

Interview with Laurence Lampert

Conducted by Daniel Blue



Laurence Lampert was born and raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He took undergraduate degrees at what is now the University of Winnipeg and Drew University and received his master's and doctorate from Northwestern University. He taught at Indiana University for 35 years and is now retired. He has published numerous articles and four books:

Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra, (named one of the Outstanding Academic Books of 1987 by *Choice*); *Nietzsche and Modern Times: A Study*

of Bacon, Descartes, and Nietzsche; Leo Strauss and Nietzsche; and Nietzsche's Task: An Interpretation of Beyond Good and Evil. He has edited an edition of Francis Bacon's *Advertisement Touching a Holy War* and is currently at work on two books on Plato.

Professor Lampert's four books each center on close readings of Nietzschean texts. While he occasionally cites scholars he admires, he rarely adverts to historic or literary background. Rather he focuses on Nietzsche's exact words, positioning each aphorism in its relationship to the whole and in the process illuminating both the text at issue and the structure of which it is a part. Few commentators have paid so much attention to the architecture of Nietzsche's books, and no one who reads Professor Lampert will view either *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* or *Beyond Good and Evil* as miscellanies again.

Professor Lampert spent considerable time traveling towards the close of the year, and had just returned from Africa (and was about to depart for Winnipeg, then the Canada bush) when we made contact by phone. From his home in Indianapolis he explained the development and critical fate of his book on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, his gathering sense of Nietzsche's historic significance, his debts to and disagreements with forebears (including Leo Strauss), and his projects for the future. He also explained a little about Canadian culture and offered experiences that demonstrate why he personally responds to Nietzsche's works. Professor Lampert had much to say, and the conversation drew to such length that eventually we had to take a break—for him to refresh himself and for the interviewer to buy more batteries and tapes.

DB: *Can you tell us something about your early years?*

LL: I was born and raised in Winnipeg, and spent all my years through college in the same house with my parents. It was a very stable and in a way uniform environment. I've often thought, when considering the biography of others, that I don't have alterations in my young life that enable me to say, well, before this point I was one way and after it another. I attended what is now the University of Winnipeg. Since we didn't have majors at the Canadian universities, I was in Arts, as they called it, the liberal arts, and after graduation I went to theological school at Drew University. I was no longer religious, but I had had a religious period in parts of high school and college, and I was intellectually interested. Theological schools can be intense intellectual places, and Drew proved to be that for me.

DB: *What about religion appealed to you intellectually?*

LL: Well, I guess it was because it had had such a grip on me. I had once been religious, and I wanted to investigate the hold that Christianity had. I was particularly interested in apologetics, the way that religion explained and defended itself in an intellectual setting, to the Greeks, to those who weren't Christians. That's how I got interested in philosophy. The history of Christian apologetics tracks the history of philosophy, and I came to see that Christianity as an intellectual enterprise is derivative from philosophy. So I moved away from the derivative to the original.

DB: *Did you get a degree in the subject?*

LL: I did. I have on my academic record something that I've always thought of as an academic blot, a B.D., a Bachelor of Divinity degree. There it is, bold as can be.

[Laughter.] So, after graduating from Drew I did graduate work in philosophy at Northwestern, which was, I suppose, *the* school in the U.S. most attuned to so-called Continental Philosophy at that time. Heidegger was a very big presence in theological studies in the sixties, and Heidegger had strongly influenced some of my professors at Drew. I read Heidegger and moved to other figures. I knew what I wanted to study basically: existentialism and phenomenology.

DB: *Were other writers in the existential-phenomenological movement of interest to you?*

LL: Nietzsche was already present. I'd studied some of him in theological school. When I got to Northwestern, the major figures were Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Husserl. These never really gripped me. Phenomenology was never a philosophical practice that I wanted to be mine. My dissertation was on views of history in Nietzsche and Heidegger, so it took a few years to write.

DB: *And that's a theme you've developed for the rest of your life.*

LL: It is. Well, Heidegger has fallen away. But I have to say that your questions have forced me to do something that hasn't been characteristic of me, that is, to look back over my past and consider what I've passed through and the steps to the way I now view things. I don't do much of that, but this I did want to say: in all of that study I was very much a spectator in my field. Just a student, just a scholar. I was conscious that I didn't have a philosophy. That is not the case now and will be something that I want to talk about later.

DB: *You published your first book, Nietzsche's Teaching, a commentary on Thus Spoke Zarathustra, in 1986, years later in your career. This suggests a long gestation period.*

Can you describe how you came to write it?

LL: Let me start by explaining the influence on me of George Grant, Leo Strauss, and Heidegger. These gave me my vantage point as a spectator of philosophy. Heidegger came first. He came, as I told you, when I was still studying theology primarily, and in graduate school it was Heidegger who became my main focus.

Leo Strauss came later. Plato's *Republic* was part of my introductory course for maybe 10 years, and I was comparing translations. At the beginning, I had assigned Cornford's, which was the standard then, and I picked up Allan Bloom's version and saw that at virtually every point it seemed more true to Plato's text. Bloom ended his introduction by saying that the authoritative interpretation of the *Republic* was by Leo Strauss, and that sent me to Strauss's essay in *The City and Man*. That was the first thing that persuaded me that Leo Strauss as a reader, as an exegete, was onto something that was just immense and that other commentators had missed.

And then, George Grant also supplied me with a perspective on things, and I read him because another Canadian once berated me, I mean *berated* me, for not knowing the greatest Canadian philosopher, George Grant. Shortly afterward, I was in Winnipeg and went into a CBC bookstore, and there, prominently displayed, was a little book by him in which one of Nietzsche's well-known, iconic profiles was in a bull's eye on the cover.

[Laughter.] That was *Time as History*, and reading it was a terrific experience. Just from

the first pages, I could see that this was Heidegger's Nietzsche, but a very special Heidegger's Nietzsche because Grant knew how to make Nietzsche speak English.

So those three helped form a perspective for me, and of course all three have a take on Nietzsche, and that take (to use a word from Grant's book) is a "refusal," a nuanced refusal of Nietzsche. That was important for me with regard to the long gestation of my first book. One of the things I've always said about myself as a scholar is that I've got *Sitzfleisch*. It's like a thick butt. I can just sit there and sit there and keep working, and this makes it possible for me to devote the largest chunks of every day to work. So I was working on the *Zarathustra* book from 1977 to 1986. But toward the end of that period, there occurred what I think of as probably the most important event in my life as a scholar. I wrote two essays on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* at the beginning of my study of it, the first of them on "The Dance Song" and the other one on Zarathustra's disciples, and I then spent about four years working out from those two concentrated considerations into writing a commentary on the whole book. I completed it and sent it to publishers, and I mean a lot of publishers, and it was rejected by every one of them. So I had this series of rejections after all this work, and it was a huge blow to me.

I was wavering about what to do, whether I could really make the book better, and I spent another three years rewriting the whole thing. In the process, I came to the view that Heidegger, Strauss, and Grant were *wrong* in their different refusals of Nietzsche. And Heidegger in particular was wrong because of his failure to understand who Nietzsche's Zarathustra really was. Of course, he's got a famous essay called "Who Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" and in that essay he makes a judgment against Nietzsche: Nietzsche is a teacher of revenge. But in my reworking of this book, I came to think that these refusals

were all wrong. Not only were they wrong (and this was the main event): Nietzsche was *right*. And that was the big shift for me. It meant that I was moving from being just a scholar with a kind of weak neutrality to the view that Nietzsche was right and most particularly on this huge issue of the teachings of revenge.

DB: *That comes through clearly toward the latter half of your book. I remember looking up and thinking, Oh, I should be less revengeful. [Laughter.] It was like seeing the light.*

LL: Good. So here's this period of gestation that you mentioned, and it resulted in a product that was wholly different in a decisive respect. I came to understand *Zarathustra* better, but the main point is that my book became a book of advocacy. I became a Nietzschean and did so by weaning myself from Heidegger, Strauss, and Grant and, more important, by winning freedom from the icon of scholarly neutrality. I remember that a Straussian later dismissed my book on Strauss and Nietzsche by saying, "Lampert has been taken over by Nietzsche." I liked that so much that it was something that I thought of regarding myself. "Who am I? Well, I am someone who has been taken over by Nietzsche."

DB: *I notice that in all your books, including Nietzsche's Teaching, you pay exceptional attention to the author's literary strategies. How did you come to recognize that this was important in Nietzsche and others?*

LL: I came to recognize it slowly, without a theory, and in Nietzsche himself. This was particularly the case in one passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "The Dance Song," which propelled me into doing a commentary on the whole book. In the spring of 1977, I assigned Plato's *Republic* and Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*. With the help of Leo Strauss, I

was seeing that the *Republic* had a dramatic structure and that the later parts built on the earlier. Because of that study I could see that the drama mattered in *Zarathustra*, too, and that here too there were events and that they altered things, altered Zarathustra and the way he talked.

One event in particular seemed important. It concerned the three songs in Part II and the fact that those songs were framed by the addresses Zarathustra made to the wise. In the first, it was “the famous wise” and, after the three songs, it’s “you who are wisest.” I asked myself: What makes it possible for Zarathustra to address “you who are wisest” and to address them as their superior? I came to see that the central event occurs in “The Dance Song.” Studying that chapter, I saw that one word after another in that piece fit exactly right. And that exactitude occurred in a song. And that song was on the deepest possible question, the question pursued by the wisest, the nature of nature. And the point of the song was that Life offered herself to Zarathustra to be fathomed. That and that alone made it possible for Zarathustra to address the wisest as he does. And I thought, if that exactitude, that precision of language is there, then it has got to be elsewhere, and I moved outward to the whole book. It was Nietzsche’s own use of language that allowed me to recognize how important it was for him to write in his exact and precise manner. And he needed to be read in the same way.

DB: *You certainly convinced me. I was quite skeptical at first, but the evidence is overpowering*

LL: I always come back to this. It's textual evidence. Just look at what's said. It's a matter of being able to see that some writers can write that well, and they can write that well because they can think that well.

DB: *As an example, you make clear that in every section of Beyond Good and Evil, the truly pivotal aphorisms occur in the exact center of the chapter. This is not the way people ordinarily write these days and haven't for several hundred years, but obviously Nietzsche did.*

LL: Obviously Nietzsche did. I too had a resistance to that. It seemed sophomoric. But Leo Strauss says again and again: Just turn to the center, you know the most important thing is there. I know it seems idiotic—nobody is going to use a formula like that and stick to that formula; but in the hands of great writers it isn't a formula. There are many ways of centering key matters, and there seems to be a rhythm that places at the center the central things they want to say. Meanwhile, as I was making my first forays into esotericism, I thought, well, this is just explosive, and it's going to spread through the scholarly world like wildfire. [Laughter.]

DB: *Academia is resistant to wildfire.*

LL: It absolutely is. Everybody is already vested in this or that way of doing things, and it's hard to break that. I did expect—with esotericism, with the access that it supplies to philosophers—I really did think that controversy would be something that would be kindled. But it is my sense that that has not happened with my books—not enough controversy, not enough reaction.

DB: *While we're on the subject, what sort of response did you get when Nietzsche's Teaching finally appeared? There are a lot of controversial ideas in the book, including the contention that Thus Spoke Zarathustra has a plot line, that Zarathustra himself develops and changes, that the proposal of the Übermensch is withdrawn, and that Part IV is an interlude, not a continuation. Did you encounter any resistance, or did people just yawn and ignore it.*

LL: Well, the main thing is—yes to the yawn. But there was resistance, and it was to what I had to say about Part IV, that I had put Part IV into an appendix, which of course I did only after long consideration. I wanted primarily to finish the book where it ended the first time for Nietzsche, and that is at the close of Part III. I wanted my commentary to end on the highest point and to give that climax its due. Of course, I had to treat Part IV in an appropriate way, and that way seemed as an appendix because it became clear that when Nietzsche came to write Part IV, he was going to write Parts V and VI as well. So the end of *Zarathustra* that matters is Part III, and Part IV is the beginning of another set of parts and makes sense primarily as that.

The resistance, I knew, came from the judgment by much of the scholarship that Part IV was the most important part, and it was the most important for one reason. In their reading, Zarathustra's critique of the higher men represents Zarathustra's deconstruction of himself. On that interpretation, Part IV was quite liberating because all that could be taken as embarrassing posturing about the true teaching was taken back in Zarathustra's repudiation of the higher men. So my reduction of Part IV to an appendix met resistance because it didn't read Part IV this way. There were also murmurs about the *Übermensch* point, which for me is so important, that is, that the Superman is understood as the

necessary new teacher. That for me is maybe the essential point of the drama of the book. Zarathustra turns into the teacher that at the beginning he only heralds.

DB: *Let's turn to your next book, Nietzsche and Modern Times. There, after examining writings of Bacon and Descartes, you turn to two works by Nietzsche, "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" and Book Five of The Gay Science. These works were written at very different times in his life. How did you find them related and connected in turn to the work of Descartes and Bacon?*

LL: That question is basic to the structure of that book. Both of those works by Nietzsche, one early, one late, focus on the deadly truths. There are three such deadly truths: sovereignty of becoming; fluidity of all concepts, types, and kinds; and the lack of any cardinal difference between man and the animals. That may seem like a casual list, but I think of the first as ontological, the sovereignty of becoming. The second is epistemological, the limits on capacity to know. The third is anthropological, lack of a cardinal difference between man and the animals. Now Nietzsche says in "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" that he takes these truths to be true but deadly. And what did Nietzsche think philosophy's response ought to be? In the early essay he says that if these true but deadly conclusions are thrown at the public for one more generation, it will perish of petty egoism and greed and cease to be a people. So in that early essay, Nietzsche held that the classical philosophers were right in judging that you have to shelter the public from the deadly truths, you have to generate salutary lies that will hide them.

In fact, the three deadly truths are what modern science was inexorably making public. So that's the key problem set in motion by Bacon and Descartes, that the sciences in their investigations of what is, of the human capacity to know, of the human animal itself, would not only come to those conclusions but make them public. The history essay is Nietzsche's early reflection on that. But in Book V of *The Gay Science*, his response is different. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, then Book V of *The Gay Science*, he shows how global humanity could live with and celebrate what he earlier judged to be the deadly truths. And that's what I wanted to show in *Nietzsche and Modern Times*.

DB: *I find that very helpful. It's easy to lose perspective in that book.*

LL: In some ways I think of that as my most important book, but it's also my most unreadable (laughter)—because, to come to its conclusions about Francis Bacon you have to negotiate all these little particulars—same with Descartes, same with Nietzsche; and I realize now that that's just exhausting.

DB: *Nietzsche's decision to embrace and go public with "the deadly truths" leads us to another theme you elaborate in Nietzsche and Modern Times, namely, his awareness of his audience and place in history. As you put it, Bacon, Descartes and Nietzsche were all aware of their time and place and wrote in ways suitable to their moment in history. Obviously, the historical moment is of great importance to genuine philosophers since they must be aware of how the new ideas they are about to introduce to the public will be heard. Can you talk more about the wily diplomacy called for here?*

LL: As your question makes clear, the wily diplomats are the canny thinkers of the very first rank. And while I think that my own understanding of this kind of philosophical activity comes from Plato and Nietzsche, and constant exposure to Descartes, nothing for me was more important than studying Francis Bacon, who was himself a political man. In fact, he was lord chancellor, that is, prime minister of England. I came to think of Bacon as probably the clearest example of a thinker who actually read his times, determined that they were dire, and then acted on the grandest scale. Bacon wrote a book called *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, and in its first fable he dealt with Cassandra, a prophet who was not heard. Bacon then puts as the first problem, How can a prophet be heard? A prophet has to know where he is, and he has to know what he can say in terms of where he is, and his account of Cassandra's failure is a kind of promise by Bacon, a prophet of the future that he will not make these mistakes. I wish that we still called our age Baconian because it's Bacon's wily diplomacy that established its leading characteristic—that the science and technology, the new science of nature, was going to be sold, in Bacon's words, as a project “to relieve the human estate.”

What necessity drove Bacon? For me, it's enlightening for us in our time to listen to his answer. Given guardedly, it's that European civilization was threatened with destruction from religious fundamentalism. The wars of religion were tearing Europe apart and that was the fact about Bacon's present that made it necessary for him to act. Publicly, he said that science would relieve the human estate. His real reason was to win rational freedom from the threat of its destruction by religious fundamentalism. So Francis Bacon, who was prime minister of England under James I, had much greater politics in mind in his books, the politics of religion and philosophy. And in order for philosophy to survive this

virulent outbreak of religious passion, it was necessary to alter the world, nothing less—to give it new ideals and new projects, projects of transformation of nature. Francis Bacon stands at the beginning of modern times, promising everyone a better world through science, but promising it because of what threatens his world. For me, he was a revelation.

DB: *Let's make a slight shift. Leo Strauss famously revealed how philosophers needed to veil their thoughts so as to get past the censors yet do so in such a way that they would be audible to those with ears to hear. It was apparently his idea of the difference between esoteric and exoteric writing which helped you to discover and present what is probably the central theme of Nietzsche and Modern Times, the notion of "a Nietzschean history of philosophy." Could you tell us more about this and how you came to recognize it? It is central.*

LL: It is central. To repeat the first sentence from *Nietzsche and Modern Times*. "This book is an installment in the new history of philosophy made possible by Friedrich Nietzsche." I thought of it as an installment because others were to come. In fact, that's what I'm working on now, an installment that concerns the founder of this view of philosophy, that is, Plato. I'll talk about that a little bit later.

Meanwhile, basic to the notion of the Nietzschean history of philosophy is Nietzsche's insight that the genuine philosopher commands and legislates (both words are important) and does so at particular turning points in the history of philosophy. So he calls for us to read the history of—not just of philosophy but the history of our civilization—in a way that brings out the active role played by these thinkers. Bacon and Descartes are obvious

examples of that. But Nietzsche said it right out in ways that Bacon and Descartes were restrained from saying, because of the nature of their times.

DB: *Your next book, Leo Strauss and Nietzsche, argues that the early Strauss was much influenced by Nietzsche and that he recognized Nietzsche's achievement as did no one else. Of all your books I find this the most visceral and exciting. You have repeatedly testified how much you owe to Strauss's ideas, and I gathered that in this work you both wanted to pay him homage, which you certainly do, but also to settle accounts. Could you talk to us about Strauss's work in your life and how you came to become disenchanted with a secretiveness which you call—and in context this is quite damning—“a failure of the historical sense”?*

LL: When I spoke of Strauss's “failure of the historical sense,” I meant that to be the most damning thing that I could say. After all, I had learned from Strauss that the thinker has to know where he is, know his time, and then, on the basis of a proper understanding of his time, to act. For Strauss of all people to write the way he did, in our post-Nietzsche era—to attribute to him a failure of the historical sense seemed the strongest thing that I could say.

This judgment on Strauss comes partly from new materials, such as early writings of Strauss published by Heinrich Meier as well as secondary works on Strauss. These gave a perspective that wasn't available before, and it's clear that from his early twenties on, Strauss opposed and fundamentally loathed the modern enlightenment. A bunch of his letters from the thirties convey that particularly strongly. It's that loathing of the modern enlightenment that became an issue for me, and the fact that he didn't seem to have an

adequate alternative. I came to think that Nietzsche's superiority to Strauss lay right there, in their assessment of the modern enlightenment.

We've already spoken about Nietzsche's fundamental endorsement of what's basic to the enlightenment, the investigation of nature and the publication of science. However, it's important to mention that Nietzsche also criticized the modern enlightenment and particularly certain moral imperatives that were rooted in it, such as esteem for equality and the desire to end suffering. I don't think that Strauss, by contrast, ever dealt adequately with modern science and the world it created. So Strauss's loathing of the modern enlightenment didn't lead him to Nietzsche's more nuanced responses.

DB: *Let's move on to Nietzsche's Task, your commentary on Beyond Good and Evil, which is replete with insights which certainly changed the way I read that work. Since time is limited, we'll confine ourselves to one topic, Nietzsche's treatment of religion. Many readers think of Nietzsche as anti-religious. According to your account, however, he is just against all religions up to now because he sees them all as expressions of resentment. So long as religion is put under the protection of philosophy, he believes that it is useful both to society and to the individuals who compose it. You suggest that for Nietzsche atheism is a transitional phase and that the appearance of Dionysus and the mortal Ariadne at the close of Beyond Good and Evil (and also, you surmise, at the end of Thus Spoke Zarathustra) are meant quite seriously as premonitions of a new god. I wonder if you could elaborate on that?*

LL: This may be the hardest topic in Nietzsche to understand. But first, let me make a small point in the way you framed the question. It's not the case that Nietzsche is against

all religions up till now. There was one religion with which he was very familiar that did not embody resentment. It's in *Beyond Good and Evil* 49 where he praises Homeric religion. He praises it for one reason, and it's a wonderful thing: "the unrestrained fullness of gratitude that streams out of it." So that's the core of Homeric religion, gratitude as a religious sentiment and a reflection of "the god-forming instinct," to use Nietzsche's phrase.

And I want to add that religion is the second most important topic in *Beyond Good and Evil*. The first, obviously, is philosophy and the demonstration of its possibility, which he lays out in the first two parts. Nietzsche then turns to the second most important topic, religion. Here an understanding of eternal return is essential. There's one aphorism in *Beyond Good and Evil*, number 56, which states eternal return, and it occurs as part of a series. First, the two central aphorisms deal with the crisis of modern religion, as reflected in the death of God and the assassination of the soul. There then follows an aphorism introducing the ladder of religious cruelty which eventually leads to nihilism. Then comes the one on eternal return. So three moves follow in succession, and these make it clear that eternal return is an event in the history of religion and can become the core of a new religion of affirmation.

There's another element implicit here, and that is the attitude of the person described in aphorism 56. That person is first an inquirer who is disposed to affirm the world that he is looking down into. And his look into the world is a look into the world as will to power and nothing besides. That's what he sees, and it draws from him an affirmation of that world, and he can say, "That's what I want, again and again." So in addition to the historical rationale, there is a connecting link between will to power and eternal return,

and it is between nothing less than philosophy and religion. Putting it another way, it's a connection between ontology, the insight into what is, and the human response to that. And this to me is probably Strauss's greatest gift to Nietzsche students. It is Strauss who makes visible the connection between will to power and eternal return as doctrines, a connection between the fundamental fact and the highest value, the affirmation of eternal return.

Just one little item in what Nietzsche sees as religion's value. Religion always winnows—regardless whether it posits the values of resentment or gratitude. A friend of mine and former student, now a colleague, George Dunn, calls this religion's "weeding and breeding." That's what religion does. It weeds out, inhibits, a particular kind of disposition, and it allows another to flourish. And the religion of affirmation, the core of which in some way is eternal return, is good for what religion always was good for, that gardening of society.

DB: *Now you're not suggesting that everyone should be able to affirm the eternal return, as Zarathustra does. It would be more like his animals do.*

LL: Exactly. It will be a view of things, a poetry, to use Platonic language. Let me put it this way. It seems to me that Nietzsche views eternal return as the fundamental statement of the poetry a global society can live, and live celebratorially and live it, as you say, the way the animals do in *Zarathustra*.

Now to turn to the other item that you asked about. Because for me here's the particularly hard thing: Do religions need gods, is there something that will be generated by the god-forming instinct within an ethos of affirmation? And it appears that Nietzsche's answer is

yes. It does seem that at the end of both *Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, the gods Dionysus and Ariadne return. I don't think these represent premonitions of a new god as you say. Instead, Dionysus and Ariadne are old names that Nietzsche gives to two gods who return at the end of those books. And although Ariadne was originally mortal, she is divinized at the end of *Zarathustra* as Eternity.

So the two gods are Dionysus and Ariadne, and these are old gods who are divinizations, that is, the making divine of the primary duality, which is the sexual complementarity of maleness and femaleness, nature's way of making its kinds eternal through reproduction. Dionysus and Ariadne are divine exemplars of manliness and womanliness, and it seems that what Nietzsche's getting at is that these gods divinize what is most basic to the natural processes of life. They elevate to divine status our fecundity, a natural divinization of a natural process. Now, just how these gods are gods, how humans will honor these in a new religion, that's problematic. One thing that seems obvious is that it won't be through worship. Worship is self-abnegation, the hope of some sort of god-given salvation; you worship what's going to deliver you. Greek religion isn't worship; it's honoring a particular divinity. Nietzsche puts gods forward to be honored; and in the honoring of them, nature is honored, *we're* honored.

DB: *Having now addressed Nietzsche's great yea-saying book as well as its nay-saying shadow, do you have other commentaries in mind? If not, what other projects are you working on?*

LL: I'm not doing another Nietzsche book, but I am doing another Nietzsche project, another "installment in the history of philosophy made possible by Friedrich Nietzsche

and Leo Strauss,” namely, a book on Plato. Actually, I’m doing two books on Plato, and the Nietzschean purpose will be to show just how close Plato is to Nietzsche as a philosopher. Of course, Nietzsche himself distinguished Plato from Platonism, and I too will attempt to separate them and to show how Plato’s Socrates came to be who he was. More than that, it seems to me that Plato’s dialogues, read in the way that Plato wrote them, give the dedicated reader access to two kinds of answers to the question of how Socrates became Socrates. The first is, how did Socrates become the Socratic philosopher? The second is, how did he become the Socrates who introduced Platonic political philosophy? So this is what I think is novel in my Plato work, and it is that Plato allows his reader to follow Socrates in the way that he entered Socratic philosophy and then the way he entered political philosophy.

This project has occupied me for five years and will occupy me for years more. And it is my optimistic view that I have a handle on this task that is an exegete’s dream. I’ve got access to a feature of the Platonic text that comes from the text, comes from what Plato put there, but that has been neglected. My initial focus is on what Plato put in the dialogues about when they occur in the life of Socrates and derivatively in the life of Athens. Here the life of Athens, so far as the dialogues are concerned, is an Athens either on the verge of war, at war, or recovering from war. So the life of Socrates as presented in the Platonic dialogues spans that history of Athens, the greatest city in Greece. My exegetical handle then is the fact that Plato situated the dialogues at specific points in Socrates’ life. If you pay attention to that situating, you can watch his evolution into the mature Socrates. Plato lets you see Socrates becoming the Socrates who is the model of

philosophy ever after, and you can watch him enter both philosophy and political philosophy.

DB: *It sounds very exciting. You'll probably get a response on this.*

LL: Well, I don't know. This approach is made possible first by Nietzsche, who stressed the separation between Plato and Platonism, and then by Strauss with his notion of esoteric writing. Plato, after all, is the ultimate master of esotericism. To attempt to enter his dialogues by paying attention to all their particulars and the way they're woven into a whole, how an entire corpus can be woven into a whole chronologically, that's Strauss-dependent. I think of my Plato as Strauss's Plato.

DB: *Would Strauss agree?*

LL: I think so, although I have learned a great deal also from Seth Benardete, the best of the investigators directed by Strauss. Benardete wrote exegeses primarily of Plato, but also the Greek tragedians, and he's written an absolutely marvelous book on Homer's *Odyssey*. So mine is a Plato that is dependent upon Strauss's orientation and also on some particulars of Benardete's readings.

DB: *To return to Nietzsche, you've worked in the field of Nietzsche studies for decades, and you've probably seen many changes. Are there any shifts that seem to you particularly positive or negative?*

LL: I can't answer that for this reason. When writing my first Nietzsche book, I thought it was my duty to read all the Nietzsche scholarship and to place myself among the scholars by giving scholarship its due; but I haven't done that for years. I'm not familiar

enough with it now to comment on it. But I do want to make one remark about scholarship generally. The typical failure of almost all Nietzsche scholarship is not to recognize what Nietzsche sort of ordered us to recognize, and that is the distinction between genuine philosophers and philosophical laborers and what both are able to do. I think that the Nietzsche scholarship will be better positioned to understand him if they recognize that Nietzsche has done something that is unattainable by us but that we can benefit from—benefit to the degree that we put ourselves in the position of being learners. But one last thing. There are good recent books on Nietzsche that I have read; and I want to mention Horst Hutter’s *Shaping the Future*. His book is excellent, and part of its excellence derives from the fact that he sees Nietzsche as a historic event in the spiritual life of the West. Hutter recognizes that Nietzsche is a genuine philosopher, a philosopher in Nietzsche’s sense, and his job, Hutter’s job, is to try to get Nietzsche right. And I think he does that marvelously.

DB: *Your own books are beautifully written, too skillfully so for me to believe that this happened without considerable concentration and practice. Do you have any views on the practice of writing that you would like to share?*

LL: I do draft after draft and I really work on it. Also, when I get close to something that will be like what I want, I do two things. The first concerns the sequence of paragraphs. I note on a separate piece of paper the order of topics, and I look at their movement and sequence and try to measure the logic of the movement from beginning to middle to end. And when I’m close to finished, I read almost aloud to myself what I’ve written, particularly with respect to the individual sentences. I want to hear the rhythm of the

sentences, I want to hear if there's any punch in the short ones and if there's flow or rhythm in the longer ones.

DB: *That explains the clarity and grace of your writing. It doesn't explain—and there is no explanation for this—the wonderful formulations that emerge from time to time. One that comes to mind—“God is dead and we're glad.” Things like that, they just come out.*

[Laughter.]

To change the subject, I notice that you have received both a Distinguished Faculty Award and a Teaching Excellence Recognition Award. Could you say something about your teaching methods and how, if at all, they are reflected in your books?

LL: My books and classes reflected one another in this sense. My books are books of exegesis, and that's what my classes were, too. I always said explicitly, “This class is an exercise in reading,” and I went on to say what that meant. Also, every semester I did at least one introductory course, and for the last 25 years or so those introductory courses have included Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*. So I have been over that book 50 times. And when I do a class, just because it's me and I need to know that I'm prepared—when I did it the forty-ninth time, I didn't think to myself, “Why I've done this 49 times. I don't have to prepare myself.” No. I read it again, read it in French, trying to hear the nuances again. And to me that's an aspect of my *Sitzfleisch*, that I can read these great books, keep interested, and keep seeing new things in them. So what's reported in my books on *The Discourse on the Method* came out of years of assigning that book in my classes. That's also the case with Plato's *Republic* and with Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, books I have also assigned frequently. And one last point. I had

the luxury of doing a seminar every semester in addition to an introductory course, and I always did it on what I was writing on at the time. I'm not a natural teacher, however. I don't speak authoritatively easily. I'm retired from teaching, and it's a kind of release into being able to read and write full time.

DB: *Jumping from your teaching to the rest of your life: In an email you mentioned that you'd built a home in the Canadian bush 25 years ago, and that you've recently purchased an apartment in Berlin. I also know that you just returned from a month in Africa. Is there anything you want to say on those? They're very different environments and quite different in turn each from your principal residence in Indianapolis.*

LL: The Africa trip was just tourism. My cabin in the bush is something else. That's a necessity somehow of being a Canadian that I acquired in my boyhood. People growing up in Winnipeg got to go to the cottage on the weekend, and my parents had a cottage in the bush. My cottage, cabin, in the bush, what I've got now, gives me the opportunity to do things that to me are so natural. For example, I can carry my canoe from my lake into the next lake, and I can just paddle in that lake, and I'm the only person that's ever there. There'll be an otter, there'll be a raven, there'll never be a human being. And from there I can carry my canoe into places that I can imagine nobody else would even want to go. Where a beaver has backed up a little stream, I go to see what the beaver are doing, I go to see what the birds are doing. It's a paradise created for them by beaver. So just being in that setting, things slow down. There's no electricity except what my solar panel is putting into my laptop, and no running water, so it's very rustic. But it's a life that has become kind of necessary for me and fits in with other things that I read and that I like a

lot, like the Canadian writer Grey Owl or Aldo Leopold, the great American ecologist, or Edward Abbey.

DB: *Yes, I definitely caught an ecological whiff in your books.*

LL: That's what I mean all this to be background to. "Be true to the earth"—the way Nietzsche defines and understands it—there's a historic necessity for human beings to have a new responsibility, not to the supernatural but to the natural. All that just seemed so obvious and congenial to me. It also made it easy for me to understand that we have in Nietzsche the first comprehensive ecological philosophy, the first attempt by a comprehensive thinker, a thinker of the first rank, to bring human existence on earth into alignment with existence on earth generally.

DB: *One final question. In Leo Strauss and Nietzsche you remark that both Strauss and Alfarabi took shelter in what Strauss called "the specific immunity of the commentator." You continue, "This immunity allows the commentator to avoid overt pronouncement of his own views," a modesty which no one will begrudge but which also lets the author off the hook. All of your own books have included commentaries, and I find myself wondering, What does Laurence Lampert ultimately think of Nietzsche's work? Clearly he admires it but does he have reservations? If you were more than a commentator when writing on Nietzsche, what would you say?*

LL: I would say what I thought I was saying as a commentator, and it's this: Nietzsche is the philosopher of our age. Nietzsche's aspirations are the aspirations of a Plato.

Nietzsche's teachings may come to be as historically important as Plato's have been, and,

if I were to speak as more than a commentator, I would say that Nietzsche's teachings are true and salutary, true and good.

Interview © Daniel Blue-Laurence Lampert-Nietzsche Circle, 2008.

All Rights Reserved.