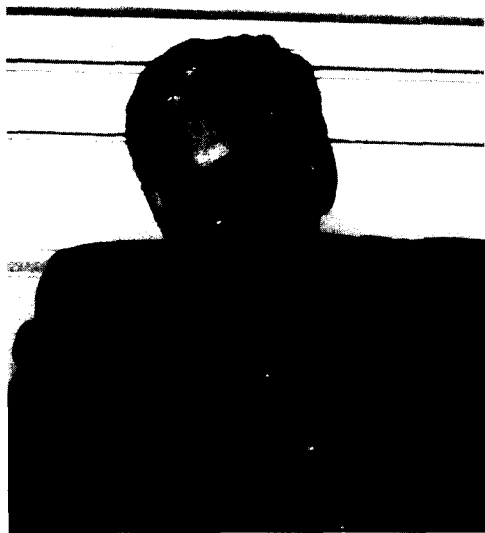


On the Philosophical Life

An Interview with Alexander Nehemas

HRP: IN YOUR BOOK *THE ART OF LIVING* YOU DESCRIBE A tradition of philosophy whose practitioners concern themselves not only with advancing technically true theories, but also with developing a unified and unique self through their work. You write, “The purpose of the art of living is, of course, living. But the life it requires is one in great part devoted to writing. The monument one leaves behind is in the end the permanent work, not the transient life.” Socrates, of course, is the only of these philosophers who didn’t write anything, and, so it can be said, left behind only a transient life. Why is the philosophy of the art of living so intimately connected with the art of writing and how does Socrates succeed as such a philosopher without writing anything?

Nehemas: The interesting thing about Socrates, of course, is that he never wrote anything, but Plato did it for him. He was extraordinarily lucky, if you like. In a very serious sense, Socrates and Plato are difficult to distinguish from one another, especially in the early dialogues, and in that sense we could almost say that Socrates did write. He wrote that which Plato wrote for him. And, as I said earlier in my book on Nietzsche, one of the reasons Nietzsche is so suspicious of Socrates – not suspicious, but jealous, I would say—is that Socrates didn’t have to do any of the work of writing. Nietzsche attempts to become Plato to his own Socrates, Socrates to his own Plato—to play both roles. Socrates’s transient life is not important at all. We know very little about that. We know that people found him extraordinarily interesting and that he was executed. That would not be enough to make him a great figure. It is Plato’s depiction of Socrates that starts off the tradition of philosophy as



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an art of living, not really Socrates's life itself. The actual events of Socrates's life, most of which we don't know, gave Plato the impetus to create that tradition. But I don't think it was just Plato's doing, as I may have suggested; a lot of other people were writing about Socrates at the time, and they were doing very similar things: they were all writing dialogues and they attributed to him the most varied views. So, clearly, there was something amazing about Socrates to begin with. He was, I think, incomprehensible to everyone around him, as incomprehensible then as he is now. And the tradition takes off once he is, so to speak, canonized—not just through his life.

HRP: In the introduction you write, “But his early works, in which Socrates is an unexplained mystery and simply leads a philosophical life, stand at the beginning of a different philosophical tradition”—that is, different from the tradition growing out of Plato's middle period in which philosophy becomes a purely theoretical activity. It would seem that philosophy as the art of living must constantly return to Socrates and reconsider and reencounter his irony. Do you think the art of living can be identified with or defined as the tradition of trying to make sense of Socratic irony?

Nehemas: I don't know that every philosopher who belongs to that tradition makes an explicit return to Socrates, but it's interesting that almost everyone who does belong to it exhibits what we might call Socratic features—particularly ambiguity. It's difficult to know when to take them seriously and when not. That applies not only to Montaigne or Nietzsche, but also to Wittgenstein, if you read Wittgenstein as a philosopher in that tradition. It's very difficult to know what exactly he's saying—when he's speaking in his own voice, when he is not. With Pascal, also, you have the sense of someone baring his soul, but you are never quite sure. How seriously are you going to take him? Many of those people are ironical. Montaigne is a highly ironical author, so is Nietzsche, and so is Foucault. The features we find in Socrates keep reappearing in the figures who belong to this tradition even when they don't write as Socratic scholars or interpreters.

HRP: I'm interested in what figures you would like to identify in the philosophy of the art of living who don't explicitly discuss Socrates.

Nehemas: I don't think Thoreau does, but I think Thoreau belongs to that tradition. (He does, of course, like Socrates, make a big issue of civil disobedience!) Emerson, who I also think belongs to it, talks a lot about Plato, though perhaps he is thinking of Socrates. Wittgenstein does not discuss him. Still, the *Philosophical Investigations*, perhaps even the *Tractatus*, can be thought of as a series of dialogues even more complex than Plato's, because we don't always know who's speaking. We don't even know how many interlocutors there are in the *Investigations*.

One feature of this tradition of philosophy is the direct examination of Socrates. Another is the presence of Socratic features. A third is an emphasis on literary style, or what we call literary style, because all philosophy is written in some style. By that I mean a personal style, an explicit interest in how you write. I think I see such an interest in Stanley Cavell; that's exactly what distinguishes him from many contemporary philosophers and why it's so difficult to create a school out of Cavell's thought—in the end, it's too personal, too “autobiographical” (to use his

own term), for that purpose. Of course, many people created Socratic schools, but we have no idea how true to Socrates any one of them was; and no one has ever known exactly who Socrates was or what he believed.

HRP: I'd like to back away from philosophy as the art of living and concentrate on Plato and Socrates. In your work you consistently argue that some issue in their philosophy is directly relevant to contemporary debates. Sometimes you do so by overturning the standard interpretation. I'm thinking here specifically of your two essays in *Virtues of Authenticity* about Plato and the poets on the one hand and contemporary criticisms of popular culture on the other, as well as your re-working of the question about whether *arete* can be taught. To what extent do you think it is possible for someone of another time and culture to model his or her life on Socrates's project of self-creation? To what extent is the Socratic project singular and specific to fifth-century Athens?

Nehemas: I don't think Socrates's project is so specific to fifth-century Athens. It's something we find people doing all the time. What you can become, if you are involved in that project, is going to depend crucially on the situation and historical conditions in which you find yourself. But the idea of harnessing your energy, harnessing your personality, and making something worthwhile out of it is as basic and general as any human activity could possibly be. Of course, I don't think you could do it by going around and talking to people in the street any longer—if Socrates ever did that. So you would have to go about it in a very different way.

Philosophy is now a written discipline.

HRP: Might that have something to do with the fact that after Socrates, philosophy as the art of living has to be done through writing?

Nehemas: Philosophy is now a written discipline. It wasn't one for Socrates, but for him it wasn't even a discipline in the sense we use "discipline" today. The questions we ask can be too complicated to address for a culture that is no longer an oral culture unless it addresses them in writing. When I say that the art of living is an art practiced in writing, I don't mean that it is enough to just write about it. In some sense what you write must have an effect on your life and personality. That's why I think that *ad hominem* arguments, interestingly enough, are important and relevant to this kind of philosophy: you can criticize philosophers in that tradition if their lives do not reflect their thought—whereas, generally speaking, *ad hominem* arguments are irrelevant and fallacious when applied to theoretical philosophy. But to the extent that *ad hominem* arguments are relevant to it, there is more to philosophy as an art of living than just the writing. On the other hand, suppose that somebody who was living philosophically never wrote a word (and wasn't lucky enough to have a Plato do it instead!). That is possible, at least in principle. But could one then leave behind the kind of model that can make one part of that tradition? To me it seems pretty clear that this is impossible. No matter how influential

you are on the people around you, unless either you or someone else writes about it, people will forget your effects, the changes your life produced. Like ripples made by a pebble in a pond, they will eventually die out. Writing remains; it keeps getting interpreted and reinterpreted, again and again, and so the ripples never die. Well, perhaps you might say, “I don’t want to have an effect on other people. All I want to do is make sense of my own life and make a good person of myself.” That’s an admirable purpose. The trouble is that I wouldn’t ever know anything about it, or about you, because I won’t have any evidence. You disappear after you’ve done your job. And that’s fine. But you can’t have it both ways.

HRP: I’d like to return to a statement you make in *The Art of Living*: “The monument one leaves behind is in the end the permanent work, not the transient life.” Earlier, you write: “Perhaps these people succeeded in applying their models to themselves, perhaps they did not; whether they did it is a matter of biography, and most likely it will remain a matter of contention as well. The image of life contained in their writings is a philosophical matter and, though it too will remain a matter of contention, the contention will be over whether that image is a coherent or admirable one.” Remarkably, however, three of the figures you write about in *The Art of Living*—Socrates, Nietzsche, and Foucault—share one obvious distinguishing characteristic: the facts of their lives are common knowledge. Bearing in mind the extent to which these philosophers’ lives have become common knowledge, I’d like to refer to another passage on this question, from Foucault’s essay “What is an Author?”: “This relationship between writing and death is also manifested in the effacement of the writing subject’s individual characteristics. Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality.” How, despite what you and Foucault seem to say, have the lives of these philosophers become omnipresent in interpretations of their work?

Nehemas: We know very little about Socrates—I want to insist on that. We do, I must admit, have all those biographies of Nietzsche, but what we know about him “as a person” is so general and broad and, ultimately, useless for understanding the work that leaves you speechless. When people try to do the psychobiography of Nietzsche they say ridiculous things like, “He said that God is dead because his father died when he was a child and he couldn’t get over it.” That is an absurd simplification, reducing the significance of a view people hold to a single event in their life, thinking of the event (or events—it doesn’t matter how many) as the cause of the view, of the view as the expression of the event.

The important question you raise here is this: what do we dispute about when we discuss philosophy? What I’m trying to say—and I’m not saying it very clearly either in the book or here—is that when you read people like Nietzsche or Socrates, Montaigne, or Foucault you should not ask, “Were they right in the way they lived?” or “Did they themselves live the way they said life is to be lived?” but rather, “How does that affect me? What am I to do once I have read them?” The philosophical question is not about them, but about you and your own life. And what you do is whatever it is you’re trying to do. You try to answer questions; you try to be good to your friends; you try to be generous to people—whatever it is that

attracts you, whatever is part of your life. And, ideally, you try to impose some order and coherence on it all. So the question, again, is not whether Nietzsche produced an admirable model of life, although you may perhaps also want to answer that question. But somehow, ultimately, what you want to do is to make something of yourself—although not under that description: success is not itself a goal. My own goal is to get whatever interests me right, and to get it right in such a way that all its parts fit together. I don't want to have one view today and another one tomorrow, do one thing now and another later, and have them bear no relation to one another. It's important that our actions, our lives, manifest a consistent personality.

HRP: I would like to return to Foucault for a moment and recall the passage I read from "What is an Author?" He seems an interesting exception to your view in *The Art of Living* that the author constructs for himself a consistent and unified literary self through certain literary styles. Foucault's writings seem characteristically impersonal, academic, and scholarly. And yet few interpretations of Foucault's writings fail to mention the details of his life, specifically his political activism, his sexuality, and his death from AIDS—facts you mention as well. What do you make of this conflict between Foucault's impersonal style and the predominance of biographical details in interpretations of his work?

Nehemas: Again, I don't think the biographical details are predominant. The biographies of Foucault contain the least interesting interpretations of his thought. As to his style, I think it undergoes the most radical changes during the course of his writing. If you start from the very early work you'll find the influence of Heidegger. You'll then detect in the middle works a shift toward Nietzschean ideas, although they are expressed in the most impersonal style—so impersonal that it has its own personality. The very late works, the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* for example, or the last lectures, which I discuss in the book, are written in a completely different style, completely personal. So I think the essay "What is an Author?" vastly overstates the unimportance of the author that was in line with the impersonal style he was using at that time. I have actually written an article about that essay, and I argue that a writer inevitably constructs a persona, the voice of which is always heard through the text: that's what an author is: sometimes that voice can be very impersonal, but that very impersonality, as I said, can be a personal feature. There is, of course, another kind of impersonality—the impersonality you exhibit when you write in a style that is universally accepted in a certain discipline. That is an impersonality that does not distinguish you from other people—at least not from anyone else who writes in that disciplinary style. But when Foucault wrote impersonally he was creating the impression that he had seen a truth no one else had seen and was simply reporting on it—all the while asserting the most extravagant, sometimes almost outlandish, ideas. And that's a very personal style, after all, it's impossible to mistake it for anyone else's. So, I don't think he's an exception at all, and I believe that toward the end of his life, when he was writing *The History of Sexuality* and the lectures on Socrates and the Cynics, he was speaking in a self-revelatory tone. It's almost as if he was trying to say, "This is what I've been doing all along—this is what my life was all about." That's what I find fas-

cinating about the lectures on Socrates: Foucault, at various points, cites a translation of the *Apology*, and then, without a break, he begins to paraphrase it and goes on to speak in his own person. When he says, for example, "I have been trying to treat you like a brother or a father," you don't know if it's Socrates or Foucault who is speaking: it's as if he is putting himself in Socrates's place. And that link, the revelation that all his work had this personal aspect, now allows me to go back and look at the early writing and see it as one part of a single protracted project, despite all the changes of direction, all the stylistic changes, all (to use his own term) the "ruptures."

HRP: Do you find that highly personal, revelatory style in, say, the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, which for me is one of the keystones of what I have called Foucault's impersonal style? Even though he isn't writing within the recognized style or method of a discipline, he still maintains this academic tone.

Nehemas: No, I don't find that self-revelatory style there. But I do find a great simplification of language in comparison to the first volume. All of a sudden the prose becomes much easier to read. In the introduction to the second volume, he says explicitly: "I've changed." He has had to "rework everything from top to bottom," and as to those who believe that such a change is a failure, he writes, "all I can say is that clearly we are not from the same planet." The language of the third volume is even simpler. It's important to realize that you don't need to be talking about yourself in order to reveal yourself. That is a major issue. Montaigne talks about himself. Nietzsche talks about himself in

Ecce Homo and in his prefaces, but he doesn't do so very much in many of his other works. Of course, he always uses "I" and "we," but that's not the point. One reviewer of *The Art of Living* complained that the book says close to nothing about my personal life. That was

silly. For, in this project to say who you are is to express your philosophical concerns, not how many children you have or what clothes you like to wear.

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HRP: It's interesting that you've been saying that you can reveal yourself in your writing without talking about yourself, which seems to me one of the essential features of the way Nietzsche reads other philosophers.

Nehemas: Nietzsche has been horribly misunderstood in that respect. People think that when he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil* that every philosophy is an "unconscious memoir" of its author, he means we should treat philosophical texts as symptoms of an underlying psychological condition. But what he means is that most philosophies contain a picture of the life their authors espouse, admire, or want to avoid, and that seeing that picture is essential to understanding and evaluating a philosophy. When he says that every philosophy is an unconscious memoir, he isn't thinking of the philosopher's actual life, of a biography. He isn't saying that Kant

believed this, that, or the other thing because he lived in Prussia, because he was a pietist, or because he liked to chew his meat, suck the juice out of it, and spit it out (someone has actually appealed to that to explain Kant's writing style!). He is saying that to understand Kant you must try to imagine what kind of life you would live if you accepted his views and lived according to them.

HRP: You frequently insist that the philosophical theses of Plato's dialogues should be interpreted in light of the literary techniques he uses to convey them, for instance, the Socratic *elenchus*, the other characters in the dialogue, and so on. However, you rarely discuss one of the most transparently literary aspects of the dialogues, namely the myths that Socrates tells in several dialogues, especially the *Republic*. Do you think that the literary symbolism of the Platonic myths has valid philosophical content?

Nehemas: One of the reasons I don't discuss the myths is that I don't really understand their function. In general, I think, people don't talk about what they don't understand. I have never been absolutely clear about the role myths play in Plato's work. Actually, one of the first papers I wrote in college was on Plato's myths, and I don't know anything more about them now than I did then! In fact, it may be anachronistic to say that they are the most self-consciously literary aspects of the dialogues. We think of myth-telling as a literary device, and although the myths are clearly a device of some sort for Plato to be distinguished from philosophical argument, it doesn't follow that they are a literary device, since the distinction between literature and philosophy (which is not the same as the distinction between poetry and philosophy) is not at all clearly marked in the dialogues.

HRP: Then perhaps many of our contemporary interpretations of the style of a philosophical treatise are anachronistic when applied to Plato.

Nehemas: There are features of the dialogues that are, so to speak, formal. That's what I mean by irony or style. Those are the features I'm interested in. I haven't really focused on the use of what we would explicitly consider non-philosophical style to illustrate philosophical content. I actually do have a theory about the myth of the *Phaedrus*. But I don't have a general account of Plato's purpose in including these stories in the dialogues. They do generally come in when an argument has reached its conclusion without convincing everyone. Plato certainly thinks that stories have strong rhetorical powers, and perhaps he uses them when he knows his arguments are for one reason or another inadequate. That suggests that Plato takes rhetoric more seriously and uses it more widely than many would expect, given the criticism of rhetoric in the *Gorgias*. But we know from the *Phaedrus* that he thinks that rhetoric is extremely important, and that one should always tailor one's writing or speaking to the requirements of one's audience. So there's nothing wrong with Plato using rhetorical means for philosophical purposes. Personally, I find it difficult to think that he would write the *Republic*, this immense book, and think that the myth that takes up its last ten pages could ever replace what has preceded it. The myth is less an alternative way to convince those who remain unmoved as it is a way to give a memorable, lively, and moving summary of what he has accomplished. Still, I'm genuinely puzzled. I'd like to be able figure it out. So far, I have failed.

HRP: In *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* you discuss the various literary styles Nietzsche deploys, and the purposes for which he uses them. In this context you focus on two such styles, the aphorism and hyperbole. You suggest that the function of these styles is aristocratic, that the philosophical purpose of hyperbole is to present the view so forcefully that his readers cannot help but realize that it is explicitly Nietzsche's view. The desired effect, then, is that only people strong enough for perspectivism can read Nietzsche's hyperbole.

Nehemas: I'm not sure I would put any of this in terms of aristocracy or strength. I think once you realize Nietzsche's view is hyperbolic, that he is stating it in more extreme terms than he might have, you can't forget that it is his view. What you then go on to do is left open. You may decide that it's Nietzsche's view and also ridiculous; or you may decide that you will accept it precisely because it's Nietzsche's view (a silly reaction); or you may decide, "Well it's Nietzsche's view, now let me think what I will make of it." So it does have this kind of rhetorical function, but I don't find it aristocratic.

HRP: Well, then, let's look at the aphorism. When Nietzsche talks about the aphorism at the beginning of *The Genealogy of Morals*, when he says that the aphorism always requires interpretation, he's not simply setting out his point. Also, hyperbole allows him to conceal the idea of perspectivism behind his literary method to such a point that you cannot help but realize how personal it is.

Nehemas: When you are faced with hyperbole, your first reaction is to find what it says silly. So, you ask, "Why is he shouting so much?" You need to interpret before you understand. It is the same with the aphorism: it doesn't wear its meaning on its face, and that's what Nietzsche is saying in the *Genealogy*: you need to do your own work in order to understand anything. But by doing your own work, you are, so to speak, changing yourself. So, again, the effect of both hyperbole and aphorism is to make you ask, not, "Does Nietzsche get it right?" but rather, "Who do I become as a result of trying to understand what he is saying?"

HRP: Aphorism and hyperbole seem to be two literary styles by which Nietzsche veils his precise philosophical meaning, in that he's not saying exactly what he means. In hyperbole, for instance, he says it so extravagantly that you can understand that it is his own view. With aphorism a certain level of interpretation is required on the reader's part. Do you find this interestingly similar to Socratic irony, at least in the early dialogues where Plato himself is trying to make out the riddle of Socrates? Given your interest in Nietzsche's lifelong relationship with Socrates, do you find any interesting similarities here?

Nehemas: Yes, there's a real connection here. There are so many ways in which Nietzsche and Socrates are mirror images of each other: hyperbole is for Nietzsche what understatement is to Socrates. Socrates is always putting himself down, admitting ignorance, saying, "I don't know, you tell me." Nietzsche, by contrast, is always, so to speak, "in your face:" he's always putting himself forward, always speaking as if he knows everything a little better than everyone else. But by using aphorisms, which, as he says, require a lot of interpretation, he makes it very diffi-

cult for you to know exactly what he's saying. Now, as I say in *The Art of Living*, it's never clear that ironists—and both aphorism and hyperbole have an element of irony in them—always know what they are saying. So, in a way, these literary strategies create a sense that Nietzsche himself is not that sure, that he himself is trying things out. On the one hand, you hear this voice of extraordinary certainty, and on the other, when you start listening carefully to its sound, you find that the mechanisms that express that great self-confidence also undermine it. In that way you realize that he is actually much less dogmatic a philosopher than he sounds! And since the content of his views is an attack on dogmatism, we have here once again a coalescence of style and substance. So, Nietzsche's strategies are Socratic because they are masks and because they are ironic and because they promote a tentativeness and

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a willingness to try out ideas that I find essential to the Socrates of the early dialogues. Also, they demand a personal response. Nietzsche always praises "experimentalism;" Socrates always says: "Let's try again, let's try once more."

HRP: In the Nietzsche book you consistently argue

that, in Nietzsche's view, our relationship to the world can best be understood as the relationship of an interpreter to a text. As a particular instance of this, you write: "Nietzsche, I argue, looks at the world in general as a sort of artwork; in particular, he looks at it as if it were a literary text." Heidegger devotes the first volume of his lectures on Nietzsche to an interpretation of the will to power in terms of artistic creation: "Art is for us the most familiar and perspicuous configuration of the will to power....But creation within art actually occurs in the productive activity of the artist." Do you think there are interesting conflicts between your desire to understand Nietzsche as thinking of our relationship to the world, and hence our will to power encountering the world, as bringing an interpretation to a text, and Heidegger's desire to understand will to power in terms of the act of artistic creation? Your model seems more one of spectatorship, though it could be argued that the interpretation is itself a creative act.

Nehemas: That's exactly what I was going to say. The most explicit and serious discussion we have of the will to power in Nietzsche is in the middle of *The Genealogy of Morals*, the very middle of the middle book, where he discusses punishment. He says that it is a universal law, even on the organic level, that in every event will to power operates. What does he use to illustrate that claim? Interpretation! For him, to create something is to interpret something else in a radically new way. There is no creation ex nihilo. That's in part what it is to be a historicist, something both he

and Heidegger are. You are always faced with certain events, certain facts, certain objects, certain institutions that are given to you. What is it to be creative? It is to take these and, as we say, re-interpret them. What is it to re-interpret them? It is, so to speak, to put them to new uses. It is to see possibilities (now I speak in the language of the spectator) no one has seen before. But to see possibilities no one has seen before is, at the same time, to create something. "If a temple is to be erected, a temple must first be destroyed," as Nietzsche writes in the *Genealogy*. Nietzsche, I believe, would deny the distinction between spectatorship and creative ability. And although he often attacks Kant for looking at art, as he puts it, from the point of view of the spectator and not of the artist, he does not, in his own philosophy of art, leave the spectator behind. Instead, he tries to show that the spectator is a creative agent.

The big difference here (I don't know that Nietzsche would agree, I'm only stating my own view) is that, for Kant and a tradition that goes back to Cicero, our interaction with art involves a number of discrete stages. In Cicero there are four. In modern aesthetics, following Kant, there are two. First you interpret, that is, you understand; then you evaluate, that is, you judge. First you say, "This is what this poem is about," an activity we take to be mostly cognitive, with no creative aspect; then you decide whether the poem is or is not beautiful—nothing creative here, either. And then you're finished with it. For me, on the contrary, the judgment of beauty comes very early during our interaction with a work of art. Instead of thinking that the judgment of beauty is the culmination of criticism, I take it to be its origin. When you think that something is beautiful, you become interested in getting to know it better, to come to terms with it, to make it part of your life. The judgment of taste, the statement, "This is beautiful," is not a conclusion we reach after we have interpreted a work of art; beauty, as Stendhal said, is "a promise of happiness"—a phrase that Nietzsche actually quotes in *The Genealogy of Morals*. To think that something is beautiful is to suspect, to guess, to have a sense that it has more to give you than you have been able to get out of it so far.

With Kant, you see, I think you do make your judgment at the end of your interaction with a work. When he says that the judgment of taste "is not governed by concepts," he means precisely that no description of an object implies that the object is beautiful (unless you beg the question and sneak in an evaluative term in your description). And although I agree with that, I think the reason the judgment doesn't follow is that it's not supposed to follow, because it's not a conclusion at all. When we see, read, hear, or are in any way exposed to something we find beautiful, we have a vague sense that there's something more we want to know about that thing, and that, whatever it is, it is valuable in some way we still don't know. The judgment of taste is prospective, not retrospective. It's a guess, a hypothesis. If it's a hypothesis, it goes behind the evidence; if it goes beyond the evidence, it can't follow from any of the features of the object we are already aware of. You find something beautiful as long as you feel you haven't exhausted it yet.

HRP: One of the most striking aspects of your writings on Nietzsche and Socrates is that you conclude that there runs through Nietzsche's writings an unresolved concern that his project is not so very different from Socrates's, that he is not sure how original he is. Why does the similarity of their projects

endanger the originality of Nietzsche's project?

Nehemas: It doesn't. I think he was afraid it did, because he wanted not only to, so to speak, appear different from other philosophers, he also wanted to be the first to have realized what philosophers were actually doing—but since I don't think there is one thing that all philosophers have always been doing, I don't think that's a

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problem. My sense is that the philosophical personality Nietzsche created and left behind was itself an immense accomplishment. That should have given him enough satisfaction. But perhaps it didn't; perhaps he wanted to accomplish even more.

That's not the same as saying that he was a miserable man, however. Another reviewer of *The Art of Living* objected that Nietzsche led a wretched life, and

that he couldn't possibly set an example for us to follow: "I wouldn't wish that life on anyone," he wrote, "not even Rousseau." I was wondering what that could mean. Does it make sense to say "I wouldn't wish that life on anyone"? That could mean you wouldn't wish anyone else to be Nietzsche. Well, of course no one else could be Nietzsche! That's trivial. But it could mean that it would have been better for Nietzsche if he had never lived. And that's clearly false—false for Nietzsche, and also false for us. People who believe that think of the "life" of philosophers as everything other than their work. But that's silly. Nietzsche's life is inextricably tied up with the writing of his books: the books are as central a part of his life as any—perhaps its most central part. The question is not, "Was Nietzsche's life apart from his work 'good', would you like to have had his migraines, and his near-sightedness, and his disappointments, and so on?" Well, of course not! Who in his right mind would want just the headaches and to vomit all the time and not to see where one is going? The question, really, is, "Were all the miseries justified and transformed through the work, does the whole constitute a worthwhile life, a life with significance?" And if that's what it took for him to have been able to write these great books, you might want to say that it wasn't such a bad life after all. Nietzsche flourished, even though he was unhealthy; he succeeded as a human being, even if his books didn't sell.

HRP: In *The Art of Living* you say that the philosophy of the art of living is still alive and worth pursuing again. This sounds a bit like a manifesto. What, in your opinion, is the state of the art of living today, and are there contemporary philosophers whom you consider in this light?

Nehemas: It's not an easy thing to live philosophically. Interestingly enough, most of the philosophers who belong to that tradition by and large did not belong to institutions. Socrates may have had a career—he may have been a stonemason—but by the time we meet him in Plato's early dialogues, he doesn't have a career—not even a job. Montaigne, famously, retired from his political career at thirty-eight and closeted himself in his library before he began writing the *Essays*. It turns out he was probably more active than he admits, but his life was very different from what it must have been when he was Mayor of Bordeaux. Nietzsche was a professor, but most of his philosophical work appeared only after he resigned from the university and lived on his own small private income. Foucault always had a very ambivalent position toward, and relationship with, institutions. I don't think it's very easy to lead a life that's both philosophical and individualist inside an institution. So I find myself in a very difficult position, because I want to be able to say "Look, it's possible to combine individualism with life in an institution"—what am I doing teaching at a university, after all? And since the people I am writing about mostly stayed outside institutions, that makes me extremely uneasy. Then I think of Wittgenstein, who was Knightbridge Professor of Philosophy of Cambridge—but he hated it!

Institutional obligations are generic, whereas the art of living, as I see it, imposes mostly individual requirements. What I would like to do is see if one could put the two together. What I'm trying to do, if you don't mind my being somewhat personal, is to bring together all the academic things I know—philosophy, criticism, the classics—and write in a way informed by all three, give them a kind of coherence, thematically and stylistically. Many philosophers are not interested in that sort of coherence, and I don't think they have to be. The question you asked goes to the heart of the matter: is it possible to do what I want to do and still belong to an institution? The answer is that I don't know and I probably never will. I am simply trying to do it.

HRP: What about an institution contributes to the art of living?

Nehemas: Not very much, I think. An institution, as I said, imposes generic obligations. Then, again, I think of Nietzsche, who wrote that every creation requires the existence of some kind of "tyranny,"

An institution imposes generic obligations. Then, again, I think of Nietzsche, who wrote that every creation requires the existence of some kind of "tyranny," some institution, from which it emerges.

some institution, from which it emerges. Everyone is bound by constraints in one way or another. Historically, people who belong to the individualist tradition in the art of living generally avoid institutions. Dogmatic or universalist philosophers belong to schools and institutions—the Stoics, for example, often actually lived together: of course they were trying to formulate and follow a form of life common to all. The people I am interested in have tried to live differently from everyone else. It may be, after all, that I'm trying to have it both ways, and I can't. But that won't

stop me from trying!

HRP: What are you working on now?

Nehemas: I am thinking about beauty. I am wondering why beauty and aesthetics have come back to the center of intellectual discussion in the last few years. I'm not quite sure why. One thing I do know is that many people are trying to render these issues philosophically respectable by arguing that beauty leads to justice, goodness, or truth. I don't believe that. I'm interested in a more independent justification of the importance of beauty, just as I believe we need an independent justification of the humanities: I don't think we should say to students that studying the humanities will make them more moral or get them a better job. Being moral or rich may be goods, but they are not the only goods. Studying the humanities, like admiring beauty, makes you a better person, but becoming more moral is not the only way of

becoming better. Moral goodness does not exhaust human goodness. I believe we have neglected the domain of non-moral goodness. I believe aesthetic values are values in their own right—that beauty, complexity, style, elegance are virtues that need to be respected and loved for themselves, and

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counted among the components of a worthwhile human life. By making the arts, and the humanities, parts of our lives, we introduce such virtues into them; we make ourselves more complex, more interesting, more engaging people. That doesn't mean we become morally worse; it doesn't mean we become morally better, either. I believe there is an irreducible aesthetic element in life, and we need to pay much more attention to it than we have done so far. We should not disavow it simply because it's not identical with moral value or worldly success.

HRP: Isn't that tied in with a contemporary concern with the aestheticization of politics? That seems to be one of the ways the idea of beauty you're talking about is often criticized.

Nehemas: I don't want to "aestheticize" politics—that's both dangerous and inefficient. The aesthetic is more or less—I don't want to draw too strong a distinction here—a private rather than a public matter: "private" may even be too strong; perhaps I should say "personal," which involves a reference to other persons without involving one's whole political or social context.

HRP: How did you become interested in relating these issues of beauty to television and talking about television as an art form in a way that many philosophers of art and art critics are unwilling to do?

Nehemas: When I was writing *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* I was subletting an apartment with a color TV, which I had never had. Since I was too tired to read in the evenings, I would watch a lot of it, and eventually I said to myself, "Either I will have wasted a lot of my life watching TV, or I will have to make something of it"—actually, of course, it wasn't at all that explicit: that's how I came to see it somewhat later. I

I realized that a lot of television was interesting and sophisticated. Our mistake is that we look down (or admire) a whole medium.

realized that a lot of TV was interesting and sophisticated. Some television shows were more satisfying than a lot of works in the more canonical genres and media: some television was better than some poetry; some television was better than some novels; some television was better than some sonatas. Our mistake is that we look down (or admire) a whole medium. That's a stupid thing to do. You have to look at individual works. But looking at individual works is always dangerous, because if their medium is in fact perverse and degrading, you may become perverse and degraded without realizing it, and even love what you have become. You change, and it's not always clear whether you've changed for the better or the worse—in this case, your very view of the character of those who watch TV changes: you can't look down on them in the way you might have before.

HRP: I take it you're referring to a view you once held?

Nehemas: I was a real snob about it. I grew up in a country with no TV. So, on one hand, it was really exciting for me to have it when I came to America; on the other, intellectuals were supposed to look down on it. Despite my contempt, however, I eventually found myself engaged by it. It's shocking and rather frightening to find yourself captured by something you had only contempt for. You wonder, what standards should I use? Those I had before I was captivated, which tell me that being captivated is bad for me, or those I have as a result of being captivated, which tell me that thinking that being captivated is bad for me is silly and ignorant? And you don't know.

I'm particularly interested in the connection between aesthetic and popular art forms. One of the most common developments in the history of art is that the popular art of one era, which is denounced and solidly excluded from proper social and intellectual life, becomes the fine art of the next. So when the novel first appeared in England, for example, it was taken to be an absolutely horrible genre. Coleridge attacked it: compared to Shakespeare, he said, reading novels is not "pass-time but kill-time." But in Elizabethan times, there was Henry Prynne, saying that Shakespeare attracts and creates only "ruffians and adulterers." Now Shakespeare is as close to the divine as any human being could ever be. The same thing happened with cinema, jazz, photography, rock-and-roll. What is popular,

and therefore pronounced harmful in one period is transformed into a standard of beauty a short while later.

You were talking of Plato's relevance earlier. Plato's attack on the poets in the *Republic* is the origin and the essence of all later attacks on popular culture and entertainment. Plato, as usual, was much more honest than anyone else; unlike all those who say, for example, that television has no aesthetic value whatsoever, he admitted that despite his contempt he loved Homer but would stay away from him because he found him harmful. People today, either because they are ashamed or because they don't bother to look, will not admit that they are attracted to popular culture. But even television is gradually becoming acceptable: we can now blame everything on the Internet instead! In the eighteenth century they thought that reading kills. Literally! People wrote that reading—reading!—causes arthritis, epilepsy, pulmonary disease and apoplexy! But if reading is bad for you, everything is bad for you. The right reaction is to realize that the difference is not in a genre or a medium, but in the way each one of us makes use of the individual works a genre or medium offers.

Something similar is true of what we have been calling "the art of living." Each one of us, necessarily, confronts different situations, different choices, different circumstances from everyone else. They are bound to include both happiness and misfortune. What matters in the end is what we are able to make of them, whether through them we can live a life that is truly our own. φ