoulders. The dwarf jumps off, and Zarathustra confronts him with an elaborate cosmology concerning the nature of time. This enigmatic, cyclical model seems to have features of an eternal return but before he can finish explaining it, Zarathustra is interrupted by a howling dog and notices the dwarf has vanished.

He suddenly catches sight of a reclining shepherd, who has a black snake lodged in his throat. He calls on the shepherd to rip it out, and he bites off its head and spits it out. The shepherd then stands up like a transformed being and laughs. That concludes Zarathustra's enigmatic riddle. It leaves the eternal return tantalizingly vague.

THE CONVALESCENT

In "The Convalescent," Zarathustra presents the fullest (and only) articulation of his enigmatic concept, the eternal return. It is tempting to think that the first iteration presented within the riddle was its true expression. But Zarathustra was not yet in the position to call it forth. His encounter with the writhing shepherd was both a vision *and* a premonition – a premonition of his own future confrontation with the thought.

In "The Convalescent," Zarathustra sees himself ready to face his greatest thought – "Up, abysmal thought, out of my depth!" The process of extracting the thought from his innermost being is so grueling and exhausting that he must recuperate for seven days. Only after he has recovered can he give voice to the experience.

Zarathustra attempts to convey his personal encounter with the thought of the eternal return. This time it is not

a description of a concrete reality outside himself but the articulation of his subjective feelings (a *thought*) toward an *inner* experience.

He conveys the thought that all signs of past greatness reveal a root pettiness, and that even the greatest are but small on closer inspection and will eternally return as small. Everything great fails to withstand closer scrutiny. Humankind does not progress or improve, but forever repeats the same pattern and produces the same types.

If the small eternally return and the great can no longer inspire, and if even past greatness conceals recurring human weakness, pettiness, and resentment, then that knowledge will cripple and suffocate. But by confronting the awareness and ripping it out, Zarathustra can move beyond it and incorporate it into his overall life affirmation.

It was latent disgust with life – specifically, his *own* life – that first inspired his ideal of a higher human type. But now his deeper insights into man have forced him to reconcile with life as it is and will always be.

THE SECOND DANCE SONG

In the penultimate section of Part Three, “The Second Dance Song,” Nietzsche again encounters the wily temptress, Life. Having internalized the thought of the eternal return, he has overcome the spirit of gravity that weighed him down. He can approach Life with greater confidence, and he now engages with her in a playful, bantering exchange. It is an exchange of equals, and wily Life chastises him for his brash attempt at mastery over her. She even envies his wisdom and fears he might leave her.

At the end of their encounter, Zarathustra accepts the boundaries that Life has drawn for them – a love that respects each other’s freedom and independence – and affirms his relationship with her.

Nietzsche thus completes the main arc of his philosophical drama.

It started with an ambitious search to solve modern man's malaise. It concludes on a quiet, personal note. His protagonist Zarathustra has set aside his wisdom and learns to honor the mystery and inscrutability of life – and to find (temporary) joy and fulfillment in its sublime, transitory moments.

PART FOUR

There has been much scholarly speculation as to why Nietzsche appended a “fourth and final part” to *Zarathustra*.

He originally planned to conclude the text with Part Three, but decided to have Part Four published privately. He had difficulty finding a publisher for it, but might also have considered the material too raucous, almost blasphemous, and therefore decided to limit its audience to friends.

Commentators have also expressed ambivalence about its literary qualities. Whereas the first three parts are composed in an elevated, lofty style, the tone of Part Four is farcical, even slapstick. A likely model for it may have been the comic satyr play that followed the performance of a trilogy of Greek tragedies.

At the start of Part Four, a now aged Zarathustra encounters an assortment of “higher men” on his wanderings, including two kings, an old magician, and the pope, among others. Nietzsche even introduces an ass, which the figures end up worshipping. They take its braying to be a form of affirmation of the eternal return. Here Nietzsche parodies his greatest thought. He seems to want to warn against those who would turn his thought into a set doctrine or the basis for a substitute religion.

ZARATHUSTRA AND THE OVERCOMING OF PITY

Nietzsche offers textual evidence for his motivation for composing Part Four.

First among these are Zarathustra's opening passage to Part Four, his words in the second section "The Cry of Distress" as well as his concluding remarks in the final section ("The Sign"). He says: "O you higher men, *your* distress was it that the old soothsayer foretold to me yestermorn. Unto your distress did he want to seduce and tempt me." He had also played with the idea of subtitling Part Four "The Temptation of Zarathustra," which hints at the Soothsayer's attempt to seduce Zarathustra by evoking his pity.

Zarathustra indicates that overcoming pity of "higher types" is his ultimate challenge, his real proof of strength. By appealing to his innate pity for them, the soothsayer hoped to lure Zarathustra away from his Dionysian isolation and to throw him back into despair.

In the work's final section, "The Sign," Zarathustra slips out of his cave in the early morning. His lion joins him. The lion roars and the remaining cast of characters scamper off. Zarathustra interprets this as a sign that his time has come. He recognizes that the cry of distress had been the soothsayer's trick all along to distract him from his higher calling. He declares his children are near and that the "noontide" will rise. He leaves the cave, "glowing and strong, like a morning sun."

RECEPTION AND INTERPRETATION

The history of *Zarathustra* is in many ways the history of its reception. There have been numerous efforts to interpret this complex text, and it is only fitting it has eluded

a definitive interpretation. This aura of mystery challenges each generation, and each individual reader, to find their own meaning in the work.

THE ÜBERMENSCH

Two strands of interpretation stand out. On one side, there has been a preoccupation with the notion of the *Übermensch*. Since Zarathustra declares this vision to be the new meaning of the earth and announces it in prophetic terms in the prologue, readers have expected that the entire text is meant to conceptualize and promote a future human ideal.

If one also considers that the work appeared during the dissemination of Darwin's findings and Zarathustra even seems to refer to a model of human evolution, it is understandable that many early commentators assumed Nietzsche had proposed an evolutionary ideal for humankind.

But *Zarathustra* is a *literary* work. It works with all the conventions and subtleties of narrative, and that requires us to be cautious and never to take at face value what it seems to promote. Even though Zarathustra proclaims the future of the *Übermensch* early in the prologue, he already distances himself by the end of it and suggests it will be a promise for only a select few.

Later in the text, the *Übermensch* almost disappears completely from view. The narrative then centers on the protagonist's personal crises and sets the stage for his impending encounter with the eternal return (Parts Two and Three). Significantly, the supposed visionary ideal rarely appears in the rest of Nietzsche's writings. This is surprising if one believes it to be a central premise of his philosophy.

Instead, one should see Nietzsche playing with the expectations of an audience already formed by Darwinian