

On the Blissful Islands with Nietzsche and Jung—Paul Bishop

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The author of this unusual and fascinating monograph is an intellectual historian whose interests extend well beyond Nietzsche to encompass Weimar classicism, 20th century analytical psychology and classical Greek and Hellenistic philosophy. Although this may at first sound like a strange juxtaposition, Bishop's previous studies have made a compelling case that vital aspects of Nietzsche's thought come sharply into focus when he is read in relation to figures such as Goethe and Schiller on the one hand and Jung on the other, with an eye to certain formative themes and metaphors in the Platonic tradition. What we find when we set these thinkers in dialogue with one another is a distinct intellectual-spiritual lineage predominantly concerned with the possibilities of self-transformation. Bishop's interpretative approach is perhaps closest to Pierre Hadot in this respect, albeit more oriented towards modern German thought and uniquely informed by Jungian depth psychology.

His latest book, *On the Blissful Islands with Nietzsche and Jung*, demonstrates effectively the kind of rich and resonant Nietzsche interpretation that can come from such a catholic approach.¹ The exegetical scope of the study would initially appear rather modest, focusing on a short passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which occurs at the end of the speech entitled "On the Blissful Islands":

Ah, you men, I see an image sleeping in the stone, the image of my visions! Ah that it must sleep in the hardest, ugliest stone!

Now my hammer rages fiercely against its prison. Fragments fly from the stone: what is that to me?

¹ It should be noted that this book is just as much a study of Jung as it is a study of Nietzsche. I focus here primarily on the latter, however, given the specific context of the review.

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I will complete it: for a shadow came to me—the most silent, the lightest of all things once came to me!

The beauty of the Superman came to me as a shadow. Ah, my brothers! What are the gods to me now! (Z II.2)²

Bishop pays especially close attention to a number of ideas here: the classical myth of the Blissful Islands, the soteriological function of the statue and project of (self-)sculpting, the protean metaphor of the shadow, the beautiful but elusive ideal of the Superman. In order to elucidate them he provides a “comparative, associationist, and amplificatory” reading à la Jung (xx), which gradually winds its way through a staggeringly wide range of intertexts: the Torah, the New Testament, various Platonic dialogues, a healthy slab of Neoplatonic treatises, works of Patristic theology and medieval Christian mysticism, an assortment of Gnostic, Hermetic, Kabbalistic and alchemical texts, select poems by Schiller and Goethe, Jung’s voluminous psychological studies (including his five year-long seminar on *Zarathustra*), and a smattering of twentieth-century philosophers (Bergson, Klages, Cassirer, etc). Bishop’s premise is not that Nietzsche somehow had all this neatly in mind as he composed *Zarathustra*: while there are obvious references to the Bible, Plato, Schiller and Goethe, it’s safe to say he was entirely unfamiliar many of these texts. Rather, the idea seems to be that some of the most powerful themes, images and metaphors of that book can be traced back through various strands of the tradition and have a kind of logic of their own that is reactivated in Nietzsche’s writing, regardless of his presumed intentions. In this way, Bishop ensnares Nietzsche with dozens of fine literary threads and pulls him back into close dialogue with ways of thinking and living that he is usually believed to have repudiated—and that contemporary philosophy is typically supposed to have left behind.

The first chapter, “On the Blissful Islands: In the Shadow of the Superman” focuses on Zarathustra’s puzzling assertion that “[t]he beauty of the Superman came to me as a shadow.” Why a shadow? What is the significance of that image? Bishop’s initial attempt at an answer unfolds into a sprawling, nearly 80 page-long consideration of this symbol across multiple texts and traditions. He surveys the significance of the shadow throughout ancient Greek cultures and provides a fascinating treatment of comparable imagery in the Judeo-Christian tradition,

² Bishop employs R. J. Hollingdale’s 1969 translation, which for all its strengths is arguably a bit dated. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will abide by those translation choices here.

from the “overshadowing” of Mary in the Annunciation to the darkness associated with God in Torahic theophanies and mystical texts (a function, ultimately, of God’s brilliant ontological radiance). Figuring most prominently in this discussion, however, is Jung’s archetypal notion of the shadow as the ‘dark’ aspect of one’s self: the seemingly inferior, worthless, repressed or rejected characteristics that one cannot acknowledge or affirm, and which consequently reemerge as projected demonizations of the other. While Jung identifies in Nietzsche’s thought (as well as Freud’s) a refreshing willingness to recognize the “black substance” out of which all radiant things must necessarily emerge, he suggests that Zarathustra struggles to affirm his *own* shadow and thus repeatedly externalizes it (he interprets the parade of grotesque characters one finds there—the fire-dog, the Soothsayer, the Dwarf, the black snake, the Ape, the Ugliest Man, etc—as products of Zarathustra’s shadow-forming process).³ And of course, one can see Nietzsche himself struggle with this through his doctrine of *amor fati*: “to see as beautiful what is necessary in things” (GS 276). On this account, as long as the self refuses to bring all parts of itself together, even its imperfections, shortcomings and humiliating inadequacies (“the enemy . . . in [one’s] own heart,” as Jung aptly puts it), it cannot achieve wholeness. Bishop clearly traces this idea back through German classicism to Neoplatonic aesthetics, emphasizing the essential connection between beauty and totality. Along the way, he examines some interesting subsidiary anticipations of Jung’s complementaristic vision, e.g. in the 16th century alchemical text *Rosarium philosophorum* and Goethe’s pivotal poem “Blessed Yearning” (*Selige Sehnsucht*).

Taken as a whole, this first lengthy chapter is a remarkable display of scholarly attentiveness and crackles with suggestive associations. Yet one can’t help but wonder what the punchline is. Bishop points out in the conclusion that “Nietzsche’s imagery in ‘On the Blissful Islands’ is extraordinarily rich in its intertextual and iconographic references and there are enormous associations at play when we read that the Superman came to Zarathustra *as a shadow*” (62). Surely this has been well demonstrated, but the original question hasn’t ultimately been addressed: why *does* the beauty of the Superman come to Zarathustra as a shadow?

³ Jung is more circumspect about identifying the Shadow himself (IV.9) as one of Zarathustra’s shadows. Although Bishop offers a lengthy Jungian analysis of the Ugliest Man (Z IV.7), he does not have much to say here about the last human being (Z P.4) or the small human being (Z III.13.2), but affirmation of such realities would presumably be a necessary condition for the “completion” of the human being as *Übermensch* (see Bishop, 10-13).

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Instead of answering it—perhaps by concisely synthesizing the aforementioned play of associations—Bishop closes out the chapter by continuing to tease out and elaborate upon contrasting metaphors and themes. The reader is thus left with a superabundance of intriguing literary and philosophical resonances, but no clear sense of how they might illuminate the passage in question.

Chapter 2 is more fully realized. Titled after Plotinus' famous precept, "Never cease chiseling your statue" (*Enneads*, I.6.9), it focuses on the central image of Z II.2: Zarathustra as sculptor, liberating the Superman from the hard, ugly stone of humanity. Here Bishop takes a close look at the metaphors of sculpting and the statue in Greco-Roman philosophy and the Judeo-Christian religious traditions, tracing the image up through the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Weimar Classicism to Nietzsche and beyond. Interestingly, there is initially more resistance to the idea of the statue in the Judeo-Christian tradition, due to the Mosaic prohibition against graven images (rooted, arguably, in the transcendence and thus imperceptibility of God; cf. the theme of darkness mentioned above). While in some Presocratic thought there is a comparable hesitancy about attempting to represent the divine, pagan Greek thought generally exhibits a more positive attitude toward the theurgic and moral functions of the statue. As Bishop points out, "over time [its] significance shifts and the statue becomes an exemplar, not so much of idolatry, as of autonomous creativity" (93). His grouped discussion of Seneca, Plotinus, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart is particularly illuminating in this respect: we see an increasing concern with the sculpting or fashioning of the self (which Nietzsche will enthusiastically retrieve) and the Neoplatonic influence on Christian thinkers leads them to conceive of prophets and even God as a sculptor of human beings (96-97). The Neoplatonic conception of sculpting as a kind of purification, clearing aside or taking away remains influential through the Renaissance period, epitomized by Michelangelo's famous remark, "I saw the angel in the marble and carved him until I set him free." All this provides a useful background against which to read Nietzsche's own ambitious language of sculpting (both of self and other, as well as individual and type).

Bishop does a fine job of interrogating the salient passages and he is well-attuned to the radically different axiological and ontological commitments that underlie Nietzsche and the Neoplatonists' respective projects.⁴ But I wonder

⁴ Bishop surveys the obligatory passages alongside Z II.2 (BT 1, KSA 9:7[213], Z II.20, BGE 225), as well as some less familiar but very suggestive ones (HH 258, AOM 172, GS 12, EH, "Wise," 2), although he does omit a couple of crucial ones (GS 290, BGE 62).

whether the question of human self-sculpture in the aftermath of the death of God might be brought even more sharply into focus by explicitly considering the Platonic ideal of *homoïōsis theōi* (becoming like god), which seems to hover in the background of much of the early philosophical sculpture literature. The theme is enormously important in Greek and Hellenistic philosophy and it gets taken up and thought through quite thoroughly in an Abrahamic context by a host of Islamic and Jewish thinkers during the medieval period. It might prove a useful foil for understanding the inherent tensions in Zarathustra's experimental cultivation of the Superman, since (1) he adopts and retains the Neoplatonic assumption that sculpting is essentially removal of the inessential, yet (2) there is no preexisting paradigm or *telos* to be discovered or revealed, and (3) he speaks both here and elsewhere of the "completion" or "perfection" (*Vollkommenheit*) of the human being. Be that as it may, we are deeply indebted to Bishop for having explored the motif of self-sculpture so thoroughly, and one's reading of *Zarathustra* (and Nietzsche's corpus in general) cannot but be much richer as a result of it.

At the very end of Chapter 2, Bishop observes that the appeal to embark on a path of self-transformation implies dissatisfaction with the current shape of things. "But does wanting something else—or wanting something *better*—imply one believes there can actually be something better?" he asks, "Or that there is something one could call the best? Does it imply one believes in something that might be called—the *ideal* . . . ?" (129). This question sets the stage for Chapter 3, which attempts to synthesize the shadow and sculpting themes. Bishop approaches this through a close reading of Schiller's poem "The Ideal and Life" (*Das Ideal und das Leben*), which attends to its developmental history as well as its thematic relation to a projected (albeit unwritten) subsequent poem on Heracles' arrival, divine transfiguration and joyful blessedness in Olympus. The central theme of the poem, which Bishop brings to bear on *Zarathustra*, is the perpetual accessibility of the ideal amidst the struggle and strife of life, via both intellectual contemplation and aesthetic creativity. While this may at first seem like an escapist fantasy, he emphasizes the ideal's capacity to invigorate and transform life in the here and now. The transfiguration of the present moment by means of "the eternal within," he calls it, leads into an extended reflection on the meaning of the Blissful Islands (*glückseligen Inseln*).

This is a welcome contribution to the literature, since the theme of the Blissful Islands in *Zarathustra* has not as yet received any sustained treatment. Bishop lays the groundwork for his discussion in the opening section of Chapter 1, where he

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examines its roots in classical Greek myth as the place of the heroic dead and traces the idea in its various permutations through Hesiod, Homer, Pindar, Plato, Virgil, Plutarch, Pliny the Elder and the 6th c. Neoplatonist Olympiodorus. Often conceived as a paradisiacal afterlife, sometimes as an actual place in the world where life is easiest and best, the Blissful Islands represent the idyllic possibility of genuine blessedness or happiness. In Chapter 3, Bishop fuses this with the invigorating and transformative capacity of the ideal in the midst of life and finds in Schiller and Nietzsche an “insistence on the possibility, in the here-and-now, of happiness or joy” (172). Ultimately, the Blissful Islands are “[e]xactly where you are right now”—hence Zarathustra’s insistence in Z IV.2 that “There are still Blissful Islands!” (173). Wherever one is, there is always the possibility of joy, or put differently, the manifestation of eternity, completeness and perfection in the present moment.

Bishop’s consideration of this theme in Nietzsche is rewarding, even inspiring, and I have to admire any scholar who can work a good Laurie Anderson quote into a discussion of Nietzsche, Schiller, and Greek myth (173). But there are several stones still left unturned here. For the Blissful Islands, at least in *Zarathustra*, constitute an actual place. Why do Zarathustra’s friends leave the Motley Cow to take up residence there in Z II.1? Why does Zarathustra abandon them in Z II.22?⁵ Why does the Soothsayer claim in Z IV.2 that “there are no Blissful Islands anymore”? Why are there multiple rejected drafts in the *Nachlass* that intimate the sinking and destruction of the Blissful Islands? One is tempted here to consult biographical details: for instance, Nietzsche’s admission to Peter Gast that Zarathustra’s Blissful Islands were inspired by Ischia, an island in the Gulf of Naples, or his mourning of their destruction in the summer 1883.⁶ Even then, though, their philosophical significance in the context of *Zarathustra* remains unclear. My own view is that the Blissful Islands represent a kind of Epicurean friendship community that captures *in nuce* Nietzsche’s own shift from the more modest project of private self-cultivation exemplified in his middle works to the nomothetic (and markedly Platonic) ambitions of *Zarathustra* and his later period. I also think a closer attention to the language of ‘blessedness’ in the Greek and German traditions generally and *Zarathustra* specifically (*makariotēs*, *Seligkeit*,

⁵ Zarathustra himself offers multiple rationales in Z II.22, III.1, III.3; cf. Z II.9 and KSA 10:16[89].

⁶ Bishop acknowledges these facts but doesn’t bring them to bear on his interpretation of the text (4-5). For a more detailed biographical discussion of the significance of Ischia for Nietzsche, see Paolo D’Iorio, *Nietzsche’s Journey to Sorrento: Genesis of the Philosophy of the Free Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2016).

Glückseligkeit, etc) would have been constructive. But Bishop's take on this theme is resourceful and thought-provoking, and it has certainly fine-tuned the way I think about it.

The fourth and final chapter of the book begins by surveying Platonic, Nietzschean and Jungian attitudes towards the body. Bishop offers a nuanced and sympathetic reading of select Platonic and Neoplatonic texts that undermines the usual assumption that they are anti-body. Similarly, a historical-developmental examination of the concept of spirit (*Geist*) complicates Nietzsche's materialism. But the heart of the chapter is a sustained reflection on the relation between asceticism and ecstasy.⁷ Bishop quickly moves beyond the usual two-dimensional platitudes about Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal to examine his subtler and more ambivalent attitude towards spiritual exercises. By situating Zarathustra's ecstatic experiences of dancing, ascent and celebratory world-affirmation (as well as some of Nietzsche's more confessional passages) against the background of ascetic practices, Bishop offers us a portrait of Nietzsche as a 'mystic' or initiate of sorts, which I find both compelling and plausible (setting aside the simplistic modern caricatures that have obscured the original meanings of that term). The book winds down with a discussion of some other affinities between the Nietzschean and Platonic worldview (e.g, the centrality of hierarchy and the idea of the world as 'perfect') and concludes with one last elegant reflection on the significance of the Blissful Islands.⁸

There are respects in which Bishop's book is unusual, and some may take exception to the liberties he allows himself. The "comparative, associationist, and amplificatory" approach to texts that he employs here can be exciting and suggestive, but also occasionally scattershot, slippery and exhausting.⁹ And Jung, from whom Bishop derives this hermeneutic strategy, has for some time had a checkered reputation in academia (both in the social sciences and the humanities).

⁷ As Bishop points out, the question of the relation between asceticism and ecstasy was one of the things that led Jung to part ways with Freud (192).

⁸ I take Bishop's emphasis on the "Platonic" aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy to be part of an encouraging trend away from the simplistic traditional oppositions often posited between these thinkers; cf. Horst Hutter, *Shaping the Future: Nietzsche's New Regime of the Soul and Its Ascetic Practices* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), Mark Anderson, *Plato and Nietzsche: Their Philosophic Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) and Laurence Lampert, *What a Philosopher Is: Becoming Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2018).

⁹ On a more picayune note, I encountered a number of citational inconsistencies and repetitions, as well as a few references to *The Will to Power* which ought instead to have been to the *KSA*. But minor flaws like this are simply attributable to sloppy editorial oversight at Routledge.

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I set aside the question whether this is entirely justified, but will say that I find Bishop's inclusive attitude refreshing and am glad to see Jung discussed in responsible scholarly contexts, placed in relation to thinkers such as Nietzsche, Schiller, Goethe and Plotinus and embraced as a significant moment in the lineage of modern German thought. Similarly, I admired Bishop's ability to set Nietzsche in productive dialogue with these thinkers about abiding practical concerns that bear on the art of living. Those whose tastes lean towards reconstructions of Nietzsche's thought into some contemporary 'ism' may find this book inadequately systematic. Those who insist on rigorous historical contextualization of Nietzsche's thought and enumerating precisely what he did or didn't read may find it too loose and speculative. I myself found it fascinating and stimulating. I very much appreciated the broad historical scope, the generous engagement with liminally philosophical texts, and the practical emphasis self-sculpting and transformation. In the spirit of both Goethe and Nietzsche, this is a book that does not merely aim to instruct, but also to augment and invigorate one's activity.