

Summer 1999

Review of Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*.

Richard Bernstein
New School for Social Research

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Bernstein, Richard (1999). Review of "Review of Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 1 : No. 1
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol1/iss1/3>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol1/iss1/3>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 283 pp. ISBN 0520211731

Reviewed by Richard J. Bernstein, New School for Social Research

Alexander Nehamas' *The Art of Living* is a tour de force. Nehamas, who has already distinguished himself as a classical philosophic scholar and as an interpreter of Nietzsche and Foucault, has composed what he characterizes as "a tragelaphic sort of work, partly a work of classics, partly of philosophy, partly of literary criticism, full of quotations acknowledged and deformed, indebted to various and perhaps not always compatible approaches" (p.188). He begins by distinguishing two conceptions of philosophy: philosophy as a theoretical discipline and philosophy as a way of life, philosophy as the art of living. The first conception of philosophy is dominant today. It is shared by most professional and academic philosophers. Philosophy as a theoretical discipline is concerned with such important issues as the nature of knowledge, reality, truth, and the good life. What matters in this tradition is the character of the reasoning and the validity of the claims made, whether or not they stand up to rigorous criticism. One downplays or avoids personal literary style and idiosyncrasy as much as possible. Strictly speaking, the personality or character of the philosopher is not relevant to the evaluation of the philosophic claims and arguments that are advanced. But in the philosophic tradition of the art of living (which tends to be marginalized, repressed and even ridiculed by "professional" theoretical philosophers), literary style and idiosyncrasy are all-important "because readers must never forget that the views that confront them are the views of a particular type of person and of no one else" (p.3).

Nehamas does not denigrate the tradition of philosophy as a theoretical discipline, but he focuses his attention on philosophy as a way of life. He distinguishes three genres of the art of living. The first is illustrated by the Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues. Nehamas claims that Socrates, who practiced his art in public, cannot show that his mode of life is right for all. Socrates' ideal is universalistic and he invites others to join him in the examined life, which he takes to be the only life worth living. But according to Nehamas, Socrates has no arguments to persuade others that he is right. "He remains tentative and protreptic" (p.9). The second genre is exemplified by Plato's middle and late works where (according to Nehamas) Plato offers a series of controversial arguments that are intended "to prove that a single type of life is best for all people." These first two genres are universalistic in their intent: they claim to show that a specific mode of life is best for all. The third genre of the art of living — the primary subject of Nehamas' study — is the least universalistic of all. "According to it, human life takes many forms and no single mode of life is best for all. Philosophers like Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault articulate a way of living that only they and perhaps few others can follow They do not want to be imitated, at least not directly. That is, they believe that those who want to imitate them must develop their own art of living, their own self . . ." (p.10). This third genre is at once "aestheticist" and "individualistic."

It becomes clear that this is the genre that Nehamas favors and wants to emulate. But if this individualistic and aesthetic genre of the art of living is the one practiced by Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault, then one must ask why did all three seek a model to emulate. And why is their model always Socrates? What is it about Socrates that enables him — the character that

Plato invented — to play this role? The answer is provided by Socrates' irony and by what Nehamas describes as "the silence that envelops his life and character" (p.10). Although it has become standard to refer to "Socratic irony," Nehamas argues that the distinctive character of Socratic irony has been badly misunderstood. Here he challenges and sharply criticizes the conception of irony where we understand irony to be "saying something but meaning its contrary" (p.51). Nehamas sharply criticizes this conception of irony because it makes Socrates much less enigmatic than he really is. If irony is to be understood as meaning the contrary of what one says, then we have a "code" for figuring out precisely what Socrates means (i.e. the opposite of what he says). But we can never pin down Socrates in this manner. Socratic irony is far more complex and subtle than this type of inversion suggests. This is what Nehamas means by Socrates' silence — a provocative silence that has elicited the most diverse and genuinely creative responses, especially in Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault. Each of these practitioners of the art of living "creates" or "fashions" his own ironic Socrates.

Matters are even more complex than this. For we have to distinguish Plato's irony from Socratic irony. Nehamas argues that Plato himself does not fully understand the character that he invented. Plato himself is mystified by the opaqueness of Socrates. It is in the middle and late dialogues that Plato tries to make sense of Socrates and his distinctive irony. The critique and analysis of the different types of irony comprises "Part One: Silence" of *The Art of Living*. Nehamas displays his sophisticated understanding of the different historical conceptions of irony from Aristophanes through Thomas Mann. Nehamas' own positive understanding of irony as an aesthetic trope is shaped by his appropriation of the conception of irony in Romantic tradition. He even begins his depiction of Platonic irony with a striking and perceptive analysis of Thomas Mann's ironical treatment of Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain*. Thomas Mann's ironical treatment of Hans Castorp illustrates "a kind of irony that goes all the way down: it does not reveal the ironist's real state of mind, and it intimates that such a state may not exist at all. It makes a mystery of its author as well as of his characters, and it often turns its readers into fools. It originates in Plato, who remains perhaps its most disturbing practitioner" (p.20).

Socrates' ironic gaze is directed not only toward his interlocutors but to his interpreters as well (the first of whom was Plato himself!). "Part II: Voices" sketches three radically different interpretations of this opaque, enigmatic, ironic, silent Socrates — creative interpretations which illustrate three radically different ways of "practicing the philosophic art of living" (p.98). Socrates is the inspirational model for Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault, a model for their own creative individualistic projects of self-fashioning and self-creation. Nehamas' claim about Montaigne is just as true for Nietzsche and Foucault: "The work and the life, the book and the self became inextricable parts of one another" (p.104). Nehamas does not mean what is so often meant by this claim — that there is a seamless whole between the life of an author and the expression of this life in his writings. Rather, he means something far more radical. Through their writings, "Montaigne," "Nietzsche" and "Foucault" create their own selves; they are engaged in an idiosyncratic and aesthetic mode of self-creation. I place their names in scare quotes because the Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault that concern Nehamas are the characters that they have created in their own writings. To extent that biographical information about their lives is relevant, it is relevant only as supplying the contingent incidents that are aesthetically transformed and integrated into their self-fashioning. Each of the portraits that Nehamas draws of these three practitioners of the art of living is richly textured, thought-provoking, and

controversial. With ironic self-awareness, Nehamas self-consciously practices what he "preaches" — the creative fashioning of these three characters.

The Art of Living is clearly intended to be provocative. There is a very thin line between the theoretical project of writing about the art of living in Socrates, Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault, and the practical project of weaving them into Nehamas' own self-fashioning. In the spirit of this provocation, I want to conclude by raising a number of questions which Nehamas does not adequately answer.

One might think that the art of living has something to do with the actual way in which these philosophic artist-thinkers lived their lives. But Nehamas is barely concerned with this issue. He emphatically states: "For the most important accomplishments of these modern thinkers are the self-portraits that confront us in their writings" (p.8). Furthermore, "the art of living, though a practical art, is therefore practiced in writing" (p.8). It almost seems irrelevant to Nehamas whether or not Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault actually lived their everyday lives in a manner consonant with their self-fashionings in their writings. All that "really" matters is what they wrote. But this is a very strange conception of an art of living, for it seems to have little to do with the way in which one actually lives his or her life. Nehamas tells us that "the main question" is "not whether, as a matter of historical fact, someone else succeeded in living that way but whether one can construct such a life for oneself (p. 8). But it is never quite clear why this is the main question. If a strong creative thinker can create a character who may have little or nothing to do with the grubby details of his or her life, why can't a reader simply aesthetically enjoy this created character without thinking that it has anything to do with his or her own life — just as I can enjoy the character of Socrates, King Lear, or the Grand Inquisitor without in any way relating him to the way in which I live my own life? In short, Nehamas' characterization of the third genre of the art of living as "aestheticist" suggests that my self-fashioning may have nothing to do with the way in which I live my life — other than the life I portray in my writings.

For all Nehamas' stress on the aesthetic variety of the art of living, his conception of this art is very conventional. Throughout he stresses that one finds in the works of the figures he examines "convincing models of how a unified meaningful life can be constructed out of the chance events that constitute it" (p.9). He praises Nietzsche for constructing a "coherent" and "harmonious self." But it is never quite clear why Nehamas so valorizes unity, coherence, harmony. What is particularly striking and ironical is that one can even read the texts of Nietzsche and Foucault as calling into question these conventional aesthetic categories. Is there really a unified Nietzsche, Foucault, or even Montaigne? Is there really a unified Socrates —even in the early Platonic dialogues? Why not valorize the diversity of "selves" that are created rather than a single unified, coherent, harmonious self?

Although Nehamas is well aware of the paradox of appealing to Socrates as a model in practicing the aestheticist art of living, I don't think that he ever satisfactorily confronts this paradox. For Nehamas places so much stress on avoiding imitation, and on creating a unique self, it isn't clear why a strong thinker even needs a model to guide his self-fashioning. What seems to be missing from Nehamas' analysis — but not from his actual characterizations of Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Foucault — is what Harold Bloom has characterized as the anxiety of influence. Nehamas' study raises more questions than it puts to rest. But he is clearly aware of this.

At the conclusion of this thought-provoking study, Nehamas acknowledges that he has been following in part what Montaigne, Nietzsche and Foucault have done: "I, too, have tried to construct a particular character [Socrates] — more ironical than Vlastos's or Montaigne's, more individualistic than Foucault's, less absolutist than the hero of the *Republic*, relatively 'more' at home on this earth than Nietzsche's. Like them, I too have used the voices of most of the authors I address." In his own distinctive way, then, Nehamas exemplifies one of the varieties of the art of living: "The art of living comes in many guises. The pursuit of Socrates' reflections is one of its variations" (p.188).