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Perspectives on Napoleon.

Series of Four Lectures @ the NGV

Dr. David Rathbone.

Sundays 9th/16th/23rd/30th of September 2-4pm

When asked in the 1970s if he thought the French Revolution had succeeded or failed, Mao Tse Tung famously answered "It's too soon to tell." The complexities of the compact knot of history from 1793 to 1812 are involved enough to allow of a multiplicity of interpretations, and the decisions we make in making these interpretations remain in turn decisive for our self-understanding today. As a focal figure concentrating the contradictions of his times, Napoleon Bonaparte can himself be viewed from several different perspectives. In the first three lectures, we shall consider the different perspectives of Hegel, of Goethe, and of Nietzsche upon Napoleon, exploring the contrasting significance Napoleon had for each of these three thinkers. Then in the final lecture, we shall consider Napoleon's perspective upon himself through a look at his autobiography and his other literary works.

1. Hegel's Napoleon

Hegel tells us that he was just writing the final lines of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on the morning of October 14th 1806 when he heard the first shots of the battle of Jena commencing on a plateau outside of town. The battle raged all day, and by the end of the afternoon, the Prussian troops (including a young Friedrich Gabriel von Clausewitz) were in chaos, and Napoleon had triumphed. We shall consider why Hegel took Napoleon to be nothing less than the flesh and blood incarnation of the World Spirit itself, and attempt to make explicit the understanding of the French Revolution implicit in the chapter of the *Phenomenology* entitled "Absolute Freedom and Terror." In conclusion, we shall consider the possibility that it was Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812 (in which Hegel's own brother perished, and of which the diary of H.A. Vossler provides a vivid period portrait) which led to the turn from organic holism to totalitarian thinking exhibited in the step from paragraph 346 to paragraph 347 of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

2. Goethe's Napoleon

Goethe and Napoleon met in the September of 1808, and Napoleon surprised Goethe by telling him that he had read *The Sorrows of Young Werther* no less than seven times with ever greater admiration for its author, but that he had one specific criticism. Although Goethe says that he found that criticism "perfectly just," he nevertheless avoided ever specifying its exact nature (even to Eckermann), reporting only Napoleon's words "La politique est la fatalité." In this lecture we shall play the guessing game Goethe has set for us, considering what clues we can find in Voltaire's *Mahomet*, in Rousseau's *Social Contract* and in the character of Euphorion in Part II Act III of *Faust*. In conclusion, we shall contrast Hegel's characterization of Napoleon as the World Spirit incarnate with Goethe's interpretation of him as the Spirit of Action, drawing out the implications of this subtle but crucial difference in terminology.

3. Nietzsche's Napoleon

In Essay I Section 16 of his crucial late work *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche says "Napoleon appeared as a man more unique and more late-born for his times than ever a man had been before him; and in him the problem of the *noble ideal itself* was made flesh – just think *what* a problem that is: Napoleon, this synthesis of *Urmensch und Übermensch*." In this lecture we shall look at Nietzsche's aphorisms on Napoleon in *Human All Too Human*, *Dawn* and the *Gay Science*, as well as dipping into *Zarathustra*, in order to understand Nietzsche's ideal of nobility and to try to rise to Nietzsche's challenge to "just think *what* a problem that is," all the while also remembering what he says in aphorism 284 of *The Wanderer and His Shadow* ("The Means to Real Peace"). By harnessing the contradiction between Nietzsche's pacifism and his apparent militarism, we are driven to confront Napoleon as Nietzsche's answer to the "delusion in the theory of revolution" (*Human All Too Human* 463), and led to consider the possibility of a pacifism suspicious of its own idealism.

4. Napoleon's Napoleon

Napoleon's *Autobiography* is itself a document susceptible of several interpretations. After contrasting Hegel's, Goethe's and Nietzsche's perspectives upon Napoleon, we shall finally consider Napoleon's self-interpretation, and through reflection upon Napoleon's interpretation of himself, attempt in turn to arrive at our own interpretation of what the various representations of Napoleon presented in the exhibition might symbolize for each of us. Our aim in this last lecture shall be to deepen our own perspective upon Napoleon, not in order to decide which of the possible perspectives is "the right one," but rather in order to make clear to ourselves what our differences in interpretation signify, and most importantly of all, what they imply for our possible futures.

NGV International, 180 St Kilda Road

Clemenger BBDO Auditorium

\$18 Adult / \$12 NGV Member / \$14 Concession (per session)

Information & bookings Ph +61 3 8662 1555 (10am-5pm daily)

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