INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

It is always a challenge when reading Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* to craft a coherent understanding of his purposefully fragmented text without, however, oversimplifying his complex and sometimes contradictory ideas. In this, one of the most essential questions is how to pull together and make practical sense of Nietzsche’s numerous pronouncements on the importance of art in living well. Complicating matters, Nietzsche’s praise for art and artists seems at times difficult to combine with his alternating praise and denunciation of the role of “science” in human life. In this essay, Tyler offers a compelling reading of both of these central issues in *Gay Science*. First, he establishes a coherent understanding of Nietzsche’s concept of “intellectual conscience” as a science-inspired approach to questioning our existence. He then constructs an equally compelling explanation of how Nietzsche relates the self-questioning required by intellectual conscience to the lessons about observation and creation that we might learn from art and artists, and from the theater in particular.

Most impressive is the way in which Tyler structures his multi-faceted argument. Avoiding oversimplification of the text, he maintains clarity in his interpretation by stating specifically which sections of *Gay Science* will be his focus, and articulating the questions that are at stake at different points in his reading of them. After establishing that self-questioning is essential to Nietzsche’s idea of a well-lived life, Tyler asks how we go about learning to carry this out, what art teaches us about self-observation and examination, and why Nietzsche often focuses on the lessons to be learned from the theater—from the practices of actors, and even from the experience of being a spectator. Posing these questions explicitly is not only an effective way of addressing his reader; through them, Tyler also makes clear how the examination of the nuances of this complicated text can lead to a more practical understanding of how to live one’s life.

—Kimberly Lewis
Art as the Key to an Intellectual Conscience

Tyler Haddow

In his book *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche repeatedly uses the words “us” and “we” to imply that he and his readers are members of an elite group capable of intellectual contemplation. He makes many demands of his reader regarding subjects as varied as art appreciation, morality, style, and truth. At first, it may seem that these demands are unrelated, floating independently of one another in an abstract philosophical haze; however, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that many of his ideas are connected, and often closely attached. I intend to explore one such connection: the association between Nietzsche’s idea of the value of an intellectual conscience and his conception of the importance of art. I will argue that, according to Nietzsche’s statements in GS 2, 78, 299, and 301, art is essential to the development of an intellectual conscience because it allows us to assume a position outside ourselves from which we can contemplate and create our life.

It seems natural to ask what characteristic qualifies people as members of Nietzsche’s elite group. In GS 2, Nietzsche first introduces the intellectual conscience as that characteristic. He asserts that “the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience,” then proceeds to explain that “the great majority of people does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con” (76). Clearly Nietzsche is condemning the common avoidance of the simple question, “why?” Most people, he claims, do not bother to contemplate the fundamental justifications (or lack thereof) for their beliefs or actions, even after those actions have been made. His use of the phrase “does not consider it con-
temptible” suggests that it is absurd not to realize that such blatant ignorance of the origins of one’s beliefs is wrong.

Nietzsche explains why this type of questioning is valuable as he continues, “what is goodheartedness, refinement, or genius to me, when the person who has these virtues tolerates slack feelings in his faith and judgments and when he does not account the desire for certainty as his inmost craving and deepest distress—as that which separates the higher human beings from the lower” (76). Here he claims that even the virtues that we consider most important are of little value if not grounded in reasonable considerations. Those that do seek explanation and crave “the rapture of such questioning” (76) have what Nietzsche would call an intellectual conscience, which he clearly sees as the crucial attribute that distinguishes the elite. Those who do not have such a conscience “stand in the midst of this rerum concordia discors¹ and of this whole marvelous uncertainty and rich ambiguity of existence without questioning” (76). That he finds “contemptible” (77).

Given only GS 2, it seems that intellectual consciousness requires us to be self-aware, to question all of our actions and held convictions. What is still somewhat unclear is exactly how Nietzsche thinks we are supposed to question ourselves. An illuminating explanation lies in GS 301, where Nietzsche illustrates a particular method of thought essential to development of an intellectual conscience. Here he begins with an assertion similar to the beginning of GS 2: “What distinguishes the higher human beings from the lower is that the former see and hear immeasurably more, and see and hear thoughtfully” (241). But he proceeds to elucidate exactly what allows these “higher” humans to “see and hear immeasurably more”:

[The higher human being] fancies that he is a spectator and listener who has been placed before the great visual spectacle that is life; he calls his own nature contemplative and overlooks that he himself is really the poet who keeps creating his life. Of course, he is different from the actor of this drama, the so-called active type; but he is even less like a mere spectator and festive guest in front of the stage. (241)

This striking metaphor that relates our lives to theatrical performances is essential to understanding what allows us to develop an intellectual conscience. He portrays the “higher human being” as, first and foremost, a spectator of the “great visual spectacle” of his life. The essential image that we can draw from this passage is this “higher human” observing his life from an external position, while still maintaining the ability to keep “creating this life.” In Nietzsche’s phrasing, this person is “placed before” his life. His comparison of

¹ Discordant concord of things. (Kaufman’s translation)
life to a theatrical drama explains exactly how this should be interpreted: we are certainly not actors in this play; that would imply that we are only going through predetermined motions without understanding our reasons for them, much like the “lower” human beings from GS 2. But we are “even less” passive spectators; if we were, we would have no control over the play that is life. Nietzsche does not reveal what theatrical role would correspond to the external observer who “keeps creating this life” (playwright? director?), probably because there is no role that corresponds closely enough. Regardless, the metaphor has served its purpose: Nietzsche has demonstrated that seeing ourselves from a different perspective is essential to the development of an intellectual conscience.

Immediately after the passage quoted above, Nietzsche breaks from the play metaphor to describe exactly what one is capable of as an external observer: “As a poet, he certainly has vis contemplative and the ability to look back upon his work, but at the same time also and above all vis creativa, which the active human being lacks, whatever visual appearances and the faith of all the world may say” (241). This “poet” of life possesses the abilities to contemplate profound questions in his life and to create his life accordingly. It seems that to Nietzsche, these two powers are codependent; it is impossible to be creative without contemplation, and it is worthless to contemplate without being creative.

So far, we have established that an intellectual conscience is the fundamental characteristic that sets the “higher” humans apart from the “lower.” Having examined GS 301, we are also able to recognize the importance of external self-observation in relation to the development of an intellectual conscience. We have seen that external observation is important to that development because it allows us to contemplate our lives and create them correspondingly. However, two critical questions seem to remain unanswered: What tools give us this contemplative and creative power if we have assumed the external position? And what allows us to assume the external position in the first place?

We might answer the first question by recalling the sentence in GS 301 (quoted above) where Nietzsche calls the contemplative man a “poet who keeps creating [his] life.” This immediately calls to mind GS 299, just two sections back, “What one should learn from artists,” which ends with an almost identical idea: “We want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters” (240). Nietzsche begins GS 299 by considering the fundamental question of how to create value where there is none:

How can we make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable

2  Contemplative power; creative power. (Kaufman’s translation)
for us when they are not? And I rather think that in themselves they never are. Here we could learn something from physicians, when for example they dilute what is bitter or add wine and sugar to a mixture—but even more from artists who are really continually trying to bring off such inventions and feats. (239)

Nietzsche is saying that even if things lack intrinsic appeal, it is possible to assign beauty or value to them by changing how we perceive them, just as physicians “dilute what is bitter or add wine and sugar to a mixture.” He goes on to describe a few ways artists might change how things are perceived, such as “moving away from things until there is a good deal that one no longer sees and there is much that our eye has to add,” or “giving them a surface or skin that is not fully transparent” (239-240).

These techniques are important because we can also use them to give value to our lives. According to Nietzsche, “all this we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins” (240). We must surpass artists in this respect, by applying these techniques not only to aesthetic matters, but to life itself—that is how we can become “the poets of our life.” Art gives one the tools to contemplate and create his life.

Once we answer the first question by concluding that art gives us the power to contemplate and create our lives from the external position, we can consider the second question: how are we supposed to get to this position in the first place? What could possibly allow us to step outside of our own perspectives? Nietzsche’s answer to this question lies in GS 78, “What should win our gratitude,” which is very closely tied to both GS 299 and 301. Here we can see that art also answers the second question:

Only artists, and especially those of the theater, have given men eyes and ears to see and hear with some pleasure what each man is himself, experiences himself, desires himself; only they have taught us to esteem the hero that is concealed in everyday characters; only they have taught us the art of viewing ourselves as heroes—from a distance and, as it were, simplified and transfigured—the art of staging and watching ourselves. (132-133)

In analyzing this passage, two phrases stand out given the points I have addressed above. First, there is a striking resemblance between “the art of staging and watching ourselves” and the metaphor (from 301) that compares our lives with theatrical drama. Nietzsche is saying here that artists—through their art—have taught us to contemplate our lives from a different perspective, an external position. He
even singles out the “[artists] of the theatre,” as special. Although he does not mention exactly what makes playwrights so remarkable, it seems plausible that Nietzsche sees their art is especially powerful because their subjects are always humans in profound or revealing circumstances, and their work is therefore more accessible and directly applicable to our lives. The second phrase, “simplified and transfigured,” refers specifically to art as a means to perceiving things (in this case, one’s own life) differently than they actually are. That is precisely what Nietzsche said “one should learn from artists” in GS 299.

Thus, we can finally see clearly the intimate connection between Nietzsche’s conception the intellectual conscience and art. We have seen that an intellectual conscience, the characteristic that separates the “higher” humans from the “lower,” demands that we question our own thoughts and beliefs. This questioning requires that we assume positions outside our own perspectives, since those positions allow us to contemplate our lives and create them accordingly. Lastly, art is the key that allows us to both step into external positions and to contemplate and create our lives once we have done so. The development of an intellectual conscience is therefore aided by—if not dependent on—art appreciation and creation. If we want to consider ourselves thoughtful people, if we want to consider ourselves “higher” human beings, worthy of Nietzsche’s words, it is imperative that we use art to step outside our own perspectives. The alternative, according to Nietzsche, is dismal: “Without this art we would be nothing but foreground and live entirely in the spell of that perspective which makes what is closest at hand and most vulgar appear as if it were vast, and reality itself” (133).

Works Cited