

On the Pathos of Truth

by Friedrich Nietzsche

Is fame actually nothing but the tastiest morsel of our self-love? Yet the eager desire for it has been linked to the rarest of men and to their rarest moments. These are moments of sudden illumination, moments in which the person stretches out his commanding arm as if to create a universe, draws up light from within himself and shines forth. At such a moment he is pierced by a certainty which fills him with happiness, the certainty that that which exalted him and carried him into the farthest regions – and thus the height of this unique feeling – should not be allowed to remain withheld from all posterity. In the eternal need, which all future generations have for these rarest illuminations, such a person recognizes the necessity of his own fame. From now on humanity needs him. And since this moment of illumination is the epitome and embodiment of his inmost nature, he believes himself to be immortal as the man of this moment, while he casts from himself all the other moments of his life as dross, decay, vanity, brutishness, or pleonasm and hands them over to mortality.

We observe every passing away and perishing with dissatisfaction, often with astonishment, as if we witnessed therein something fundamentally impossible. We are displeased when a tall tree breaks, and a crumbling mountain distresses us. Every New Year's Eve enables us to feel the mysterious contradiction of being and becoming. But what offends the moral man most of all is the thought that an instant of supreme universal perfection should vanish like a gleam of light, as it were, without posterity and heirs. His imperative demands rather, that whatever once served to propagate more beautifully the concept "man" must be eternally present. The fundamental idea of culture is that the great moments form a chain, like a chain of mountains which unites mankind across the centuries, that the greatest moments of a past age is still great for me, and that the prescient faith of those who desire fame will be fulfilled.

Terrible cultural struggle is kindled by the demand that that which is great shall be eternal. For everything else that lives exclaims "No!" The customary, the small, and the common fill up the crannies of the world like a heavy atmosphere which we are all condemned to breathe. Hindering, suffocating, choking, darkening, and deceiving: it billows around what is great and blocks the road which it must travel towards immortality. This road leads through human brains- through the brains of miserable, short-lived creatures who, ever at the mercy of their restricted needs, emerge again and again to the same trials and with difficulty avert their own destruction for a little time. They desire to live, to live a bit at any price. Who could perceive in them that difficult relay race by means of which only what is great survives? And yet again and again a few persons awaken who feel themselves blessed in regard to that which is great, as if human life were a glorious thing and as if the most beautiful fruit of this bitter plant is the knowledge that someone once walked proudly and stoically through this existence, while another walked through it in deep thoughtfulness and a third with compassion. But they all bequeathed one lesson: that the person that lives life most beautifully is the person who does not esteem it. Whereas the common man takes this span of being with such gloomy seriousness, those on their journey to immortality knew how to treat it with Olympian laughter, or at least with lofty disdain. Often they went to their graves ironically- for what was there in them to bury?

The boldest knights among these addicts of fame, those who believe that they will discover their coat of

arms hanging on a constellation, must be sought among philosophers. Their efforts are not dependent upon a "public," upon the excitation of the masses and the cheering applause of contemporaries. It is their nature to wander the path alone. Their talent is the rarest and in a certain respect most unnatural in nature, even shutting itself off from the hostile towards similar talents. The wall of their self-sufficiency must be made of diamond if it is not to be demolished and shattered. For everything in man and nature is on the move against them. Their journey towards immortality is more difficult and impeded than any other, and yet no one can be more confident than the philosopher that he will reach his goal. Because the philosopher knows not where to stand, if not on the extended wings of all ages. For it is the nature of philosophical reflection to disregard the present and momentary. He possesses the truth: let the wheel of time roll where it will, it will never be able to escape from the truth.

It is important to discover that such men once lived, for one would never be able to imagine on his own, as an idle possibility, the pride of the wise Heraclitus (who may serve as our example). For by its nature every striving for knowledge seems intrinsically unsatisfied and unsatisfying. Therefore, unless he has been instructed to the contrary by history, no one will be able to imagine such regal self-esteem, such boundless conviction that one is the sole fortunate wooer of truth. Men of this sort live within their own solar system, and that is where they must be sought. Even a Pythagoras and an Empedocles treated themselves with superhuman respect, indeed, with an almost religious awe. But they were led back to other men and to their salvation by the bond of sympathy, coupled with great conviction concerning the transmigration of souls and the unity of all living things. But only in the wildest mountain wasteland, while growing numb from the cold, can one surmise to some extent the feeling of loneliness which permeated this hermit of the Ephesian temple of Artemis. No overwhelming feeling of sympathetic excitement emanates from him, no desire to help and to save. He is like a star without an atmosphere. His burning eye is directed inward; from without it looks dead and frigid, as if it looked outward merely for appearances' sake. On all sides the waves of illusion and folly beat directly against the fortress of his pride, while he turns away in disgust. But even tender-hearted men shun such a tragic mask. Such a being might seem more comprehensible in a remote shrine, among images of the gods and amidst cold, sublime architecture. As a man among men, Heraclitus was incredible. And if he was perhaps observed while watching the games of noisy children, he had in any case been pondering something never before pondered by a mortal on such an occasion, viz., the play of the great world-child, Zeus, and the eternal game of world destruction and origination. He had no need for men, not even for the purposes of his knowledge. He was not at all concerned with anything that one might perhaps ascertain from them or with what other wise men before him struggled to ascertain. "It was myself which I sought and explored," he said, using words which signified the fathoming of an oracle- as if he and no one else were the true fulfiller and accomplisher of the Delphic maxim, "know thyself."

But what he heard in this oracle he presented as immortal wisdom, eternally worthy of interpretation in the sense in which the prophetic speeches of the sibyl are immortal. It is sufficient for the most distant generations: may they interpret it only as the sayings of an oracle- as Heraclitus, as the Delphic god himself "neither speaks nor conceals." Although Heraclitus proclaims his wisdom "without laughter, without ornaments and scented ointments," but rather as it were, "with foaming mouth," it must penetrate thousands of years into the future. Since the world forever requires truth, it requires Heraclitus forever, though he does not require the world. What does his fame matter to him! "Fame among mortals who are continually passing away!" as he scornfully proclaims. Fame is something for minstrels and poets and for those who were known as "wise" before him. Let them gulp down this tastiest morsel of their self-love; the fare is too common for him. His fame matters to men, not to him. His self-love is love of truth, and it is this truth which tells him that the immortality of humanity requires him, not that he requires the immortality of the man named Heraclitus.

Truth! Rapturous illusion of a god! What does truth matter to men!

And what was the Heraclitean "truth"!

And where has it gone! A vanished dream, which has been erased from mankind's countenance by other dreams! It was hardly the first!

Regarding everything, which we call by the proud metaphors "world history" and "truth" and "fame," a

heartless spirit might have nothing to say except:

“Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. It was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of world history, but nevertheless only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star cooled and solidified, and the clever beasts had to die. The time had come too, for although they boasted of how much they understood, in the end they discovered to their great annoyance that they had understood everything falsely. They died, and in dying they cursed truth. Such was the nature of these desperate beasts who had invented knowing.”

This would be man's fate if he were nothing but a knowing animal. The truth would drive him to despair and destruction: the truth that he is eternally condemned to untruth. But all that is appropriate for man is belief in attainable truth, in the illusion, which draws near to man and inspires him with confidence. Does he not actually live by means of a continual process of deception? Does nature not conceal most things from him, even the nearest things- his own body, for example, of which he has only a deceptive “consciousness”? He is locked within this consciousness and nature threw away the key. Oh, the fatal curiosity of the philosopher, who longs, just once, to peer out and down through a crack in the chamber of consciousness. Perhaps he will then suspect the extent to which man, in the indifference of his ignorance, is sustained by what is greedy, insatiable, disgusting, pitiless, and murderous- as if he were hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger.

“Let him hang!” cries art. “Wake him up!” shouts the philosopher in the pathos of truth. Yet even while he believes himself to be shaking the sleeper, the philosopher himself is sinking into a still deeper magical slumber. Perhaps he then dreams of the “ideas” or of immortality. Art is more powerful than knowledge, because it desires life, whereas knowledge attains as its final goal only- annihilation.