



Nietzsche Contra God: A Battle Within

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Abstract

Nietzsche's name has become almost synonymous with militant atheism. Born into a pious Christian family, this son of a Lutheran pastor declared himself the Antichrist. But could this have been yet another of his masks of hardness? Nietzsche rarely revealed his innermost self in the published writings, and this can be gleaned mainly from his private letters and the accounts of friends. These sources bring to light the philosopher's inner struggle with his own, deeply religious nature.

Losing his father at a young age was a calamity from which Nietzsche never recovered, and I argue that his famous thought-image "God is dead" was a transfiguration of the painful memory of this loss. In this essay, I trace Nietzsche's tortuous path from an ardent devotee of God to a vociferous critic of Christianity, a path that was punctuated with veiled longings for a loving deity. Deep in his heart, he remained faithful to Christian ideals. Rather like Cordelia, the only truly loving daughter of King Lear, Nietzsche refused to utter words of intense affection and reverence, as these had been blatantly devalued and corrupted. Instead, he adopted a mask of a wrongdoer and a blasphemer who took not the punishment but the guilt.

Nietzsche's attitude to religion is discussed from the perspective of his life, his personality, and his mental condition. The discussion draws on psychoanalytical concepts of Freud, Erikson, Winnicott and Kohut. This is not an exclusive reading, but complementary to other studies in this field.

I am one thing, my writings are another.
(Nietzsche, 1888)

I have been since 1876 more a battlefield than a man.
(Nietzsche, 1882)

Introduction

"Atheism is the secret of religion."
(Feuerbach, 1843/2008, p. ix)

Nietzsche has earned the reputation of being the most audacious of God-assassins. In *The Gay Science*, the madman announces that "God is dead And we have

killed him". He then poses the question to the crowd: "Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?" (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, pp. 181-182). But gods had been dying long before Nietzsche dazzled the world with this unsettling image. Egyptian Osiris, Greek Dionysus, as well as Jesus Christ, suffered death, followed by a form of resurrection. The impulse to kneel at the altars of godly might, accompanied by an equally

strong urge to reclaim the “divinity within”, has proved a persistent theme in humanity’s history. It also formed a pivotal conflict in Nietzsche’s life and philosophy.

Prometheus, a mythical personification of rebellion against the power of the gods, stole fire from Olympus and offered it to humanity; a daring act for which he was severely punished. As a teenager, Nietzsche wrote a play about Prometheus in which he already showed a fascination with the theme of a dying god, Zeus. Later, in the manner of his protagonist, he rebelled against the Christian God by enlightening humanity about the human, rather than divine, origin of morality.

Undoubtedly, Nietzsche’s views on Christianity were shaped by the *Zeitgeist* of his time. This was infused with a mounting religious scepticism, as voiced by philosophers such as Feuerbach and Schopenhauer. Momentous scientific discoveries, along with growing psychological awareness and emergent existentialism, paved the way for the “death of God”. Perhaps it all started with Copernicus, that Christian revolutionary, whose daring work forever changed the direction of human thought. “Since Copernicus, man seems to have been on a downward path, – now he seems to be rolling faster and faster away from the centre – where to? into nothingness, into the *piercing* sensation of his nothingness?” (Nietzsche, 1887/1994a, p. 122). Other intellectual giants, such as Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, Giordano Bruno and Charles Darwin joined the army of “involuntary assassins”. Some even risked being burnt alive at the stake for heresy.

Blaise Pascal was alarmed by the prospect of human loneliness in the universe: “the eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me” (Pascal, 1670/2011, p. 28). Kant, with his “Copernican revolution”, revealed a deep cleft between the scientific and the religious sides of human nature and declared: “I *will* that there be a God, that my existence in this world be also an existence in a pure world of the understanding ...” (Kant, 1788/2015, p. 115). Outwardly a pious Christian, he may have unwittingly contributed to a godless worldview. On reading Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Heinrich Heine, admired by Nietzsche, commented: “Do you hear the little bell tinkle? Kneel down – one brings the sacraments for a dying God” (cited by Kaufmann, 1950/1974, p. 100). All the above-mentioned thinkers, well known to Nietzsche, played a role in “unchaining this earth from its sun” and “our straying as through an infinite nothing” (see below). In this light, his thought-image “God is dead” reads more like a lament than an assault.

In secondary literature, relatively little has been said about how Nietzsche’s own life and personality may have affected his views on Christianity. This essay is an attempt to redress this imbalance. Lou Salomé (1894/2001), Roberts (1998), Kee (1999) and Benson (2008),

among others, considered Nietzsche to be a deeply religious man, despite his outward atheism. I concur with their view. Perhaps the Antichrist, as Nietzsche called himself, was yet another mask of hardness, behind which stood a reverent, spiritual, albeit embattled, self.

From a Pious Christian to the Antichrist

You want to create the world before which you can kneel:
this is your ultimate hope and intoxication.
(Nietzsche, 1883-85/1969a, p. 136)

I attack only causes that are victorious ...
(Nietzsche, 1888/1986, p. 47)

Nietzsche was born into a pious Christian family, and many of his ancestors on both sides were clergymen, including his father, a distinguished Lutheran pastor. The values and traditions of Christianity permeated his childhood and youth. At school, he was renowned for reciting by heart hymns and long passages from the Bible, and this earned him the nickname “the little pastor”. As a boy of 13, Nietzsche wrote in his diary: “in everything God has safely guided me ... I have firmly determined to serve him forever” (cited by Brobjer, 2000, p. 2). After reading Feuerbach at the age of 17, he wrote to his friends Wilhelm Pinder and Gustav Krug: “Christianity is essentially a question of the heart ... The main teachings of Christianity only relate the fundamental truths of the human heart; they are symbols ...” (ibid., p. 3). Around the same time, he wrote a poem, *Vor dem Kruzifix*, which depicted a drunkard throwing a bottle of Schnapps at the figure of the crucified Christ. And yet, in his graduation speech at Pforta School, Nietzsche read:

Once more, before I wander on
and turn my glance forward,
I lift up my hands to you in loneliness –
you, to whom I flee,
to whom in the deepest depth of my heart
I have solemnly consecrated altars,
so that your voice
might summon me again. [...]

I want to know you, Unknown One,
you who have reached deep into my soul,
into my life like a gust of a storm,
you incomprehensible yet related one!
I want to know you, even serve you.

(Nietzsche, *To the Unknown God*, in Grundlehner, 1986, pp. 25-26)

Nietzsche’s early atheism could be described as stoic, with a predominantly intellectual aura. However, after parting with Wagner, his great idol, he would declare war on all his idols and ideals. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche presented his most incisive and

provocative critique of Christianity. He challenged the centuries-old view that moral values had a divine origin, and traced the historical origin of guilt, conscience, law and justice to human custom:

Have these genealogists of morality up to now ever remotely dreamt that, for example, the main moral concept ‘*Schuld*’ (guilt) descends from the very material concept of ‘*Schulden*’ (‘debts’)? Or that punishment, as *retribution*, evolved quite independently of any assumption about freedom or lack of freedom of the will? (Nietzsche, 1887/1994a, p. 43)

Nietzsche disparaged Saint Paul’s interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus as designed to burden humanity with debt and guilt (in German, the word *Schuld* has both meanings). By contrast,

The [Greek] gods served to justify man to a certain degree, even if he were in the wrong they served as causes of evil – they did not, at that time, take the punishment on themselves, but rather, as is *nobler*, the guilt ... (ibid., p. 70)

This view seems to have logically led to his notion that the truly loving God should do nothing but wrong (see below).

Philosophers Without Gods (Antony, 2007), a collection of personal essays, offers insight into atheistic points of view as held by several contemporary philosophers. For some, atheism is a natural outcome of increasing doubt in the supernatural, sparked by consciousness of logical inconsistencies in religious worldviews. Such “rational atheism” is generally a private affair which entails standing aside in relation to the existence of a deity. For others, the battle between reason and faith is more complex and involves periods of uncertainty and even a return to faith. The fiercest battles, however, are fought between contrary emotions, as was the case with Nietzsche for most of his creative life.

The more intense the conflict, the more militant the atheism; the personal becomes political. Vitz (2013) holds that intense atheism is rooted in a particular background and fuelled by “the peculiar psychological needs” of its proponents (p. 3). A militant atheist moves not so much away from God as he moves against God; in short, he becomes an anti-theist. Vitz proposes the “defective father hypothesis” as an explanation for intense atheism, largely based on Freud’s assumption that “the personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father” (Freud, 1910/1985, p. 216). Young Nietzsche wrote:

In everything God has led me safely as a

father leads his weak little child ... I have firmly resolved within me to dedicate myself for ever to his service ... Like a child I trust in his grace ... All he gives I will joyfully accept: happiness and unhappiness, poverty and riches, and boldly confront even death, which shall one day unite us all in eternal joy [*ewige Freude*] and bliss. (*Aus meinem Leben*, 1858, cited by Hayman, 1995, p. 26)

Using Bowlby’s attachment theory, Vitz examines the effects of an insecure attachment to the father in childhood on a person’s religiosity in later life. Those with an insecure attachment are said to experience a higher level of religiosity, which can oscillate between extremes, with sudden religious conversion as common as an equally sudden apostasy. Nietzsche’s case is a good example of a radical shift from devout religiosity to militant atheism, a dramatic turn which may have been psychologically rooted in the early loss of his father.

From the perspective of Erikson’s psychosocial theory, Nietzsche was bound to face a “crisis of autonomy” (see Erikson, 1959/1994). Losing his father at an early age implied that he never had the chance to negotiate his own psychological sovereignty. Passionately identifying with Brutus in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Nietzsche wrote:

Independence of the soul! 0 that is at stake here. No sacrifice can be too great for that: one must be capable of sacrificing one’s dearest friend for it, even if he should also be the most glorious human being, an ornament to the world, a genius without peer – if one loves freedom as the freedom of great souls and he threatens this kind of freedom. That is what Shakespeare must have felt. ... (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 150)

Was not Nietzsche speaking of himself here? His need for independence of the soul was matched in intensity only by his longing for a loving deity:

Strike deeper!
Strike once again!
Sting and sting, shutter this heart!
What means this torment
With blunt arrow?
Why do you look down,
Unwearied of human pain,
With malicious divine flashing eyes?
Will not kill,
Only torment, torment?
Why – torment *me*,
You malicious, unknown God? [...]

Away!
He himself has fled,

My last only companion,
My great enemy,
My unknown,
My Hangman-God! –

No! Come back,
With all your torments!
Oh come back
To the last of all solitaries!
All the streams of my tears
Run their course to you!
And the last flame of my heart –
It burns up to you!
Oh come back,
My unknown God! My pain!
My last – happiness!

(Nietzsche, 1883-85/1969a, p. 267)

In this poem, “The Sorcerer”, Nietzsche wishes (or commands?) God to depart and to return. It brings to mind Freud’s “repetition compulsion”, an unconscious tendency to repeat a major traumatic experience in a vain attempt to endure it. The theme of abandonment and return resurfaced as “Ariadne’s Lament” in his last creative year. He also wrote with rage, possibly fuelled by his dysphoric, elated mood:

Christianity is a metaphysics of the hangman. (Nietzsche, 1888/1976a, p. 500)

Christianity has corrupted the reason even of those strongest in spirit by teaching men to consider the supreme values of the spirit as something sinful (Nietzsche 1888/1976b, p. 571)

God degenerated into the *contradiction* of life, instead of being its eternal transfiguration and Yes! (ibid., p. 585)

Was Nietzsche hurling insults at God in an attempt to provoke his response? If so, God remained silent.

The battle between the need for the independence of the soul and the equally strong need to surrender to loving God fuelled Nietzsche’s philosophy. Lou Salomé, who knew him personally, observed:

Only when we enter Nietzsche’s last phase of philosophy will it become completely clear to what extent the religious drive always dominated his being and his knowledge. His various philosophies are for him just so many surrogates for God, which were intended to help him to compensate for a mystical God-ideal outside of himself. His last years, then, are a confession that he was not able to do without this ideal. And precisely because

of that, time and again we come upon his impassioned battle against religion, belief in God, and the need for salvation because he came precariously close to them. (Salomé, 1894/2001, pp. 88-89)

The Eternal Return of Loss and Pain

If one has a character, one also has one’s typical experience which returns repeatedly.
(Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 91)

The death of his father before his fifth birthday was a tragic blow of fate from which Nietzsche was never able to recover. He later recalled in his memoir:

I was born in Röcken, near Lützen, on October 15, 1844 and I received in holy baptism the name Friedrich Wilhelm. My father was the preacher in this village Gifted in spirit and heart, adorned with all the virtues of a Christian, he lived a tranquil, simple, yet happy life, respected and loved by all who knew him. ... If there is one image that cannot be erased from my soul, surely I will never forget the familiar parsonage. For it was incised in my soul by a mighty stylus. ...

In September 1848 my beloved father suddenly became mentally ill. ... We sent for the famous doctor Opolcer who, to our consternation, took the illness to be a softening of the brain [*Gehirnserweichung*]. ... Finally, he went blind and had to endure his suffering in eternal [*ewigen*] darkness. My beloved father had to bear horrific [*ungeheure*] pain. ... Then he fell asleep quietly and blessedly. †††† on July 27, 1849. When I woke up in the morning I heard all around me weeping and sobbing. My dear mother came to me with tears and cried out: “Oh, God! My good Ludwig is dead [*tot!*]!” ... The thought that I would be separated forever from the beloved Father [*den geliebten Vater*] seized me, and I wept bitterly. ... On the second of August the earthly remains of my father were consigned to the womb of the earth. ... At one o’clock in the afternoon the ceremonies began, with the bells pealing their loud knell. Oh, I shall never forget their hollow clangour in my ears. ... Our pain was horrific [*ungeheure*]. (Nietzsche, 1854-1861/1994b, pp. 4-6)

Nietzsche seemed to have recreated the lost paradise of his childhood when he became a frequent house-guest at Wagner’s residence in Tribschen (Switzerland). The

idyll of Röcken was transfigured into the idyll of Tribschen. But the bliss did not last, and Nietzsche walked out on his eight-year intense friendship with Wagner in early August of 1876. On this occasion, he abandoned the man whom he loved rather than waiting to be abandoned by him. His life was never the same thereafter. His health deteriorated immediately, and a few years later he resigned from his position at the University of Basel as a professor of philology. In the manner of Hamlet, with whom Nietzsche felt a deep affinity, he was now completely alone:

Lonely now and miserably self-distrustful, I took sides, not without resentment, *against* myself and *for* everything that hurt me and was hard to me. Thus I once more found the way to that courageous pessimism that is the antithesis of all romantic fraud, and as it seems to me today, the way to ‘myself’, to my task. (Nietzsche, 1876-1886/1913, p. 13)

Nietzsche’s subsequent philosophy can be seen as an attempt to transfigure the pain of his great disillusionment and loss. *Human, All Too Human*, his first book after the break up with Wagner, marked the beginning of a struggle with his deeply cherished ideals and idols, and of a relentless *agon* with himself. Could it be that the memory of his dead father returned to him as an image of a dead God? The passage reads:

The madman – Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, “I seek God! I seek God!” – As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? Asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Or emigrated? – Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried. “I shall tell you. We *have killed him* – you and I. All of us are murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in

the morning? Do we not hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead [*Gott ist tot!*]. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

“How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed, and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I come too early”, he said then; “my time is not yet”. This horrific [*ungeheure*] event is still on its way (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, pp. 181-182)

Several images coalesce in this astounding phantasm. In the recollection of his father’s death, Nietzsche says *the* (rather than *my*) *beloved father*, a phrase that can equally be interpreted as father the man and as Father our God. He uses the words *tot* (dead) and *ungeheure* (horrific, monstrous) on both occasions, rather like musical *leitmotifs*. The mournful mood of this passage is reminiscent of Heine’s image of bringing sacraments to a dying God. It also resonates with Pascal’s “terror of infinite spaces”, and conveys Nietzsche’s “loneliest loneliness” of existence in a godless universe.

The image of a decomposing body of Christ is central to Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Idiot* (Dostoyevsky 1869/1983), a book Nietzsche probably read sometime after writing the above fragment. Dostoyevsky visited Basel in 1867 and was said to have had an epileptic fit after seeing Holbein’s painting “The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb” in the *Kunstmuseum*. This experience was re-enacted by Prince Myshkin, the chief protagonist of the novel. Nietzsche, who lived and taught in Basel for a decade, may have seen the painting too. If he had, the image of Christ’s decomposing body in the painting could have merged with that of the decomposing body of his father during that fateful summer of 1849. The Hamletian ghost of the father had returned to haunt him.

Inheriting the Father's "Sin"?

What was silent in the father speaks in the son, and often I found the son the unveiled secret of the father.
(Nietzsche, 1883-85/ 1969a, p. 212)

The diagnosis of Pastor Nietzsche's fatal illness was an enigmatic "softening of the brain" (*Gehirnserweichung*). Intriguingly, this diagnosis was *not* made post-mortem, but while he was still alive. After yet another health crisis, Nietzsche wrote to a friend, Karl von Gersdorff:

I could no longer doubt that I am plagued by a serious illness of the brain, and that my stomach and my eyes suffer only because of this illness in the central nervous system. My father died at age thirty-six of an inflammation of the brain [*Gehirnentzündung*]; it is possible that matters will move more quickly in my case ... There is as yet no real convalescence; my uncanny state has *not* been alleviated; at every instant I am reminded of him. (Nietzsche to K. von Gersdorff, January 18, 1876; cited by Krell & Bates, 1997, p. 93)

In the play *Ghosts*, which deals with a son's fear of having inherited syphilis from his father, Ibsen too uses the phrase "softening of the brain" (Ibsen, 1881/1964, Act III, p. 98). The term *Gehirnserweichung* was, moreover, used in nineteenth century Germany to denote *dementia paralytica* (tertiary syphilis). This condition cannot be inherited from one's father, and, in the case of congenital syphilis, the mother has to be infected. But inheriting syphilis from the father was a common belief at that time. Whilst in Nietzsche's time there were no tests for this disease (these were devised in the mid-twentieth century), over 60% of inmates in mental asylums in Europe were diagnosed as syphilitic. Clearly, the fear, not medical knowledge, was responsible for such a misdiagnosis (Cybulska, 2000). We shall never know the cause of the pastor's death (tuberculous meningitis is one possibility), but almost certainly it was not syphilis. What matters, however, is Nietzsche's interpretation of his illness. Could he have thought that his father had died of syphilis, a secret never to be spoken of? If he did, one can only imagine his horror, especially given that acquiring syphilis was considered synonymous with leading an immoral life. It would have meant inheriting not only the father's illness, but also his "sin". Rather like Oswald, the tragic hero of Ibsen's play, Nietzsche often feared insanity and thought that he may have inherited this curse from his father.

Nietzsche viewed sin, guilt and punishment as moral prejudices, and accused Christianity of diabolising Eros: "the passions become evil and malicious if they are regarded as evil and malicious" (Nietzsche, 1881/1982,

p. 45). Although Nietzsche blamed Saint Paul for this, the concept of "inherited sin" had been a tenet of Judeo-Christian morality much earlier. In the Old Testament, there are numerous passages speaking of "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:7). Nietzsche must have known these passages well.

Nietzsche's tendency, throughout his life, to oscillate between extreme idealizations and equally extreme devaluations (particularly in relation to Wagner and Christianity) may have been a sequel of not having received adequate psychological care following the illness and death of his father. Children's idealisation of their parents could be a matter of survival; a good and omniscient parent plays a protective role in an immature and vulnerable psyche. However, in the process of growing up, a healthy disillusionment sets in, and a child learns that parents have faults and limitations. To recall Winnicott's concept of a "good enough mother", a parent must fail – but in such a manner that the child can cope with the disillusionment (Winnicott, 1982, pp. 145-146). I propose a concept of a "good enough father" to denote the vital role that a father plays in facilitating a child's healthy disillusionment in him, and indeed in any ideal. The father also provides a realistic "mirroring", so that the child's budding self is acknowledged and internalised. An inability to reconcile conflicting feelings about oneself and others is conducive to rebellion in adolescence. If this is not contained by the parents, it may result in a lifelong tendency to oscillate between idealisation and devaluation. And this, I suggest, was Nietzsche's predicament. Regrettably, Wagner, whom he loved as a father-like figure, not only failed to contain his idealisation, but used it for his own narcissistic needs (see Cybulska, 2015). Nietzsche's subsequent attack on his former idol was the consequence of an inevitable disappointment and abrupt devaluation. As Kohut (1976) pertinently warned, sudden, intolerable disappointment in the idealised object could lead to a calamitous fragmentation of the ego, particularly when the emphatic early mirroring had been insufficient. In the absence of a containing relationship, the ego may turn to self-aggrandisement, even self-deification. And such was the case with Nietzsche.

One cannot help but wonder whether Nietzsche's fierce assault on Christian morality was not propelled by an unacknowledged resentment related to his father's illness and death. Perhaps by attacking Christianity as a "split off" part-object of the father, he could preserve a much cherished ideal of him? Freud (1924/1983, p. 217), given his interest in a "splitting and projection" defence mechanism, stated: "it is possible for the ego to avoid a rupture ... by effecting a cleavage or division of itself". A split off part of an idealised object can be projected onto something else and then attacked by proxy.

Dancing with Dionysus at the Edge of the Abyss

I would believe only in a God who knew how to dance.
(Nietzsche, 1883-85/1969a, p. 68)

If there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god!
(ibid., p. 110)

Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872/1993), could be regarded as his philosophical and also personal manifesto. On having completed a draft of the book, he confessed to his friend Erwin Rohde: "In addition to many depressed moods and half moods, I have also had a few quite elated ones and have given some sign of this in the small work I mentioned" (cited in Middleton, 1996, p. 79). And his oscillating moods, from manic elation and dysphoria to melancholic despair, continued to fuel his creativity (Cybulska, 2000).

Not accidentally, Nietzsche proclaimed Dionysus, the dismembered and then resurrected god of the Greek pantheon, the god of dark unconscious forces, of excess and frenzy, as his patron. Ambiguity lies at the heart of the Dionysian Mysteries: the god who is the principle of indestructible life is simultaneously the god of death and the dead. Dionysus is also a god of dissonance and equally of ecstasy. Dissonance denotes disharmony or conflict, while ecstasy (a state of bliss) derives from the Greek word *ekstasis*, meaning standing outside oneself. Wagner was the ultimate master of dissonance and ecstasy, and this greatly attracted Nietzsche to his music. Dionysus, a god of wine and inebriation, is also a god of grief and tears. The oldest account of a wine harvest in European literature (Homer, *Iliad*, c. 750 BC, XVIII, ll. 561-572) carries a note of grief. In ancient Greece, at the time of the wine harvest, young girls and boys would stride down the path leading to the vines, carrying baskets full of grapes. A boy playing a lyre customarily walked with them, singing the *Linos*, the song of lamentation expressing grief for a god that was being dismembered (Kerényi, 1976, pp. 65-67). Not surprisingly, the German words *wein* and *weinen* (wine and to weep) share the same root, and the English *wine* and *whine* are homophonic.

For Nietzsche, the moments of transfiguration of pain into bliss became highly appealing. Overcoming pain and suffering must have given him a sense of mastery: "I took myself in hand, I made myself healthy again ... I made out of my will to health, to life, my philosophy" (Nietzsche 1888/1986, p. 40). But this "great health", which he considered to be a victory of his will, was only an illusory, pyrrhic victory of mania. In early January of 1889, in his Turin lodgings, he danced naked and sang loudly to the accompaniment of Wagner's erotic music, his brilliant mind engulfed by madness. In the Dionysian spirit, he rejoiced in his own destruction, affirming the tragedy of his life:

Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems, the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the very sacrifice of its highest types – that is what I called Dionysian, that is what I guessed to be the bridge to the psychology of the *tragic* poet. *Not* in order to be liberated from terror and pity, not in order to purge oneself of a dangerous affect by its vehement discharge – Aristotle understood it that way – but in order to be *oneself* the eternal joy of becoming, beyond all terror and pity – that joy which included even *joy in destroying*. (Nietzsche, 1888/1976a, pp. 562-563)

The "joy in destroying", the fusion of pain and bliss and the mystic transformations of Dionysus mirrored Nietzsche's own lived moments. In the epiphany he had at Sils-Maria in 1881, which gave birth to his enigmatic idea of Eternal Return, the abyss of pain intersected with the apogee of elation, a conjunction that would remain fixed in his mind (Cybulska, 2013). The memory of that mystical moment haunted him for the rest of his life:

A philosopher who has traversed many kinds of health, and keeps traversing them, has passed through an equal number of philosophies; he simply *cannot* keep from transposing his states every time into the most spiritual form and distance: this art of transfiguration *is* philosophy. We philosophers ... have to give birth to our thoughts out of our pain and, like mothers, endow them with all we have of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, passion, agony, conscience, fate, and catastrophe. (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 35)

In the German original, Nietzsche uses the Latin word *Transfiguration*, which has greater religious resonance than the more commonly used German word *Verklärung*. He once was captivated by Raphael's last painting, *The Transfiguration*, depicting Christ rising to heaven above the suffering crowd below, and interpreted its thrust in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/1993) as a "deification of individuation", reflecting the "eternal contradiction" between Apollonian and Dionysian principles and yet their "reciprocal necessity" in so far as "the whole world of torment is necessary so that the individual can create the redeeming vision" (pp. 25-26). In his affirmative project, Nietzsche aimed to transfigure his pain and suffering into the ecstasy of becoming, and Dionysus became a symbolic vehicle for that alchemical process. Soon after his final Dionysian rite in Turin, he was admitted to a mental asylum, where he spent the last decade of his life in a state of oblivion. Perhaps it was for him a welcome release from the prison of self-individuated consciousness and the pain of existence.

The Ultimate Sacrifice: Taking not the Punishment but the Guilt

Devise the love that bears not only all punishment but also the guilt!
(Nietzsche, 1883-85/1969a, p. 94)

A god come to earth ought to *do* nothing whatever but wrong; to take upon oneself not the punishment but the *guilt* – only that would be godlike.
(Nietzsche, 1888/1986, p. 45)

Nietzsche's name has often been associated with Nazi ideology, owing largely to his Machiavellian sister Elisabeth, who invited Hitler to her brother's shrine in Weimar in 1934 and made an offering of his philosophy. The ideas such as "will to power" and *Übermensch* must have made an impression on the Führer. A disturbing passage reads:

Not merely a master race whose sole task is to rule, but a race with its own sphere of life, with an excess of life, with an excess of strength for beauty, bravery, culture, manners to the highest peak of the spirit ...
(Nietzsche, 1883-88/1969b, p. 478)

But did not Nietzsche court his own destiny? In his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, he wrote:

I know my fate. One day there will be associated with my name the recollection of something horrific [*Ungeheure*] – a crisis like no other before on earth, of the profoundest collision of conscience, of a decision evoked *against* everything that until then had been believed in, demanded, sanctified. I am not a man, I am dynamite.
(Nietzsche, 1888/1986, p. 126)

The title of the book is telling. The phrase *ecce homo* ("behold the man") originates from Pontius Pilate, who presented the scourged Jesus Christ, bound and crowned with thorns, to a hostile crowd, shortly before his crucifixion. While on the verge of a total mental eclipse, Nietzsche signed several of his letters "The Crucified". Jung considered Christ to be an embodiment of the self, which from a psychological angle corresponded to only one half of the archetype. The other half appears in the Antichrist. According to Jung (1951/1991), "this great symbol tells us that the progressive development and differentiation of consciousness leads to an ever more menacing awareness of the conflict and involves nothing less than a crucifixion of the ego, its agonizing suspension between irreconcilable opposites" (p. 44).

During the summer of 1881, in a moment of ecstasy, the idea of Eternal Return of the Same (*die Ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen*) suddenly invaded Nietzsche's mind

and became central to his philosophy and his life. It had an aura of religious revelation. He could not explain this idea, because mystical experiences are ineffable. Being beyond propositional scientific or philosophical knowledge, they are, as William James (1903) asserted, "more like states of feeling than like states of intellect" (p. 380). Nietzsche used the word *Ewige/eternal* (rather than *unendlich/infinite*), a word which frequently occurs in Lutheran liturgy; it is carved in the wooden vault of the Röcken church where he was baptised. The phrase *Wiederkunft Christi* denotes the Second Coming of Christ. Nietzsche's friends observed that he spoke of his "secret" in a whisper and with a petrified expression on his face; not a reaction one would expect had it been a "life-affirming formula" (Cybulska, 2013). In March of 1884, he wrote to Overbeck: "I don't exactly know how I have come to this – but it is possible that for the first time a thought has come to me that will break the history of humanity in two" (cited by Klossowski, 1997, p. 100). Is it possible that, in a psychotic moment, he envisioned himself as Christ's Second Coming, with a kind of crucifixion as a part of his destiny? The question remains: did Nietzsche provoke his own "crucifixion" by letting his name be associated with something horrific – a crisis like no other before on earth? In his words:

The "bringer of glad tidings" died as he had lived, he had taught – not to "redeem men" but to show how one must live. He does not resist, he does not defend his right, he takes no step which might ward off the worst; on the contrary, he *provokes* it. And he begs, he suffers, he loves *with* those, *in* those who do him evil. *Not* to resist, *not* to be angry, *not* to hold responsible – but to resist not even the evil one – to *love* him. (Nietzsche, 1888/1976b, pp. 608-609)

Nietzsche emphasised that Christ, as portrayed by Saint Paul, took the punishment for our sins and left humanity with a sense of guilt and unrepayable debt. Perhaps by acting out the dark side of the archetype, the Antichrist, and by "doing nothing whatever but wrong", Nietzsche took "not the punishment but the guilt".

The Antichrist or the Cordelia of Christianity?

Whatever I create and however much I love it – soon I have to oppose it ...
(Nietzsche, 1883-85/1969a, p. 138)

Does one not write books precisely to conceal what lies within us?
(Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 216)

Nietzsche rarely revealed his innermost self in his published works; this can be gleaned from his private letters and accounts of friends. However, in academic scholarship, his provocative and paradoxical utterances

have usually been taken at face value. But what if sometimes this “philosopher of masks” publically stated the opposite of what he felt? Then his published writings could be interpreted as an inverted image of his soul. After all, as he stressed in *Ecce Homo*: “I am one thing, my writings are another” (Nietzsche, 1888/1986, p. 69).

In the famous scene in Turin’s piazza, just before his total mental collapse, Nietzsche, with tears streaming down his face, embraced a horse which had been beaten by the cabdriver. Such a reaction stands in clear contradiction to his self-professed stance against pity; it was a moment when the mask of hardness slipped (Cybulska, 2015). A friend, Meta von Salis, observed: “he had condemned a whole series of intense feelings not because he did *not* have them, but on the contrary because he *had* them and *knew* their danger” (cited in Gilman, 1987, p. 202). Nietzsche was acutely aware of his psychological vulnerability and himself recognised that developing a “thick skin [would be] the sole antidote to [his] massive inner vulnerability and capacity for suffering” (Nietzsche to M. von Meysenbug, August 11, 1875; cited in Krell & Bates, 1997, p. 92). His many masks, of which the mask of the Antichrist became the most notorious, in effect served this purpose. Nietzsche’s assault on Christianity – as a religion of the weak and the sickly – could be interpreted as an attack on his own sickliness and vulnerability. His imperative “*Become hard!*” has the aura of a self-imposed command (see Nietzsche, 1883-85/1969a, p. 231). To a friend, he confessed: “As far as Christianity is concerned, I hope you will believe this much: in my heart I’ve never held it in contempt and, ever since childhood, have often struggled with myself on behalf of its ideals” (Nietzsche to F. Overbeck, June 23, 1881; cited in Fuss & Shapiro, 1971, p. 55).

Nietzsche staged a vociferous frontal attack on Christianity as constructed by St Paul, whom he called the “greatest apostle of vengeance”. In *The Antichrist*, written in his last creative year, he blamed Paul for the invention of sin, judgment and punishment as a way of controlling the herd (Nietzsche, 1888/1976b, pp. 627-634). Nietzsche vehemently objected to the Pauline interpretation of Jesus’s martyrdom as redemption for our sins, whereby the crucifixion had been rendered symptomatic of religious self-hatred. The enormous debt inflicted on humanity by Christ’s sacrifice could never be repaid. This he saw as a complete inversion of the gospel of Jesus, who “had abolished the very concept of ‘guilt’ – he had denied any cleavage between God and man; he *lived* this unity of God and man as his ‘glad tidings’” (ibid., p. 616). Nietzsche stressed that Jesus “died as he had lived, as he had taught – *not* to ‘redeem men’ but to show how one must live” (ibid., p. 608).

He wrote:

The “kingdom of God” is nothing that one expects; it has no yesterday and no day after tomorrow, it will not come in “a thousand years” – it is an experience of the heart; it is everywhere, it is nowhere. (ibid., p. 608)

This sounds remarkably like the notion of Christianity which Nietzsche had as an inquisitive adolescent. After more than a decade of anti-Christian campaigning, he appeared to have returned to his point of departure. He may never truly have left that point, and in his heart he had remained faithful to the ideals of Christianity. We remember how Cordelia, that most loving and devoted daughter of King Lear, refused to proclaim love for her father because her devious sisters had already devalued the word. She loved him too deeply and too sincerely to join the chorus of flatterers and deceivers. Only as he carried Cordelia’s dead body in his arms did King Lear fully understand the redeeming power of her love, the love of which she would not speak. I suggest that Nietzsche may have adopted a similar stance towards Christianity. Perhaps for him to love was to express publically the opposite to what he intensely felt? Going a step further than Cordelia, he attacked what he loved, much in accordance to his own motto: “I attack only causes that are victorious” (Nietzsche, 1888/1986, p. 47). And he conceded that “great despisers ... are the great venerators and arrows of longing for the other bank” (Nietzsche, 1883-85/1969a, p. 44).

His last letter to a friend, carrying an echo not only of Psalm 96, but also of Raphael’s great painting, reads: “Sing me a new song: the world is transfigured and all the heavens rejoice. [signed] The Crucified” (Nietzsche to H. Köselitz, January 4, 1889; cited in Middleton 1996, p. 345).

Closing Comment

From early adolescence, Nietzsche showed a profound preoccupation with religion, Promethean rebellion, and the theme of a dying god. This continued throughout his adult life, until his mental collapse. It was a circuitous journey from a devout believer in God to his most celebrated opponent. He engaged in an intense battle between his inner Brutus and his inner Cordelia, a battle in which the assassin and the loving son interlocked in a deadly combat. And to this Nietzsche devoted most of his creative life, leaving behind a poignant diary in the form of his philosophy.

It seems fitting to conclude with a link to Nietzsche’s liturgical composition *Miserere*: bit.ly/1oq70pS

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Since taking an early retirement a few years ago, Dr Cybulska is now devoting her time to reading, writing and travel.

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