

# Conversations with Nietzsche

A Life in the Words of His Contemporaries



Edited and with an Introduction by  
**Sander L. Gilman**

Translated by  
**David J. Parent**

## CONVERSATIONS WITH NIETZSCHE



Even before Nietzsche's death in 1900, the "Nietzsche House," Villa Silberblick, had become a major tourist attraction in Weimar. After his death it became the center of the "Nietzsche cult." Postcards, printed by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche's Nietzsche Archive, were only one sign of the Nietzsche industry which grew up about the dead philosopher's name. (Source: *Private Collection, Gilman*)

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In memory of  
Mazzino Montinari,<sup>†</sup>  
the dean of modern Nietzsche scholars

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# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION TALKING WITH NIETZSCHE xiii

### CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL DAYS (1844–1858)

Learned to speak late; reading and writing by age of four, 3. Left birthplace of Röcken on father's death, 3. Boyhood friendship with Wilhelm Pinder, 4–6. Inspired by Handel's *Messiah*, 6. Ice-skating; defends deformed boy (anecdote), 6–7.

### SCHULPFORTA (1858–1864)

Respectful opinion of teachers and fellow students, 8. Friendship with Raimund Granier, 9–10. Excellent student but not leader, 9. Physical appearance at age of eighteen, 9. Polish ancestry, 10. Friendship with Paul Deussen, 10–15. Student-proctor (anecdote), 10. Love for Anacreon, 10. Confirmation, 10–11. Piety undermined by historico-critical method, 11. Member of anti-studious "wild" clique, 11. Schoolboy quarrel and reconciliation, 12–13. Shy, reserved temperament, 13. Piano accompaniment for readings, 13. Esteem for beauty and contempt for material interests, 14. Not good as actor or acrobat, 14–15. Danger of eventual blindness, 15. Writes on Greek poetry, 15. Comments by former teacher, Otto Benndorf, 15–17. Attended lectures on Greek sculpture, 16. Affinity with Goethe, 17. Friendship with A. Fritsch, 17. Wrote poetry and composed music, 17.

### UNIVERSITY AND MILITARY TIME (1864–1869)

Cheerful atmosphere in Naumburg home, 18. Life-story of Ernst Schnabel, 18–19. Horseback ride up the Drachenfels; youthful pranks (anecdotes), 20. Arrival at the University of Bonn, 20–21. Studies Greek lyricists, 21–22. Joins "Franconia" fraternity, 22. Fights duel (anecdote), 23. Accidental visit to a brothel (anecdote), 23–24. Relations with women and attitude toward marriage, 24. Classes and theater-going, 24. Freethinker, but no enmity to Christianity, 25. Ritschl-Jahn dispute; transfers to Leipzig, 25. Urges Deussen to give up theology for philology, 25–26. Forms Philology Club and joins



Ritschl Society reluctantly, 26–28. High reputation as a student, 29. Lectures on Menippus and Homer, 29. Appointed professor at Basel at the age of twenty-four, 30. Rebukes Deussen for lack of respect, 30–31.

## PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BASEL (1870–1878)

### 1870

Ida Overbeck's first meeting with Nietzsche, 32. His piano-playing, 32. Physical description, 32–33. Nietzsche frequents the Overbeck home, 33. Attitude toward religion, 33. Poor eyesight, 33. Acquaintanceship with Julius Piccard, 34. Piano composition (anecdote), 35. Persecution complex (anecdote), 35. As a high-school teacher (three views, with anecdotes), 35–39.

### 1871

Recommended by Ritschl for professorship, 39–40. Reaction of Basel public to his early writings, 40. Sensitivity to newspaper criticism, 41. The tragedy of his life, 41. Nietzsche's parable on philology, 42. Friendship with Richard Wagner, 43.

### 1872

Jakob Burckhardt's attitude toward Nietzsche (three views), 44–47. Burckhardt receives insane letter years later from Nietzsche, 46. Nietzsche's friendship with Heinrich von Stein, 47. Franz Overbeck's comments on Nietzsche's deep, one-sided friendships, 47–48. Malwida von Meysenbug meets him in Bayreuth, 48. Her praise of his friendliness, 49. Frau Bachofen on Nietzsche's enthusiasm for Wagner, 49–50.

### 1874

Nietzsche as pleasant socializer in Miaskowski circle, 50–54. His manner with women, 52. Physical appearance, 53. His later illness, 53.

### 1875

Impact of *The Birth of Tragedy* on Peter Gast and his generation, 54. Schmeitzner becomes Overbeck's and Nietzsche's publisher, 55. Widemann and Gast go to Basel to study under Nietzsche, but find him completely unknown (anecdotes), 56–57. On Gluck-Puccini dispute, 57. Praise of Switzerland, 58. His university lectures, 58. Pleasant home-life with his sister, 58. Composes "Hymn to Solitude," magnificent piano-playing, 59. Gast copies *Untimely Meditation* on Richard Wagner and does other secretarial work for Nietzsche, 59–60. Physical appearance, 61. Lectures on the Greeks in a tortured manner, 62. Burckhardt and Nietzsche, 62. More on his composing and piano-playing, 62.

### 1876

Ludwig von Scheffler decides to attend Nietzsche's course, 63. Scheffler meets Peter Gast, 64. Impressions of a Nietzsche lecture, 65–66. Reinterpretation of

Plato, 66–67. Burckhardt and Nietzsche, 68. Peter Gast's anti-clericalism, 68. A visit to Nietzsche's apartment, 69–72. On Holbein's self-portrait, 71–72. Nietzsche's homoeroticism, 72. Lectures on Heraclitus, 73. Invites Scheffler to accompany him to Italy (anecdote), 74. Compared with Platen as a great sufferer, 75. Richard Reuter in Basel, 76–77. On the German Reich, 78–79. Nietzsche's break with Wagner, 79–80. Paul de Lagarde as a source of Nietzsche's thinking, 80–82.

1877

In Italy with Malwida von Meysenbug and Paul Rée, 83. On striving for truth, and on suffering, 83. Meysenbug's plans for a community of scholars, 84. Influenced by Rée's scientific attitude, 84–85. Denies the law of causality, 85. Rejects transcendentalism, 85–86. On Goethe, 86–87. On other authors, 87–88. Meysenbug cautions him against Rée's positivism and against premature criticism of women, 88. Bad state of health, 89. Who should not read Nietzsche, 89. On Wagner, 90. Writing aphorisms at night between headaches, 91. Plays church organ (anecdote), 91. On the Catholic Church, 91. In Sorrento, 91–92. Seydlitz on Nietzsche's character, 93. Helpful as a critic, 93–95. Attends lecture on Origen's "eternal return of all things," 95–97. Nietzsche advises a student (anecdote), 97. Pensioned off for medical disability, 98.

1878

Nietzsche as a broken, lonely man, 99. Object of factionalism in Basel, 99. Shaken by battlefield experiences, 100. Suffers excruciating headaches, 100. Sends away his sister and even Peter Gast, 101. His last lecture, 101. Von Scheffler witnesses Nietzsche's pathetic seclusion, 102–3. Hellenistic influence, 104. On pity, 105. On morality, 105–6. On psychology, 106. On the Greeks and Christianity, 107. On religion, 107. Stormy friendships, 108. Disgust with himself and the world, 109. Mental sufferings, 109. Ida Overbeck on Nietzsche's philosophy, 109–10.

MIGRANT YEARS (1879–1889)

1880

The ailing Nietzsche visits the Overbecks, 111. His ascetic life, 111. Philosophical conversations, 112. On French authors, 112. His suffering at being little known and read, 112–13. On Klinger, Stirner, and Schopenhauer, 113–14. On Ludwig Feuerbach and Samuel Johnson, 114–15. On morality and altruism, 115.

1882

Meets Lou Andreas-Salomé and Paul Rée in St. Peter's in Rome (anecdote), 116. Proposes marriage to Salomé through Rée, 116. Nietzsche seriously ill, Paul

Rée stays in Rome with him, 117. Second proposal of marriage to Salomé, 117. Humorous portrait with her, 117. Spends several weeks alone with her, 117–18. Aphoristic style, 118. Deeply religious nature, 118. Slanders Rée and Salomé, 119. “What I have done cannot be forgiven,” 119. Ida Overbeck’s view of the Salomé affair, 120–23. His “son” Zarathustra, 120. On Salomé, 121. His break with Salomé and Rée, 121. His sister’s role in the affair, 121–22. His hopes and mistakes, 122–23. His terrible loneliness, 123. His break with Ida Overbeck, 123. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche on his attitude toward women, 123–25. Arthur Egidi meets Nietzsche, 125–26. On Peter Gast, 126–27. On Wagner, 127. On aphorisms, 129. Tells a Wagner anecdote, 129. On punctuality (anecdote), 130. On the break with Wagner, 130. On *The Birth of Tragedy* and Hans von Bülow, 130–31. On Beethoven and Bach, 131. Egidi on Nietzsche’s asceticism, 132. Egidi on the Wagner case, 132.

## 1883

Sebastian Hausmann meets him on a walk (anecdote), 133. On the need for a formal style in writing, 134. On “Don’t forget the whip!”, 135. On his career in Basel, 135–36. On Jakob Burckhardt, 136. On Richard Wagner, 137–38. On Jakob Froschammer, and vice versa, 138–39. Nietzsche’s conversational style, 139–40. Nietzsche as a secluded scholar in Leipzig, 141–43. Gives grapes to children (anecdote), 142. Conflicts in his thinking, 143. On Kant, 143. On Napoleon and how the strong prey on the weak, 143. His sense of tragedy, 144. On the idea of God, 145. His high philosophical ambition, 145. Franz Overbeck and Nietzsche, 146.

## 1884

Resa von Schirnhofer meets Nietzsche in Nice, 147. Her comments on Salomé, 147. His sensitivity and courtesy, 148. On prejudices, 148. They climb a mountain and attend a bullfight (anecdote), 149–50. On Malwida von Meysenbug and Lou Salomé, 151. On Sallust, Napoleon, and Corsica, 151. On Schirnhofer’s poems, 151–52. On Wagner, 152. On Francis Galton, 153. On Stendhal and other writers, 153–54. On Taine, 154–55. Schirnhofer reads songs from *Zarathustra*, 155–57. His scepticism about knowledge of our own thought processes, 158. He visits Meta von Salis-Marschlins, 158. On vanity as a residue of slavery, 159. On man’s potential, 160. On dislike for dialects, 161. Second meeting with Resa von Schirnhofer, 161. Stamped by a herd of cows (anecdote), 162. Signed his own prescriptions for drugs, 163. Schirnhofer on hashish, 163–64. His fear of mental illness, 164–65. His sister disputes her father’s brain disease, 165–66. Helen Zimmermann’s friendship with Nietzsche, 166–69. She vouches for his sanity, 167. And his courtesy to women (anecdote), 168. Pirated translations of his works in the United States, 168–69. Dietary problems, 170. His landlord tells about him (anecdote), 170–71. Meeting with Gottfried Keller, 172. Introduced to the

astronomer Wilhelm Tempel, 172–73. Paul Lanzky becomes his companion, 173, 178. Quest for a suitable place to live, 174–75. A sad parting, 176, 182. His humaneness, 178. His working and living habits, 179–80. Overexertion, 179.

## 1885

Dietary problems, 180. Fear of insanity (anecdote), 180–81. In Sils-Maria with a musician and an elderly intellectual lady, 182–83. Physical appearance, 183. On Chopin, Schumann, Kirchner, and Wagner, 184–87. Terrible headache, 187. Walking, 188.

## 1886

Meetings with Marie von Bradke in Sils-Maria, 188–92. Eye for natural beauty, 190. Recollects writing *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 191. Sensitivity, 192.

## 1887

On Dostoevsky, 193. On his own changing personality, 194. Advice to a Catholic not to read his works, 195. His undaunted will, 195. Summer in Sils-Maria, 196–97. Memory of a visit from Heinrich von Stein, 198. Caution in forming opinions, 198–99. Ability to “share joy,” 199. On various authors, 200–4. On the French Revolution and Napoleon, 203. On conservatives and liberals, 205. His sanity, 205. Memories of Schulpforta, 206.

## 1888

On Wagner, 208. Nearly drowned (anecdote), 209. Memories of his childhood and his mother, 209. Compared with Murillo’s “Christ,” 209. On Wilhelm II, 210. Need for independence, 210–11. His sister warns against errors about him (tub-of-water and frog anecdotes), 211–12. Bernoulli refutes her version of events, 212–13.

## Undated

He meets young newlyweds in Venice (anecdotes), 213–16. His lonely stay in Turin, 216–18. Nietzsche’s piano, 218–20.

## AT THE JENA SANATORIUM (1889–1890)

Nietzsche in the sanatorium, 221–22. On display to medical students, 222–24. Syphilis, 224–25. Left to his mother’s care, 225–26.

## UNDER HIS MOTHER’S CARE IN NAUMBURG (1890–1897)

Quotations from the sick Nietzsche, 227–28. Conversation with his mother, 229–32. More quotations, 233–36.

## ON DISPLAY IN WEIMAR (1897–1900)

Resa von Schirnhofer visits the sick man, 237–40. A bust of Nietzsche, 240–42. The Archives, 243. Treatment, 244. *Dementia paralytica*, 244. Transfer in special train, 245. Sketch for a Nietzsche monument, 246. Physical appearance, 247. His funeral, 247–48. A suitcase of manuscripts found in Italy, 249. A visit to Weimar, 250–54. Description of him as a patient, 254–55. Grotesque musical paroxysms, 255–56. A moment of lucidity? “In vero vinitas,” 256. Medical history, 257–59. “Mattress grave” and death, 260–61. Death, 262.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

263

## SOURCES

268

## INDEX OF NAMES AND WORKS

271

## INTRODUCTION

# TALKING WITH NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche's friend the philosopher Paul Rée once said to the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies that Nietzsche was more important because of his letters than his books and yet more important in his conversations than in his letters.<sup>1</sup> This statement, a report of a conversation, can provide the text for our considerations of the importance, meaning, and function of conversations in general and the conversations with Friedrich Nietzsche in particular. The tradition of collecting the spoken discourse of important thinkers is one which reaches back to classical antiquity. What indeed are the Socratic dialogues but Plato's reports of Socrates' conversations? In the nineteenth century this tradition reaches some type of height in Germany with the publication of J. P. Eckermann's conversations with Goethe.<sup>2</sup> Eckermann's conversations with Goethe share one feature with Plato's reports of Socrates' dialogues—they were perceived as reliable reports of actual conversations, at least until the underlying structures of the texts as texts were examined. Once this was done, it became evident that such "conversations" were elaborate fictions which used the device of the report to create the aura of reality. The report, with its basic structure of the "talking head," the recreation of a first-person representation speaking direct discourse (or reported indirect discourse), mimics our daily experiences of conversing. In this mimetic structure is embedded the possibility of a range of ideological messages, all of which acquire some believability as they are literally "put into the mouth" of a "real" individual. What makes this figure real to us, however, is not merely that the recreation meets our idealized expectations of the nature of discourse (for who ever spoke like Plato's Socrates or Eckermann's Goethe?) but that it confirms an image of a figure who has acquired some more general or mythic quality. Thus we expect Eck-

1. Ferdinand Tönnies, "Paul Rée," *Das freie Wort* 4 (1904), 670.

2. See Sander L. Gilman, introduction to *Johann Peter Eckermann: Aphorismen* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1984).

ermann's Goethe to speak in quotable *bons mots* because the archetypal image which Eckermann employs is that of the wise old man, Odin-like, who speaks in gnostic utterances. This is not to deny that the content of the conversation may have stemmed, at perhaps some remove, from the historical figure to whom it is attributed. There is, however, little doubt that the structuring of the literary conversation provides the form and the context even for material which could be successfully attributed to the actual speaker. Until the introduction of acoustic recordings of speech in the late nineteenth century, however, no literary conversation was set down which is not suspect. In all cases we must consider the author of the conversation as a more or less creative artist who is shaping (if not inventing) the conversation.

Does this fact, however, vitiate our use of this material? If we wish to use the Platonic dialogues, Boswell's conversations with Johnson, or Eckermann's reports of Goethe's views as the unmediated report of the views and opinions of Socrates, Johnson, or Goethe, then we are stymied. This material is not original in the same way as a text ascribed to an author, a letter written or dictated by him, or even the copy or printing of such material. If we wish to place this material in the complex reception of the writer, as part of the mythbuilding which occurs in the creation of a writer's reputation, then we have an extraordinarily rich and complex source. Not only can we examine the literal recreation of the fictionalized persona of an historical figure, but we can examine it within the bounds of an identifiable tradition, that of the conversation. The parallel existence of a genre of clearly fictionalized "conversations," such as the "imaginary conversations" of Walter Savage Landor, provide the matrix for the examination of this tradition. Thus we can examine "texts," that is, written documents, to recreate the broader "text," the reputation of the writer, which is undergoing transmutation and expansion through the generation of texts in which he is allowed to speak. For the joy of the "imaginary conversation" is that the mute are given tongue, that the dead are given immortality in their discourse. In literary conversations much the same illusion is employed. The mute author, whose presence we sense but cannot ever truly see behind the work of art, the printed page, the actors on the stage, suddenly sheds his or her disguise and steps forth and addresses us directly, without the mediation of the work of art. This illusion permits us an intimacy with the historical figure impossible for those of us who know him or her only through the work of art.

We are permitted into the presence of the “great one” and share the sort of intimacy that we desire, but usually cannot hope to have. We see the private life of the creative artist and it reifies our view of his or her greatness. Or, conversely, it reveals the hidden flaws, the feet of clay or goat’s feet, enabling us to dismiss the hidden figure behind the book as merely mortal like ourselves.

Having this caveat means that we can begin to seek patterns in the reporting of conversations and the structures which are used by the reporter. We can also call on these accounts in documenting the growth and shaping of a reputation, of our understanding of the dynamic interactions which resulted in our present image of the writer, and in Nietzsche’s case, his oeuvre. For Nietzsche is a case study in the power which reports of conversation have to subtly shape our understanding of the man and his work, both altering his image and reflecting the mythbuilding which surrounded the growth of his reputation. This mythbuilding and the resulting attempt to undo it was a conscious and planned act, a rarity in the history of a writer’s reception, initially orchestrated by Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, within a specific historical and ideological context, and then expanded by her allies and opposed by her enemies. All of the conversations with Nietzsche reflect this conflicted ideological embeddedness, as indeed they must, but they also reflect an ongoing debate about the use to which Nietzsche and his works were to be put with the rise of the philosopher’s reputation and its manipulation during the closing decade of the nineteenth century and the opening third of the twentieth century.

The conversations with Nietzsche reflect a wide range of reporters. Their reflections begin to be recorded only at the point, in the 1890’s, when Nietzsche’s name literally had become a household word, similar to Freud’s or Einstein’s in the later twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> They are, by definition, retrospective (except for the accounts of the decade of his illness), unlike Eckermann’s daily recording of his conversations with Goethe; and, as such, are both less reliable and more interestingly creative. Some of the reporters knew Nietzsche intimately (such as his sister), while others merely visited the ill philosopher in his home in Weimar, a home which his sister selected so that her brother would, in death, share the glory of the reputation

3. On the power of Nietzsche’s reputation at the turn of the century, see Sander L. Gilman, “The Nietzsche Murder Case; or, What Makes Dangerous Philosophies Dangerous,” in Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 39–58.



of that seat of the muses, the home of Goethe. Taken all together they give us a sense of the power which the reputation of the philosopher had, and, perhaps, some sense of the residual power which the man himself must have had on those about him.

Some of these reports are "true," i.e., they describe actual events; some are "false," i.e., the events most probably never happened. But most of these reports, the stuff out of which contemporary biographies of Nietzsche have to a great degree been crafted, are neither true or false.<sup>4</sup> They give a single perspective on an event, they report a half-remembered conversation filtered through the growing international reputation of the philosopher/writer. They all, however, capture the image of Nietzsche which speaks to the ideological presuppositions of the author of the memories. They are the realities of mythmaking and must be understood as such. The image they give us of the philosopher is complex. Some of the complexity stems from the author of the memoir, some of it from Nietzsche's own protean self. The ideological bias can be judged from some of the radical positions taken as the writer's reputation was beginning to grow at the turn of the twentieth century.

Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the masters of modern autobiographical self-analysis.<sup>5</sup> Strongly conscious of his own strengths and weaknesses, he submitted the course of his life to constant scrutiny. After his collapse in 1889 this critical distance was surrendered and his life quickly became the object of hagiography. Responsible for this radical change in Nietzsche's image and in public opinion was his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who soon after her return from Paraguay in 1893 began to establish the legend of Nietzsche as the noble prophet of his time. She worked at this image all her life and defended it stubbornly. The main document of this myth-building was her three-volume biography of her brother. Published in 1895, 1897, and 1904, of all of the memoirs about Nietzsche it contains the greatest number of memories of him.

4. Especially the biographies of Curt Paul Janz, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, 3 vols. (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1978–1979), and Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

5. See the extraordinary reading of Nietzsche's autobiographical fictions in Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). An earlier study of this problem, which reflects on the question of Nietzsche's response to the world of words in which he lived, is Sander L. Gilman, *Nietzschean Parody: An Introduction to Reading Nietzsche* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1976).

The biography was revised in 1913, and the correspondence and extensive quotations from Nietzsche's *Ecce homo* (meanwhile published) removed. The biography was only the peak of a lifelong series of publications devoted to her brother. But this material, whether it be her own memories or her sketches of conversations with people who knew her brother, must be considered suspect. Like all other memories of Nietzsche, his sister's biographical writings represent a specific underlying image, which was created and supported by these very reminiscences. Those among Nietzsche's friends and acquaintances who shared her image of her brother tended to support her work.

The following unpublished letters from acquaintances of Nietzsche to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche are a direct echo of the volumes of the biography. Max Heinze, one of Nietzsche's teachers in Schulpforta and Rudolf Eucken's successor as the chair of the philosophy department at the University of Basel, wrote to her in August 1895 after the publication of the first volume:

"Ungrateful" is probably the word that often came to your mind about me recently in your private thoughts or even in conversations with others, and I cannot deny that you have every right to label me so. But I do not wish to be slow to apologize, since I know—or at least I hope very much—that you will forgive me in the end. From Pentecost until just a week ago I was loaded down with work, and more recently I had hoped to come to Naumburg to express my thanks to you personally. But no opportunity arose, nor probably will any prior to my departure for the South, so I must thank you merely in writing for Volume I of *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche*. I have read most of the book, and though formerly I was of the opinion that some time should have been allowed to elapse before publication of a biography, I have now changed my mind, since this biography has contributed essentially to knowledge of your brother's early development and hence to an understanding of his later life and achievements. You have earned the thanks of all who honor Friedrich Nietzsche and at the same time you have erected a splendid memorial to yourself as his sister. Writing this book gave you a good deal of joy, though mixed with sadness, may it continue to provide you satisfaction now that it has been published.<sup>6</sup>

6. All unpublished material was found in the former Nietzsche Archive in Weimar, GDR, now located in the Goethe-Schiller Archive, NFG, Weimar.

Nine years later, after the publication of the last volume, he wrote to her:

After a two-week stay in the green woods, which we enjoyed very much, we are about to return to Leipzig today—until yesterday we had still hoped you might delight us with a visit. Now we can give up the idea completely. Nor had you held out much hope of it in Weimar, and after reading the galley-proofs of your book I can see why you have almost no other thought on your mind than to finish the book. Soon it will have reached that point, and with all my heart I wish you success in finishing this tremendous work. As far as I can judge, the work will bring you many deep-felt thanks. You cast an excellent and bright light on your brother's later development with your mastery of the vast and scattered materials and I appreciate especially Chapter 24, in which you give us a complete explanation of your brother's fundamental ideas and his eventual reconciliation. The intentions he had in writing his great works are now much better understood and evaluated. And what a great deal of new material has come to light! I always said, my dearest friend, that you understood your brother best, and so were most suited to enable others to understand him too, and I understand only too well that one section can still use a few more revisions—as it stands now, some questions remain unanswered. I would have liked to discuss some points with you in person, now perhaps later! I will take note of my concerns! Many thanks for letting me have the galley-proofs, I am sending them back by special delivery.

Wilhelm Pinder, Nietzsche's childhood friend, wrote a long letter to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche in July 1895, praising Volume I of her biography:

Do not be angry with me for sending you my reactions to *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* only now. Just as on page 141 of the biography "our friend P." is mentioned as having "trumped up school duties" as an excuse for his apathy as a member of the Germania fraternity, so the aforementioned P. now must bring up business duties as an excuse to obtain your forgiveness for his procrastination in responding to the biography. I have truly been under considerable business pressure until just yesterday evening, when my four-week vacation began. Under such circumstances I must ask you to allow me to express only now my deepest and most heartfelt thanks for the precious gift of the biography which you sent. I have already read about a half of it and can assure you that its

content moves me most deeply and gives me a great deal of joy and happiness. The richest and most moving memories of my youth are linked with the person of my friend Fritz, whom I admired, honored and loved. And you have drawn the image of this friend of my youth, your beloved brother, down to the finest detail with incomparable loyalty, reverence and tenderness! An aura of poetry clings to this image. The portrayal of the youthful years of this great and mighty thinker, who later produced such profound movements through his creations, has an idyllic effect on the reader. But that does not mark the full parameters of the effect produced by the portrayal. For you wrote what you have written with your life's blood, and so the effect of the biography extends far beyond the confines of an idyll.

I will use the leisure of my vacation to finish reading the book and I hope that when I come and visit you briefly in Naumburg in a few weeks, as I intend to do, that I will be able to express my gratitude in person.

Reinhardt von Seydlitz, art critic and author, who had met Nietzsche in 1876, first wrote in 1895:

Once again it is my liveliest desire not to know at all what you must think of me. For after you had heaped us with precious gifts, my silence must have seemed rather shabby, and your judgment of this silence must be no different than Isolde's: "Can I 'grasp' what you keep silent?"

My laziness is incomprehensible, and only my own indolence can grasp it.

I am very glad to hear that some of the letters from your dear and unique brother will be useful for the second volume of the biography. With the first volume you have erected a heroic monument to himself and yourself (excuse me for naming the great man before the great lady). Everything about this book is delightful, and it should delight everybody. As its creation surely must have had a liberating effect on you, so for the reader it is a copious source of pleasure. You succeeded completely—insofar as that is at all possible—in showing him to us in his developing years. You let him grow up, mature and blossom before our eyes, and the ability to do this is a divine talent. It is an admirable work, which suffers no loss from being written out of genuine most beautiful and purest love. The "reader" as such can thank you only by reading it. But how differently various people read. I can only assure you—I *have* read it! So, a thousand thanks!

Two years later, after Volume II appeared, he wrote to her:

“Of course! When you send people something, then they finally write, otherwise not at all!” That is what you are thinking, isn’t it? But you are mistaken. One can send people even the nicest things (especially books!) and they still fail to write. And yet . . . but no, excuse my boorishness (for excusing myself is my peculiar type of boorishness), and accept right away my huge sack of gratitude which I’ve been filling and stuffing ever since the arrival of the second volume.

Of course I was particularly moved in this volume by learning how the time when I first met him really was (as seen by him, your brother). For I met him in the eerie torch-smoke of the Bayreuth Corybant festival, and under that illumination he seemed to belong there, “howling with the wolves.” Only for that reason, and of course because the gigantic strides from summit to summit are so much more difficult for us lesser persons, did our friendship undergo a brief interruption, which he then ended so beautifully with his royal initiative of 1885. He was always a king among us, or rather above us. How he understood the royal art of affability (to mention just one!).

Now I am thinking primarily of my offenses against him. I have not yet written my “Nietzsche article.” (Incidentally, how he would laugh at this journalistic expression!) And this sin of omission seems to turn out to my benefit—everything good is promptly punished here below, so why should sin not be rightfully rewarded? For now I will wait until your second half-volume goes to press, in order not to quote passages from his letters which you already present; I think it would be better so.

Otherwise, if you wish me to begin *soon*, I need only strike the rock and a rich stream will pour forth freely. “I sparkle like a dragon with wit and malice,” he once wrote to me from Turin, and I believe that I too would in turn sparkle right away—not with malice, for that is the right of kings—as soon as I set pen to paper in writing this “article,” though the sparks might be merely small, and I feel like Wolf Goethe (the great man’s grandson), who once said: “Yes, my grandfather was indeed a Hun [an imposing figure], but I am just a hen.”

It has been a very long time since your last letter, i.e. since I failed to answer it. Nothing has changed here since then, except that I could perhaps mention that Maximilian Street, where you scraped your knee so painfully then, has now been paved over with asphalt, so that in the future you will be spared such a fall. But much has changed with you, as we notice. You are in Weimar! And

where do you have the Archive? And how is your dear mother? I will not ask how *he* is, and will silently wait for you to have some news for us.

(Seydlitz's memories, including those that introduce his correspondence with Nietzsche, are included in the present book.)

Andreas Heusler, Nietzsche's colleague in Basel, wrote to Nietzsche's sister in December, 1896:

In sending me the first half-volume of Volume II of the life of your dear brother, you have given me a great though melancholy pleasure, and I thank you sincerely with all my heart for it. I was immediately fascinated by the book and I read it from cover to cover in flying haste yesterday and today, only to begin it again from the beginning and reread more carefully at least the main parts, as my free time permits. What interested me most during this rapid reading was more detailed information about his rift with Wagner; for the ideas presented on pages 262–264 from the year 1876 agree astonishingly with objections which your brother himself used to raise even during the time of his greatest enthusiasm for W[agner] (the time of the idyllic days in Tribschen), of course not in as sublime and convincing a manner as they appear in these pronouncements, otherwise he would perhaps have agreed more with me at the time.

Incidentally, I admire your mastery in describing your dear brother's development. You have thereby given him a beautiful and worthy monument.

The last of these letters, dated February 11, 1897, comes from the widow of Nietzsche's teacher F. W. Ritschl, who had known Nietzsche since December 4, 1865:

When I thanked you several weeks ago for your friendly parcel, dear and respected lady, the book had just arrived and I had read only the preface. Now that I have read the book itself, I feel an urge to thank you again and to express the deep sympathy, the intellectual interest and stirring emotion with which I followed this highly tragic course of life. What a hero full of spiritual power, what a child full of love and imagination your genial brother was! How he struggled with unbroken energy against his cruel disease, always driven restlessly by the feeling of a sublime mission in life! I do not know what false descriptions of his character have been made—but if they resemble Schure's, then your loving, detailed book will dispel this fog for every unprejudiced reader and bring to view his character in its full greatness, boldness, and truthfulness.

ness. He shines like polished steel. Dear lady, I simply had to write these few words to let you know that you sent your valuable gift to a woman who understands it, who has thought of your brother and "his beloved sister" with unchanging, warm affection, even when he broke with us.

This entire correspondence reflects a general agreement with the heroic image of Nietzsche, as it was later presented in the Nietzsche literature known as the "Weimar school," those unquestioningly positive writings produced by the Nietzsche Archive under the leadership of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.

How cautious one must be with the works of this group is documented in Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche's two attacks on other authors of accounts of Nietzsche. Both in her "Nietzsche Legends" and in her "Memories," she attacks reminiscences of her brother which run counter to her own.<sup>7</sup> Her own memory is, however, often tendentious, for in fact memories are easier to forge than letters. But even her scholarly accuracy is highly questionable. One example should suffice. In her last book on her brother, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Women of his Time*, a work intended as an answer to those who wanted to brand Nietzsche as the arch-misogynist, she quotes from an interview with Helen Zimmern, the translator of Schopenhauer into English, whom Nietzsche had met in Sils-Maria, as if she had read this interview personally in the *London Observer*.<sup>8</sup> No such interview was ever published in the *Observer*. What she actually read was a newspaper article in the *Frankfurter Generalanzeiger*, dated November 16, 1926, which claimed to be reporting about an interview published in the *Observer*. Similar inaccuracies are found throughout her works. Her unreliableness as a biographical source is evident. This unscientific tendency, however, fits well with her successful attempt to manipulate the Nietzsche legend during her lifetime (and even afterwards).

The hagiographers of the "Weimar" group found their counterpart in Basel, where a group under the leadership of Carl Albrecht Bernoulli presented a very critical version of Nietzsche's

7. Both in *Zukunft*, January 28, 1905 and October 12, 1907. Passages about Salomé in the biography ought of course to be read also in the light of Lou Andreas-Salomé's monograph on Friedrich Nietzsche.

8. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1935), p. 142. On the question of Nietzsche's image of women, see R. Hinton Thomas, "Nietzsche, Women and the Whip," *German Life and Letters: Special Number for L. W. Forester* 34 (1980), 117-25. On Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and her falsifications see H. F. Peters, *Zarathustra's Sister: The Case of Elisabeth and Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Crown, 1977).

life. Central figures of this group were Nietzsche's Basel colleague, the theology professor Franz Overbeck, and his wife Ida. Overbeck had been depicted as a "villain" by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. She accused him of having failed to recognize her brother's greatness since he had recommended that some of Nietzsche's papers be destroyed. He was also accused of having ignored the medicine bottles on Nietzsche's night table in Turin. Nietzsche's sister regarded these self-prescribed medicaments as the cause of her brother's collapse. She wanted to use this myth to counter the accusation that Nietzsche's mental illness was either hereditary or of syphilitic origin. Overbeck became fully aware of the Weimar camp's enmity against him when Elisabeth finally published an extract from the third volume of her biography under the title "Friedrich Nietzsche and his Acquaintances" in *Zeitgeist*, an insert in the *Berliner Tageblatt* (October 3, 1904), in which numerous critical remarks against Overbeck could be found. In January 1905, Overbeck wrote to Bernoulli:

What I believe is that I cannot and do not want to ignore the fact that I no longer have the choice to limit the consequences of this action to the Förster woman's explanations. Even Nietzsche will not remain untouched by the effects of my former indiscretion. For anyone who compares the biography and his letters to me conscientiously and with sharp eyes, a dubious light will inevitably fall also on the unreliability and ambiguity, indeed almost the "lack of will-power" in his behavior toward his sister, and the damage, especially of the position which he occupied between his sister and me (and secondarily also my wife). This will result especially from what my letters will reveal about the "Lou affair," but also from other things. I know this, and by admitting this knowledge, I do not mean to say that I feel sure of my statement in view of the coercion placed on me for my actions by the existence and character of the Förster woman. Unless I meet alone with this hateful person, who moreover is not solely responsible in my eyes, I must resign myself to this totally unintended consequence of my actions; but I still find her obnoxious. And that you had so little understanding for this feeling from the first is what I have to complain about today.<sup>9</sup>

9. Published unabridged in *Zusammenstellung der klägerischen Schriftstücke erster Instanz des grundlegenden Overbeckbriefes vom 3.4. Januar 1905 und der beiden Urteile erster und zweiter Instanz in Klagsachen des Herrn Peter Gast (Heinrich Köselitz) in Weimar gegen Herrn Schriftsteller Albrecht Bernoulli in Arlesheim bei Basel und Herrn Verlagsbuchhändler Eugen Diederichs in Jena wegen Untersagung von Veröffentlichungen. Gedruckt zur Erleichterung der Stoffübersicht für den Privatgebrauch.* (Weimar: R. Wagner, 1908), pp. 67–68.



Overbeck's defensiveness is revealed here. His memories of Nietzsche were published in this defensive, critical mood. After Overbeck's death, Bernoulli published these memories as part of a comprehensive two-volume study on the relations between Overbeck and Nietzsche. After the appearance of the first volume, Peter Gast, Nietzsche's amanuensis who after the turn of the century had again allied himself with the Weimar camp, sought a court injunction against publication of the entire book or the removal of at least the passages which dealt with his correspondence with Overbeck.<sup>10</sup> The court's decision was reached in favor of Peter Gast in the spring of 1908, and long passages of Volume II of Bernoulli's study fell victim to censorship. These passages cast a bad light both on Gast and on Nietzsche's family, while Overbeck was presented extremely favorably. The "Basel group" simply had other prejudices than the "Weimar school"; it too aimed to present a specific image of Nietzsche, one that was far less positive than the one in his sister's hagiographical works, and which implied that Nietzsche's final insanity permeated his entire philosophy.

Other memories of Nietzsche, though not officially of either school, also reflected some type of personal bias. Lou Andreas-Salomé's posthumously published memoirs, Resa von Schirnhofer's sketches, the reports on Wagner's and Burckhardt's criticisms of Nietzsche, all were written down long after the events they describe. The time interval between the events and their written record is in many cases more than fifty years. They were written under the impact of the growing reception of Nietzsche in Europe and must be read in terms of their position in the creation of the various "Nietzsche legends."

Accounts of Nietzsche begin with contemporary depictions of visits with the mentally ill philosopher in the 1890's, when his reputation had begun to spread throughout Europe. Gabriele Reuter's report on her visit with the sick philosopher is perhaps the best known one because of the use Thomas Mann made of it in his novel *Dr. Faustus* (1947), a work redolent with references to Nietzsche's life; but there are many other reports about such visits in the last decade of Nietzsche's life.<sup>11</sup> In addition to his sister's biographical

10. A detailed biographical study of "Peter Gast" is available in Frederick R. Love, *Nietzsche's Saint Peter*, Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschungen, 5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981).

11. Helmut Kreuzer, "Thomas Mann und Gabriele Reuter: Zu einer Entlehnung für den *Doktor Faustus*," in *Neue Deutsche Hefte* 10 (1963), 103-119.

works, the total number of reminiscences of Nietzsche grew continually until the 1930's, especially in the popular press.

While gathering materials for her biography, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, and later also other collaborators at the Nietzsche Archive (for example, Richard and Max Oehler, Karl Schlechta), began to interview or to correspond with many people who knew Nietzsche. Some of this original material is not accessible (or never existed in written form) and is therefore taken from the printed sources. In one case (that of Jakob Wackernagel) two unpublished memoirs were written down with a thirty-year interval between the two versions. Other accounts existed apparently until 1945 in written form, but have since been lost. Others were published only in part until now. This and other unpublished material is presented here in unrevised form for the first time.

Of some interest, besides, are numerous sources which might include accounts of meetings with Nietzsche, but fail to do so. Thus, among others, autobiographical writings of Rudolf Eucken, Gabriel Monod, Carl Spitteler, Richard Voss, and Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorf do not describe actual meetings with Nietzsche.<sup>12</sup> Eucken, who wrote an essay about his memories of Nietzsche, mentions him only fleetingly in his autobiography. Monod's main interest is to explain Nietzsche's conflict with Wagner. Voss's only remark is that he avoided visiting the sick Nietzsche.

Many essays with promising titles fall far short of the expectations they raise. S. Zuckermann's article entitled "A Visit to the Home of Friedrich Nietzsche," in the *Berliner Herold* of December 8, 1897, closes with the paragraph:

It would of course be of great interest to see the genial man even in his helpless state, but such a wish was granted to no one, not even to Nietzsche's friends. And if nonetheless such articles about personal visits with Nietzsche appear in the newspapers, these communications are based, as Frau Förster-Nietzsche expressly states, on untruth and stem merely from the fantasies of some newsreporter or other. It has been a rule for a long time that besides his sister, the nurse Alwine, and at times a servant, no one has access to Fr. Nietzsche, since he is able to recognize only his sister and the nurse.

12. Rudolf Eucken, *Lebenserinnerungen: Ein Stück deutschen Lebens* (Leipzig: K. F. Koehler, 1921); Gabriel Monod, *Portraits et souvenirs* (Paris: C. Lévy, 1897); Carl Spitteler, "Meine Beziehungen zu Nietzsche" (1908) in his *Gesammelten Werke* 6 (Zurich: Artemis, 1947); Richard Voss, *Aus einem phantastischen Leben. Erinnerungen* (Stuttgart: J. Engelhorn, 1920); Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Erinnerungen (1848-1914)* (Leipzig: K. F. Koehler, [1929]).

This statement is an effort to stem the rumors of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche's exploitation of her sick brother.<sup>13</sup> Yet such visits continued to take place, as the compendious memoir-literature of that time shows.

The selection of material is taken from the much more extensive *Begegnungen mit Nietzsche* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1981; 2d, rev. edition, 1985), edited by Sander L. Gilman. For the present volume a representative sample of the material has been selected for the English reader. This material supplements (or served as the "source" of) much of what is known about Nietzsche's life. Thus the footnotes to the selections reflect the observations of the original authors of the accounts.

No attempt has been made to clarify contradictions between the various views of specific incidents, as no single view is most probably "correct." *Conversations with Nietzsche* presents (as did its German source) a "new" Nietzsche in that the contradictions in the perceptions of those who knew him are made manifest. Thus the volume can serve as a biography in contradictions of this most contradictory of thinkers.

The material for the original volume was only marginally accessible through existing bibliographies.<sup>14</sup> Much effort and many hours were spent reading European newspapers and journals dating from 1880 to 1980 for any firsthand account of a conversation with Nietzsche. Our thanks for assistance in this go to Ingeborg Reichenbach. The English manuscript was sensitively edited by Susan Meigs, who also has our thanks.

13. Similar to Zuckermann's is an essay by Robert de Montesquieu, "Pèlerinage passionné," *Le Gaulois*, October 15–16, 1904.

14. Helpful in locating about one-fifth of the accounts contained in *Begegnungen mit Nietzsche* were the following bibliographies: *International Nietzsche Bibliography*, Herbert W. Reichert and Karl Schlechta, eds., University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature, 45 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), and Richard Frank Krummel, *Nietzsche und der deutsche Geist*, Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschung, 3 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974). Following the publication of the first edition of the *Begegnungen mit Nietzsche*, Krummel published a second volume of his excellent source study, *Nietzsche und der deutsche Geist*, Band II, Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschungen, 9 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1983), which covers the period from 1901 to 1918. This volume drew heavily on the sources in the first edition of the *Begegnungen*. The German editions of the conversations with Nietzsche (and, therefore, this present selection) contained only memoirs which gave accounts of conversations with Nietzsche. Letters and diary extracts were not included since they will appear in the new critical edition of Nietzsche's work begun by the late Giorgio Colli and the late Mazzino Montinari.

## CONVERSATIONS WITH NIETZSCHE

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# CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL DAYS (1844–1858)

1 Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche

1847

My brother reportedly learned to speak only late, at the age of two and a half, so that our parents were beginning to worry and consulted a physician. This man, a jovial type, gave the following diagnosis: "Little Fritz is being served too solicitously and attentively; all his wishes are being fulfilled without delay, so why should he bother to speak!" Thereafter serious efforts were made, and since little Fritz had always looked at a pastel portrait of Grandma Nietzsche with special delight, he was insistently asked who that was. "Granma," he shouted happily, and that was his first word. In a short time then he was speaking very fluently and clearly. By the age of four he began to read and write. (13, 27)

2 Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche

1850

So (after father's death) at daybreak we tearfully left our birthplace, Röcken, which remained all our life the "dear homeland of our loved ones." For us the quiet cemetery with the graves of our father and our little brother was the "quiet isle of graves" to which we bore the evergreen wreath of happy and painful memories. Our family

plot in Röcken's cemetery is directly adjacent to the ancient church, one of the oldest in the province of Saxony. The church wall, covered with roses and wild grapevines, forms the back wall of the cemetery. A few paces away is the old schoolhouse where five-year-old Fritz went to school after father's death. Once when my brother and I visited Röcken as adults, the little village children, clattering along in their wooden shoes, happened to be going to afternoon classes. My brother watched all the little blond heads with deep emotion, for he had once sat among them. Of course, now it was children of another generation who were running so eagerly to school, but they still sat on the same uncomfortable old schoolbenches which had already been there in my brother's earliest childhood days.

My brother once stated heart-movingly what he later felt on recurrent visits to our old home: "The sight of our childhood surroundings touches us: the summer house, the church with its graves, the pond and the woods—we always see these again with a painful feeling. Self-pity takes hold of us, for what a great many things we have suffered since then! And here everything still stands, so silent, so eternal." (17, 22–23)

### 3 Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche

1854

Here the oldest of these youthful friends, Wilhelm P[inder], who like my brother wrote a biography in his fourteenth year, will now take up the pen to describe in childlike detail their first meeting and our Fritz himself as he then seemed to his friends:

I must first mention one of the most important events in my life. For by chance I had met in my grandmother's garden a boy who has been my dearest and truest friend ever since and will certainly continue to be so. This boy, Friedrich Nietzsche by name, has since then had a very important and very good influence on my whole life, on all my occupations and my opinions. I want to add here a brief description of his life, since he will be mentioned very often in the course of my sketch and will occupy a very prominent place from now on.

He then recounts the main events in our life, which we have already mentioned, and later returns once again to give a detailed description of my brother:

He had, as I have already said, had many sad experiences in his life, having at an early age lost his father, whom he loved very