

DOROTHY GREEN

SNARES FOR THE MULTITUDE

Noel Macainsh : Nietzsche in Australia,

Munich, 1975

This unassuming, timely, and badly-presented paper-back demands close attention from any literary critic in Australia who ventures ever again to reach for that handy hold-all, Nietzsche, when a writer's philosophy is under consideration. Many of those who resort to glib Nietzschean explanations of literary ideas have, as Dr Macainsh points out, been content "to cease their inquiry into Nietzsche's work as soon as they have found inspiration, and, or confirmation of themselves" in some partial aspect of it. The present reviewer has already had occasion to point out two unfortunate instances of this practice, which should have been apparent to anyone trained in elementary logic. Dr Macainsh has more formidable equipment: a scholar's knowledge of German, sharpened by residence in Germany, a skill in handling difficult philosophical concepts, familiarity with the German tradition of the 19th century, and what seems to me — though only a German-speaking Nietzsche expert could pronounce on this — an impressive grasp of his subject. What the layman has a right to say is that, whether Dr Macainsh's conclusions are correct or not, his book lays the foundations for a systematic inquiry into the real extent and the exact nature of 'Nietzschean influences' in Australian literature. Vague generalisations based on an imperfect acquaintance with inadequate translations of Also Sprach Zarathustra and questionable versions of Der Wille zur Macht will no longer do.

The one weakness in Dr Macainsh's approach is an imperfect grasp of the historical method, which makes his account of the Australia First Movement inadequate, with the result that the conclusion to his argument must be qualified. But since the main intention of the book is philosophical and psychological, the central thesis is not affected. What is refreshing about the book is that it reveals its author as having a recognisable set of values and a respect for valuing, qualities which permeate all that he has to say about literature, philosophy, psychology, religion and politics. One of his chief values is a belief in the importance of 'dialogue', which in any genuine sense is so lacking in the Australian literary scene — sad victim of the tyranny of distance. He has no vested interest in his hypotheses. Unlike the Antipodean writers he is discussing, he does not bludgeon the reader with affirmations, and, if he dissents from the views of other critics, he does so without hedging, as well as without malice, in an effort to arrive at, or more accurately, to move towards the truth. He believes, as Nietzsche did, that "Grosse Geister sind Skeptiker."

Fundamental to Dr Macainsh's thesis is his conviction that the content of poetry matters and that "to enjoy it without any concern for what its thought may be implies superficiality of acceptance." This is not a popular view nowadays, so that the evidence he produces in favour of it is doubly welcome. Nietzsche in Australia provides fresh and

detailed argument in favour of the view that the "German tradition", particularly as crystallised in Hegel, has manifested itself in surprisingly different ways in Australian literature, and that what has too often been attributed to Nietzsche in that literature derives in fact from Hegel and other "evolutionists", particularly those with Lamarckian views. Such a view has already been applied to the work of Henry Handel Richardson and in passing to that of Brennan and Patrick White. There is endless work to be done in disentangling confusions of philosophic ideas in other authors as diverse as Katharine Susannah Prichard, O'Dowd and A.D. Hope. Dr Macainsh confines himself to three writers, largely because their association led to observable "practical" consequences: the poet William Baylebridge, the publicist P.R. Stephensen and the artist-writer Norman Lindsay. The effects of this meeting of minds were disastrous only for a small group of people, who had no powerful political friends. It is to be hoped that someone with the leisure and knowledge to follow Dr Macainsh's example will trace the effects of the distortions of Nietzschean ideas in works which have had a profound influence on people who have access to political power, the consequences of which are already beginning to affect the lives of a great many people in Australia, and indeed the future of the country as a whole. The works of Ayn Rand have had a wide sale in this country for many years, but no investigator of reading habits has paid much attention to the fact.

Dr Macainsh's object is, he says, to "consider the role of ... Nietzsche ... in the development of a nationalistic ideology in Australia as expressed in the works of Baylebridge and Stephensen. Lindsay's position in the triad is less clearly definable. The exercise is permeated with ironies, in that concepts which seemed to be aggressively "Australian" were in fact European in origin; and the unselfconscious acceptance of cultural independence which Stephensen had so passionately longed to bring about, developed without any help from him as a natural consequence of the events of the 1939-45 war - for a time, at least!

Throughout the argument, the reader is expected to keep in mind the careful distinction drawn between "Weltanschauung" and "ideology" in R.H. Samuel's article "The Origin and Development of National Socialism". Dr Macainsh agrees substantially with Samuel that the former term belongs to philosophy and the search for truth, while the latter implies the purpose of attaining power, particularly political power, which it claims to base on certain ideas. Baylebridge, according to this view, is an ideologue, not a philosopher. I should myself qualify this opinion by regarding Baylebridge as a would-be ideologue.

It should be kept in mind also that Dr Macainsh's analysis of what can and, more emphatically, cannot be attributed to the influence of Nietzsche on Baylebridge is directed more to what critics have said of Baylebridge rather than what he said of himself. He was at pains to conceal the provenance of his views, not to reveal himself as a disciple, though he ran great risks at times in plagiarising the actual words of, for instance, Shaw as well as Nietzsche. Dr Macainsh contends that much of what passes for Nietzsche in Baylebridge, is too often Nietzsche as refracted through Shaw.

During the course of this inquiry, it becomes clear that a great many commonly held beliefs about Nietzsche are false, or the result of a failure to appreciate his ambiguities. Serious misinterpretations have also arisen from the reliance on inadequate translations, or on 'tampered with' texts,

of which the posthumously compiled The Will to Power is almost certainly an example. The brief discussion of the controversy over that book shows an admirable commonsense.

The first part of the discussion "places" Nietzsche in relation to the whole complex of European thought which arose in response to Darwin's Origin of Species. It traces the crucial role of Hegel, not only in accommodating "Darwinismus" in German thinking, but in bringing Nietzsche into relations with Darwinian ideas. Hegel's role in diverting attention from the "mechanistic" component of the theory of natural selection to Lamarckian orthogenesis¹ is also made clear, particularly in respect of its appeal to the "artist". The section ends with a particularly useful account of the reception of Nietzsche's work in England, its assimilation into the Eugenics movement, and the part played in disseminating its influence by the poet John Davidson, whose "Testaments", Dr Macainsh argues persuasively, provided a model for Baylebridge. Davidson was certainly read in Australia by many of Baylebridge's contemporaries, at the same time as Nietzsche himself was coming to be known in the Levy translations.

The second part of the book is devoted to Baylebridge's "vision", as he distilled it from the currents of thought to which he was exposed. The argument remains close and intricate and to try to summarise it would be to do it less than justice. Two or three points which seem crucial may be singled out, in particular the fundamental difference between the Hegelian and Nietzschean world-view, which makes it impossible to see Baylebridge as a Nietzschean. For Hegel, the All was a unity, in which the parts had meaning only in virtue of their participation in the Whole. For Nietzsche, the Whole was a chaos, in which whatever meaning there was resided only in the individual, the person. Baylebridge, in his "National Notes" and elsewhere clearly belongs in the Hegelian party. What Dr Macainsh is concerned to point out is the relative devaluation of the personal which too often follows from mystical, teleological, evolutionary views based on monism, a monism, which can so easily slip into "collectivism" in social and political spheres. Baylebridge succumbed to the temptation to regard men as "instrumental"; Nietzsche abhorred the man who allowed himself to be used for other purposes than his own. What one would like to ask here is whether the notion of men as instruments is regarded as more properly a consequence of monism, than of "historicism", as Popper might argue. Swedenborg, for instance, whose role in the formation of Hegel's system is not alluded to here, could be called a monist; so could Comte, whose notion of amalgamating State and Religion into one concept is curiously like Baylebridge's. The image of the "Grand Man", a monist concept in which Man and God are either equated or regarded in some sense as interdependent is common to Swedenborg, Hegel, Comte and Baylebridge. And Swedenborg we know, was very widely read in Australia both before and during Baylebridge's life-time. Swedenborg's scheme, however, was protected from disastrous consequences by the central place in it which he gave to disinterested love.

Secondly, Dr Macainsh sees no real similarity between Baylebridge's views on Eugenics and Nietzsche's views on marriage, in spite of their common view of women as vessels of maternity. For Baylebridge, the object of marriage, or rather of breeding, was to produce more and better of the same. For Nietzsche the object was to produce a stronger and stronger will to self-transcendence, a more and more unassailable person,

better able to confront the absence of God without succumbing to the temptation to divinise himself.² This brings us to the crux of the argument: the contrast between an open-ended doctrine of "progress" and the closed, and therefore terrifying system implied in Nietzsche's doctrine of Eternal Recurrence. Too little attention has been paid to this doctrine, according to Dr Macainsh, and those who have not come to terms with it and faced all its implications, as Baylebridge and Lindsay did not, have no right to be called Nietzscheans. He makes short shrift of the crude misinterpretations of Nietzsche's concept of the will-to-power³, emphasising that

its essence is self-overcoming and that it is more related to the concept of sublimation, of binding one's so-called instinctual drives into higher forms of expression, than to the mere assertion of oneself over others, which may in fact be expressive of personal weakness.

The corollary of this interpretation demolishes the popular notion of the concept of the *Übermensch*:

In particular, the not uncommon muscular versions of the Superman idea are a travesty, since Nietzsche regarded reason and knowledge as far more effective in the service of the will-to-power than mere physical prowess.

The confusions between the ideas of race and nationalism held by Hegel, Nietzsche and Baylebridge are clarified, especially in Part IV, and it becomes amply clear that the Nietzsche who detested anti-Semites and who thought of himself as a bad German and a good European and believed in the cross-fertilisation of races could hardly be the spiritual ancestor of the Australia First movement. The least satisfactory part of the book is Part V, which deals with that movement. It is here that deficiencies in historiographic method show most clearly. It may be correct to say that the Australia First movement was one of the consequences of Baylebridge's attempt, in the interests of "practice".

to make a rationally unjustified leap towards bodying his "higher reality" out into the world.⁴

but the inference that it was by deliberate design is hardly justified by the facts. On page 133, for instance, the reader is invited to infer that there was some causal connection between Baylebridge's being "instrumental in setting Stephensen up in an office in Bond Street, Sydney, to publish on his own account" and the appearance of the first issue of The Publicist referred to in the following paragraph. The prime mover in The Publicist venture was the wealthy business man W.J. Miles and it was his opinions, not Baylebridge's, which were directly reflected in The Publicist until it was closed down, some considerable time after his death and Baylebridge's. There is little doubt that Stephensen found in Baylebridge a kindred spirit, whose ideas on national cultural independence coincided with his own, but to let it be assumed that Baylebridge had any direct share in formulating the policy of The Publicist and the Australia First movement is unwarranted. Dr Macainsh pays far too little attention to Stephensen's essay The Foundations of Culture in Australia, an essay completed six months before the first issue of The Publicist

appeared, and published by March, 1936. This essay is a liberal-minded, reasonably sensible plea for intellectual independence (in no way offensive to Britain), such as had been made before in Australia from Deniehy onwards. It is highly critical of Hitler and Mussolini and, justly, as it turned out, apprehensive of Japan. It expresses an attitude entirely defensible in the circumstances in which it was written: an attitude, which, unfortunately, it seems necessary to re-state from time to time in this country, largely because Australians have always been more interested in a "protector", a father-figure, than in neutrality, or independence. The Foundations was an attempt, like that of A.J. Marshall's Australia Limited (1938; 1942), to wake Australians up and make them ashamed of conceiving culture in terms of cash-values. It well repays re-reading nowadays. It is regrettable therefore that Dr Macainsh did not refer to Stephensen's transition from liberal (stressing the importance of the individual) to right-wing conservative (conceding the importance of the group). It may not be possible to account for the change, but the need to attempt an account should be recognised.

Stephensen, six years after his impressive essay, was interned along with a number of his associates in The Publicist venture and the Australia First movement, without proper trial, on evidence that could not have been substantiated, or held as admissible, in any court of law. One of them got a long sentence, partly because he was rude about Australians in private letters, and because he had a peculiar temperament and a sardonic sense of humour! Marshall's book, re-published during the war, was a far more devastating and more comprehensive attack on Australian ignorance and Philistinism than any of the private letters used as evidence against Kirtley, but no-one seems to have considered interning him.

This section of Dr Macainsh's book needs some revision. It refers briefly to Bruce Muirden's Puzzled Patriots, a balanced account of the whole affair, but does not make proper use of it. It relies too heavily on biased newspaper reports of the already biased findings of Mr Justice Clyne's Commission of Inquiry. It takes too seriously Clyne's summing-up of his findings about the individuals involved, and above all it does not make clear the unstated assumption behind the Commission's report that "subversive thinking was enough to justify detention."⁵

The consensus of reasoned opinion on this pitiful episode in Australian history, including C.E.W. Bean's, is that Australia was never in any danger whatever from the activities of the Australia First movement and that if they were a nuisance, they could have been dealt with simply under the war-time censorship laws. The moral of the story in fact is that much harm can be done to foolish people by "little men (i.e. military security officers) momentarily possessed of great power" and by accidental events. This said however, it does not follow that Dr Macainsh's assessment of the potentially dangerous connection between philosophy, ideology and "practice" is thereby disproved. The only reason the consequences in the episode he describes were not more serious and more widespread was that none of the people involved had any real access to any real power. What political friends they had in either of the main parties were, as Muirden says, "fair weather friends".

The whole episode surely vindicates three of Nietzsche's most important beliefs: that the function of a philosopher is to act as "a physician of culture"; that a free man does not allow himself, without his free consent, to be used for purposes other than his own; that the

will-to-power has for its object self-overcoming, self-transcendence, not the power over others which is a confession of weakness. The soundness of political programs could well be tested by these principles.

Dr Macainsh's main intentions are not materially affected by his careless handling of the Australia First investigations. He has admirable things to say in the final section about the risks inherent in substituting the principle of immanence for the principle of transcendence in theological thinking, which can lead insidiously to man's usurpation of divinity. He warns us, as E.R. Dodds warned us in The Greeks and the Irrational, against "hoisting any old bag of bones" into the seat left vacant by the "death of God". He suggests Jaspers's "profounder assimilation of tradition" as an antidote to nihilistic despair, but unfortunately does not elaborate this idea.

What this book does above all is to open up a whole new area of criticism in Australian literature and demand fresh evaluations. Its chief virtue is its power to stimulate and disturb. For this reason, it is to be hoped that the book will be re-issued in Australia, free of verbal errors (and of the factual mistakes in Part V) and purged of misprints. The book is so closely packed that an index would be useful to busy scholars; they might also be indulged with translations of some of the more complicated German quotations.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Recent work on RNA, I am given to understand, makes Darwinian "mechanists" less confident that Lamarck was entirely wrong.
2. Some comment on Tillich's concept of the "God beyond God" would have been welcome here. Nietzsche's "death of God" idea has had interesting effects on modern theology.
3. Some of these, alas, have the authority of Russell and Popper behind them, though it is possible they wrote before material which would have corrected their views was available. That influential ideologue of the New Capitalism, Ayn Rand, also selects a partial aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy as a basis of total condemnation. Now, in turn, unscrupulous politicians extract what suits them from her philosophy to justify greed and cruelty, while ignorant journalists accuse her of adherence to a Nietzschean view she condemns! The process of making the straight path crooked goes on endlessly, and only rigorous criticism can correct it, as Popper pointed out.
4. 'Muscular versions' of the Superman idea have been spread in Australian literary criticism by Lindsay, and latterly by Hope's misreadings of Maurice Guest.
5. Muirden, Puzzled Patriots, (M.U.P., 1968) p.152.