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**Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra as Abomination**

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**Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra as Abomination**

by

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For Melanie

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## Chapter 1

### Form Matters or: Matters of Form

If one were to gauge Nietzsche's own assessment of the philosophical significance of his respective works by means of the typical assortment of literature found at virtually any bookstore featuring a philosophy section, or any university library, one would undoubtedly draw the wrong inference. One generally finds several translations of most of Nietzsche's writings, including *Nachlass* material, along with at least five times as many secondary works dealing either with Nietzsche's writings, persona, or history. Of those secondary works, one or two—perhaps three, depending on the overall size of the selection—might deal with *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.<sup>1</sup> Though copies of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* itself are usually plentiful, it is plainly evident just by looking at the available material, that *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's self-proclaimed masterpiece, is far from attracting the kind of scholarly attention its author thought it merited. "Among my writings, Nietzsche states, "my *Zarathustra* stands to my mind by itself. With that I have given mankind

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (Penguin, 1954); hereafter referred to as *Z*, followed by part and section number.

the greatest present that has ever been made to it so far.<sup>2</sup> He predicts, further, that “some day institutions will be needed in which men live and teach as I conceive of living and teaching; it may even happen that a few chairs will be set aside for the interpretation of *Zarathustra*” (EH, “Good Books,” 1).

The dearth of interest in what Nietzsche considered his most accomplished work is puzzling for more than one reason. Nietzsche is widely regarded as an extraordinarily gifted writer, who has an almost unparalleled ability among philosophers to engage a broad range of readers. Walter Kaufmann, the most prolific translator of Nietzsche’s works into English to date, writes: “Nietzsche is one of the few philosophers since Plato whom large numbers of intelligent people read for pleasure.”<sup>3</sup> Given this talent, therefore, one must wonder why a greater proportion of his readers, particularly those whose professional interests center on his works, do not recognize “the art that has been squandered” (EH, “Good Books,” 4) on the work its author took to constitute the pinnacle of his literary and philosophical accomplishments. With notably few exceptions,<sup>4</sup> the vast majority of

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<sup>2</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Preface, 4, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann, in Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, 1992); hereafter referred to as EH, followed by abbreviated chapter title and section number.

<sup>3</sup>*Basic Writings*, Intro., ix.

<sup>4</sup>Among the exceptions are Kathleen Higgins’ *Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), Anke Bennholdt-Thomsen’s *Nietzsche’s Also Sprach Zarathustra als Literarisches Phänomen* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag,

scholars, including those contemporary philosophers who are otherwise quite enchanted with Nietzsche's writings, continue to avoid *Zarathustra* like an infectious disease.

It is not that *Zarathustra* does not provide ample opportunity for study. As Robert Pippin remarks, "in the surprisingly small amount of literature devoted chiefly to *Zarathustra*, [there is] nothing close to a standard reading of the work's intention, form, development, resolution, or lack of resolution. (In fact, there are not even standard disagreements.)"<sup>5</sup> The lack of argument and debate concerning any of the issues Pippin mentions is, indeed, baffling. One should think it a modest challenge to generate controversy within the scholarly community, which ordinarily requires little in the way of prodding to be moved to disagreement.

*Zarathustra*, however, cannot even manage to get a group of individuals known for their contentiousness to argue. Though quite remarkable in its own right, the lack of debate among Nietzsche scholars directly involving *Zarathustra* points toward an answer in our query concerning its marginal status: people, as Nietzsche

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1974), Laurence Lampert's *Nietzsche's Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), and more recently, Robert Godding-Williams' *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup>Robert B. Pippin, "Irony and Affirmation in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*," ed. Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy B. Strong, in *Nietzsche's New Seas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 45.

himself observes, have considerable trouble understanding this book. Strangely enough, Nietzsche was not only aware of the confounding character of this book, but did not find it problematic. Far from entertaining any doubt about its literary and philosophical accomplishments, he praises *Zarathustra's* inaccessibility as a sign of its distinction: "how could I possibly wish to be read by those 'moderns' whom I know!" he remarks. "That today one doesn't hear me and doesn't accept my ideas is not only understandable, it even seems right to me . . . . The time for me hasn't come yet: some are born posthumously" (EH, "Good Books," 1).

Ironically, the fact that *Zarathustra* is cognitively opaque is one of the few issues about which Nietzsche scholars explicitly and unanimously agree. To my knowledge, there is no dissent concerning that point. Unfortunately, knowing *that* this work is opaque is helpful only on a superficial level. One must, it is true, have some idea what one is disagreeing about (or at least think that one does) in order to disagree. This, however, does not take us very far. In order to explain *Zarathustra's* inaccessibility on a level that allows us to draw more substantial inferences concerning its intent or purpose, we need to ask *why* this book has on the whole defied rigorous philosophical analysis, especially since it is not nonsensical *per se*. By gaining some insight into Nietzsche's authorial strategy, in other words, we should be able to gather clues concerning his motives. He obviously had the ability to communicate his ideas more clearly, as evidenced by his other writings, which

suggests that *Zarathustra's* opacity serves a distinct function or has a particular aim.

The inaccessibility of the work's cognitive content, however, is not the only characteristic in virtue of which it defies convention. *Zarathustra's* fictional status, imagistic style, and frequent use of non-standard metaphors appear ill suited for the task of conveying substantive philosophical insights. Our sense of propriety also tends to be challenged by its protagonist, Zarathustra, who delivers a seemingly endless series of sermons in an offensive and confrontational tone of voice suggestive of a haughty, arrogant attitude highly unbecoming a critic of the Christian-Platonic tradition. As Kathleen Higgins notes, the speeches "may have sounded different to nineteenth-century ears . . . but to us in the latter half of the twentieth century, the high biblical prose-style of Zarathustra's sermons can be grating."<sup>6</sup> *Zarathustra*, as a number of commentators have remarked, has a tendency to irritate and annoy many of its readers.

Surprisingly, Nietzsche was aware of the work's propensity to elicit emotionally charged responses from its readers as well. He writes in the preface to *On the Genealogy of Morals*: "Regarding my *Zarathustra*, for example, I do not allow that anyone knows that book who has not at some time been profoundly

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<sup>6</sup>*Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 131.

I examine the issue of Zarathustra's apparent hypocrisy in depth in Chapter 4. At present, I merely want to point out some of the factors responsible for *Zarathustra's* propensity to elicit negative emotional reactions from its readers.

wounded and at some time been profoundly delighted by every word in it.”<sup>7</sup> This professed intent to wound the reader, again, flies in the face of philosophical (and mainstream literary) convention insofar as inflicting pain on one’s readership is rarely among the aims of most authors. Furthermore, it is hardly conducive to accomplishing the mission philosophers have traditionally embraced: to persuade their readers, usually by way of argument and demonstration, to adopt the view endorsed by the author.

*Zarathustra*’s cognitive opacity, as well as its propensity to offend and wound the reader, raise substantial questions with respect to Nietzsche’s authorial motives. Why would Nietzsche want to injure the reader? What possible purpose could it serve other than to rebuff the very individuals upon whose favorable appraisal his success as a writer and philosopher depends? Presumably, no one *has* to read this book—unless it is an assigned reading for a class, and even then, one need not read it carefully. It is difficult to see, at any rate, why anyone would want to engage this “unreadable” book, as Louis Mackey once put it during a conversation.

Our query, it might be noted, has shifted naturally from the issue of Nietzsche’s motivation to that of *Zarathustra*’s potential readers. Nietzsche was clearly concerned with the book’s effect, as evidenced by his apparently perverse

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<sup>7</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Preface, 8, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); hereafter referred to as GM, followed by part and section number.

demand that the appropriate reader, that is, the reader who would eventually come to take delight in it, must first be wounded. Only then would he allow that the reader has understood *Zarathustra/Zarathustra's* message. These conditions, and especially the order in which they must be satisfied for Nietzsche to grant that the reader has gained access to the book, are again contrary to common expectation. Nietzsche seems to be putting the chariot before the horse here, to use one of Plato's famous metaphors, by requiring that reason be directed by the passions. If being wounded and then delighted is a precondition for understanding, it would follow that the reader's anticipated emotional response to the book is key to its content.

Having considered several peculiar characteristics of Nietzsche's "masterpiece," a pattern begins to emerge: what tends to strike us as strange and questionable about *Zarathustra*, as well as Nietzsche's commentaries, seems to violate certain assumptions most of us casually take for granted. The idea that some kinds of insights are attainable only if we allow ourselves to be led by emotion is highly unorthodox. It turns the Socratic "reason-virtue-happiness" formula on its head.<sup>8</sup> But the Socratic/Platonic ideal of rationality is not the only culturally central,

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<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates," 10, in *The Portable Nietzsche*; hereafter referred to as TI, followed by abbreviated chapter title and section number.

Nietzsche points to the harmful consequences of the Socratic maxims, "'virtue is knowledge;' man sins only from ignorance; 'he who is virtuous is happy,'" as early as *The Birth of Tragedy*. This "faith" in the ultimate intelligibility of existence, he claims, led to the death of tragedy because dialectical reasoning is accorded precedence over

and seemingly unassailable, “truth” challenged by Nietzsche’s comment. His prediction that some day there would be individuals capable of accepting human susceptibility to error, injury, and even death as a natural and inevitable part of their empirical existence is equally incommensurable with the traditional Western world view. Suffering and error have traditionally been considered the result of some shortcoming, in principle avoidable—a sign of sin and vice in either a moral or intellectual sense. Though this view of the world seems natural to us, there is at least one viable alternative, which Nietzsche considers indicative of a healthier, more robust, outlook on life: the tragic world view. As we will see in Chapter 2, *Zarathustra* challenges the Christian-Platonic attitude toward suffering by confronting it with a radically different interpretation of its meaning and role in the figure of the tragic hero Prometheus.

Nietzsche’s rejection of the notion that pain and suffering must be justified, however, is not limited to his criticism of the Christian-Platonic tradition. “[I]f you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, worthy of annihilation, and as a defect of existence,” Nietzsche writes, “then it is clear that besides your religion of

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instinct and emotion.

See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 14, in *Basic Writings*; hereafter referred to as BT, followed by section number.

Nietzsche’s consequent reiteration of this view in one of his last works, *Twilight of the Idols*, suggests that he considers the Western tradition’s idealization of reason problematic throughout his career.

pity you also harbor another religion in your heart that is perhaps the mother of the religion of pity: the *religion of comfortableness*.”<sup>9</sup> These “ways of thinking that measure the value of things in accordance with *pleasure* and *pain*, which are mere epiphenomena and wholly secondary,” Nietzsche explains, “are ways of thinking that stay in the foreground . . . .”<sup>10</sup> The kind of happiness that follows from this superficial orientation toward the world, he concludes, is “a state that soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible—that makes his destruction *desirable*” (BGE, 225).

The perceived perversity of Nietzsche’s anticipation of readers who are not deterred by the pain *Zarathustra* is intended to cause, therefore, appears to be the result of our having accepted as given that pain and suffering ought not to exist (without justification). Underlying this belief, however, is the assumption that life as a whole would be better if there were no pain or suffering in the world. But it is not at all clear that such a state, even if it could be achieved, would be desirable. “You want, if possible—and there is no more insane ‘if possible’—to *abolish suffering*,”

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<sup>9</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 338, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); hereafter referred to as GS, followed by the section number.

This issue is explicitly raised by *Zarathustra*’s “last man” speech, which vividly describes the nihilistic consequences of subscribing to the “religion of comfortableness” (Z, Prologue, 5).

<sup>10</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 225, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989); hereafter referred to as BGE, followed by the section number.

Nietzsche writes, a goal that both betrays and promotes the types of values that he fears will lead to the degeneration of humankind, to nihilism and despair (BGE, 225). Let us, then, conduct an experiment, and remove or “subtract” the two assumptions we have just identified, and reconsider the problem posed by *Zarathustra*’s opacity and potentially offensive character. Unless we presuppose that the structure and content of philosophical works in particular ought to be transparent (because reason is supposed to determine our beliefs), and that they ought to persuade readers to concur with the message their authors seek to communicate (which is not facilitated by offending one’s audience), most of the *prima facie* problems *Zarathustra* raises are diffused. Granted, we have not explained why Nietzsche should have chosen to write this book as he did. But we have come upon a set of assumptions at the heart of the Christian-Platonic tradition that has become so deeply entrenched in our culture as to appear unquestionable. At the same time, it is clear that Nietzsche vehemently and explicitly opposes these assumptions on the grounds that they contribute to the devaluation of our empirical existence, and feared that our continued subscription to the ideals they imply would eventually deprive life of meaning and purpose.

This provides strong indication that Nietzsche’s motive for seeking to confound and cause his readers some discomfort is to avert of the existential crisis triggered by God’s death, which pulls the foundation out from beneath the culturally

conditioned practice of positing a moral-rational world order.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, one gets the impression that his strategy is not exactly congenial to attaining that goal. How, one might wonder, should Nietzsche's confronting his readers with a cognitively opaque text designed to inflict pain contribute to their eventual emancipation from the harmful ideals of the Christian-Platonic tradition? Aside from asking us to part with the assumption that individuals are fundamentally motivated by pain and pleasure, this seems to require *Zarathustra's* readers to draw inferences based on the book's overall message, which even Nietzsche concedes remains mysterious to the vast majority of readers. The path to recognizing the problem of nihilism,<sup>12</sup> therefore, along with the means to confront and, ideally, overcome it, must involve a substantial departure from the traditional approach to gaining knowledge or insight.

If this is true, and Nietzsche intends for *Zarathustra* to counteract the basic

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<sup>11</sup>Nietzsche uses the phrase "God is dead" as shorthand for the decline of religious belief in Western culture, but more importantly in the context of the problem posed by *Zarathustra's* opacity, for the cultural abandonment of belief in an absolute foundation of values.

<sup>12</sup>In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche asks: "What does nihilism mean?" His response: "*That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer."

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, I, 2, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968).

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche provides an alternative definition: "what is nihilism today if it is not *that?*—we are weary of *man*" (GM I, 12).

assumptions of the traditional Western world view with respect to knowledge and virtue, then we may be able to pick up some clues concerning his strategy for conveying the insight(s) necessary to deal with God's death. Let us recall the assumptions Nietzsche thought particularly harmful in terms of the values and ideals they advocate. Christianity, as well as Plato, embraces the idea that pain is in principle to be avoided—and perhaps more importantly, avoidable, and that knowledge or faith and virtue are the means to attaining happiness, taken to be a state minimally characterized by the absence of suffering. The absence of suffering is thus a sign that reason and/or faith and virtue dominate an individual's actions and beliefs. Conversely, suffering, pain, and failure are taken to indicate a lack of moral and intellectual virtue. After two and a half millennia of Christian-Platonic hegemony, moreover, it is not surprising that the connection between suffering and vice has become so deeply ingrained in Western culture as to go unnoticed and unquestioned even in the secular realm. Where there is pain, we immediately look for intellectual or moral vice, which we assume ought to have been avoided.

Yet it is far from obvious that this view of the world is well grounded, or that it justifies seemingly needless suffering even if we ignore the lack of foundation. Aside from presupposing that the universe is inherently structured in accordance with certain rational and moral principles, whether created by a divinity or occurring naturally, theologians and philosophers alike have for centuries prior to God's death

unsuccessfully attempted to solve the problem of evil. Evil and unjustified suffering did not become problematic only after Western culture ceased to believe in God. Zarathustra suggests that we need to dispense with the notion that suffering is punishment for intellectual or moral vice in the interest of well-being: “Things are ordered morally according to justice and punishment. Alas, where is redemption from the flux of things and from the punishment called existence?’ Thus preached madness,” he claims in the chapter entitled “On Redemption” (Z, II, 20). But if it bespeaks of madness to assume that suffering and vice are correlated,<sup>13</sup> then unjustified pain and suffering must be integrated into our world view if only for the sake of our mental health.

In light of this view, it would make sense for Nietzsche to attempt to inflict pain on his readers to get them to recognize that their sense of cosmic justice is not just groundless, but also harmful in the sense that it deprives their empirical existence of value and significance. This leaves us with a problem: how can *Zarathustra* enable the reader to accept the natural occurrence of suffering and failure without condemning life if he or she does not understand its message? On what grounds, in other words, is the reader to draw the relevant inference? Or to

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<sup>13</sup>Nietzsche writes in his revised preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, “confronted with morality (especially Christian, or unconditional, morality), life *must* continually and inevitably be in the wrong, because life *is* something essentially amoral—and eventually, crushed by the weight of contempt and the eternal No, life *must* then be felt to be unworthy of desire and altogether worthless” (BT, P, 5).

raise an even more basic problem: how can a text whose content is not understood manage to wound the reader? It seems impossible to be wounded by something one does not understand. So while we may have reconciled the seemingly incompatible claims that *Zarathustra* is intended to wound the appropriate set of readers, but at the same time constitutes “the greatest present ever made” to them,<sup>14</sup> one would expect its overall cognitive opacity to subvert any attempt to throw off readers’ emotional composure.

The answer to this, as well as the previously raised question concerning the source of *Zarathustra*’s opacity (given that it is not nonsensical) lies with the text’s strategic violations of readers’ sensibilities and cognitive habits, which are in turn conditioned by the predominant Western categorical framework. As we will see, the text, following the Prologue, flows along very smoothly and presents little difficulty in terms of its meaning or significance—beyond its imagistic, poetic style and perhaps extravagant use of metaphor. *Zarathustra*’s individual speeches are, for the most part, fairly comprehensible, as are the plot and narrative, both of which are surprisingly minimal. At certain junctures, however, the textual flow is disrupted by a jarring dissonance between the kinds of assumptions and inferences a typical member of Western culture and tradition may be predicted to draw, or the

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<sup>14</sup>*Zarathustra* could be considered “the greatest present” in case it succeeds in enabling readers to confront nihilism.

expectations he or she is likely to form, and the words and actions of *Zarathustra's* protagonist.<sup>15</sup>

These disruptions occur with the greatest frequency in the Prologue, a relatively short section of the work, where *Zarathustra* encounters members of organized society for the first time following his decade long self-imposed solitude. Because those discontinuities are responsible for *Zarathustra's* perceived lack of clarity, as we will see, I consider their occurrence, role, and impact—their “propositional force” or *Aussagekraft*, for lack of a better term—with respect to *Zarathustra's* stated mission in the Prologue in detail. The remainder of the text repeats the pattern introduced in the book's opening sections, though the intervals between disruptions are greater. This proportional increase in smoothly flowing text, I show in Chapters 6 and 7, has a tendency to lull readers into a false sense of confidence in their capacity to confront the problem of nihilism because *Zarathustra/Zarathustra's* message is relatively accessible. By leading his audience to identify, or at least sympathize, with the protagonist and his project, however, Nietzsche is able to wound his unsuspecting victims more deeply when he violates their expectations after a period of comparative calm and clarity.

As for the mystery of how *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* could possibly manage to wound its readers without their comprehending its/his message, we can infer that the

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<sup>15</sup>I owe this observation to Kathleen Higgins.

book is not likely to inflict pain mainly in virtue of its semantic content. This leaves us with the possibility that textual violations of readers' expectations are a formal matter. We have already noted above that Zarathustra's haughty, arrogant tone and sermonizing style seems incompatible with the presumption that our protagonist shares Nietzsche's views regarding Christian-Platonic values and ideals. The perception of dissonance here, that is, the impression that formal elements like tone or style are at odds with the expectation that Nietzsche's hero should be critical of traditional Western values, can be traced back to assumptions implied by the Christian-Platonic world view. If Zarathustra rejects the tradition's claims to represent absolute, universal truths because he doubts that such truths are possible, then he cannot at the same time be a prophet proclaiming moral and metaphysical "truths" himself. His tone and style thus violate our expectations even if we are not exactly sure of the content of his message. In other words, if he expresses views critical of traditional values and ideals, then it is inappropriate for him to speak in a sermonizing, authoritative tone of voice. If, on the other hand, his message is consistent with Christian-Platonic ideals, then his tone may be appropriate to the content, but the content itself violates the expectation that the protagonist of Nietzsche's most cherished work ought to represent the author's views.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>It seems that anyone faintly familiar with Nietzsche, even if by reputation alone, would expect the hero of his "masterpiece" to share the author's critical attitude toward the Christian-Platonic world view.

And yet—on reflection, we find that neither of the assumptions fueling this conflict are themselves justified. Why should we take for granted that Zarathustra is essentially a mouthpiece for Nietzsche’s ideas? Just because he is the protagonist of Nietzsche’s favorite work does not mean that he, therefore, must give straightforward expression to the author’s views. If it is true, as Higgins argues, that *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* communicates many significant insights indirectly,<sup>17</sup> then Zarathustra’s divergence from ideas Nietzsche expresses elsewhere do not present a problem. More than likely, the presupposition that Zarathustra’s views should unambiguously reflect those of his creator is based on the model of texts central to the Western tradition. The Platonic Dialogues, which purport to voice Socrates’ ideas, as well as the biblical account of the life of Jesus Christ, who is said to disseminate God’s word, feature speakers who relay “truths” in the name of a transcendent authority.

Obviously, the same cannot be said for Zarathustra, a fictional character created by perhaps the most radical critic of the Christian-Platonic tradition to date. Neither Nietzsche nor his protagonist can afford the luxury of appealing to a transcendent source as support for their claims. But then again, neither can anyone

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<sup>17</sup>*Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, 105-115. Higgins points out that insights based on personal experience, according to Nietzsche, cannot be communicated via universal discourse, but may be transmitted indirectly to individuals who shares the relevant experience.

else whose orientation toward life and world is not centered on a belief in God or Platonic Forms. And while we may be willing to tolerate a tone of conviction and an air of moral superiority in the case of a person whose life revolves around his or her faith,<sup>18</sup> it is not clear why we tolerate it in the case of individuals whose secular orientation rules out the possibility that they believe their views to be legitimated by a higher power. Presumably, the only difference between the latter (usually elite members of society whom Zarathustra labels “the good and the just”) and Zarathustra consists of the respective values and ideals they endorse. But if God is dead, then neither those who continue to espouse Christian-Platonic values nor their critic(s) can legitimately claim authority.

It appears that, in the end, there is no rational reason for treating the proclamations of a recognized member of the moral and/or intellectual elite any differently than those of *Zarathustra's* protagonist. So why do we perceive Zarathustra's tone as disturbing and offensive? The explanation I will outline in more detail shortly, and make use of in the chapters to follow, is that he does not fit into the culturally accepted categorical scheme that sets the rules for the proper identification and classification of objects, experiences, impressions, and events. Zarathustra's tone, in conjunction with the content of his speeches, simply has no

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<sup>18</sup>Zarathustra, as we will see in section 2 of the Prologue, does not tell the saint he encounters in the forest that “God is dead,” though he himself takes God's death for granted, judging from his casual, very matter-of-factly statement to that effect.

place within the framework of Western cognitive categories that structure our impressions of the world, thereby allowing us to interact and communicate with others, to think, read and write, etc. Since Zarathustra, as a heretic of the tradition whose values and ideals remain definitive even on a secular level (for reasons to be discussed in Chapters 2 and 7), does not fit into the accepted framework of categories, his authoritative tone is perceived as highly inappropriate. This is due as much to his ambiguous status, given that he is “unclassifiable,” as it is to his views, both of which threaten to undermine the established order.

There are numerous examples in the course of Western history that testify to the fact that dissent from the established world view is dangerous—not only to the accepted belief system, but to the dissenter him- or herself. For instance, Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei, both of whom had the audacity to defy church doctrine concerning man’s place in the world by endorsing Copernicus’ theory of a heliocentric universe, paid dearly for voicing their convictions. Bruno was burned at the stake while Galileo was forced, on his knees, to retract his belief in the Copernican theory, and imprisoned for the remainder of his life. Unlike Galileo and Bruno, however, who were respected members of society, Zarathustra is also an outsider, having spent ten years in solitude on a mountain. So if Galileo and Bruno’s fate—or that of the many victims of the Inquisition, the witches and heretics of the late middle ages—is any indication, we can see why Zarathustra’s voicing heretical

views in a tone befitting only an established member of the moral or intellectual elite might be disconcerting to some readers. He not only criticizes the accepted world view, but does so from a position that itself threatens to undermine it in virtue of its ambiguity.

As might be suspected by now, the correlation between *Zarathustra's* opacity and its disturbing or unsettling quality is not the type of connection one is likely to discover by means of rational analysis. For one, it seems to defy common sense for reasons already noted. But perhaps more significantly, the notion that violations of the established order are perceived as offensive simply because they violate that order appears so arbitrary that any philosophically minded reader would be loathe to consider herself capable of being swayed by them. This is probably particularly true of readers who are familiar with Nietzsche's views and tend to agree with them. It is unclear why they, of all readers, should be bothered by transgressions against the very world view of which they are already critical.

Given these difficulties, and the low probability of being able to explain *Zarathustra's* disturbing effect in light of its inaccessibility, I was fortunate enough one day to stumble upon a possible explanation in an article by Noël Carroll, entitled "The Nature of Horror."<sup>19</sup> Although I already had a suspicion that *Zarathustra's*

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<sup>19</sup>Noël Carroll, "The Nature of Horror," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46/1 (Fall 1987): 51-59.

tendency to conjoin incompatible concepts and images was a source of annoyance, it was not until I read Carroll's article that the connection between the book's opacity and its disturbing effect became clear. The work's tendency to elicit a negative emotional response is not, as I had thought, due to the fact that readers become frustrated as a consequence of their inability to understand it (though that may be part of the problem). It is that the passages responsible for *Zarathustra*'s overall opacity are perceived as disturbing *immediately* and in their own right because the very factors that contribute to the text's opacity are also responsible for its unsettling quality. The reactions *Zarathustra* tends to generate are visceral, in other words.

The type of response I have in mind here is similar to the reaction monsters in horror films tend to elicit insofar as their immediate and non-rational nature is concerned. Monsters are perceived as creepy and repulsive, though in most cases, we would be hard pressed to articulate our reasons for that judgment. Carroll, who relies on a study by Mary Douglas,<sup>20</sup> argues that "the monster" in the context of a work in the horror genre disturbs because it violates "schemes of cultural categorization."<sup>21</sup> We tend to be repulsed by, and afraid of, monsters, Carroll

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<sup>20</sup>Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Frederick Z. Paeger, 1966).

<sup>21</sup>"Following Douglas," Carroll contends, "an *object* or *being* is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, categorically incomplete, or formless." Ghosts and zombies, for instance, are categorically interstitial or contradictory because they are neither living nor dead. A severed head or hand is

explains, not primarily because they are physically threatening (or would be if they were real), but because they are perceived as impure. Their perceived impurity and corresponding tendency to elicit reactions of fear and disgust, in turn, is due to the fact that they transgress against culturally accepted cognitive schemes and/or the symbolic boundaries underlying them. In short, they do not fit into the conceptual framework that allows us to make sense of our environment.

Now I do not think that *Zarathustra* constitutes art-horror, although it does contain some monsters, and features one scene in particular that could easily be integrated into a horror film or novel.<sup>22</sup> Yet on the whole, *Zarathustra* can hardly be said to generate the “state of abnormal physical agitation (shuddering, tingling, screaming, etc.)” that would allow us to classify it as art-horror using Carroll’s criteria.<sup>23</sup> What I am mainly interested in with respect to *Zarathustra*, therefore, is what Douglas calls “reactions of impurity”<sup>24</sup>—a necessary, but not sufficient, component of “art-horrified” responses. “Reactions of impurity,” according to Douglas, cover a fairly broad spectrum of phenomena, ranging from laughter to mild irritation and confusion to a feeling of vertigo or seasickness, to revulsion, disgust,

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categorically incomplete. “Horror,” 55.

<sup>22</sup>The scene in question is section 8 of the Prologue, which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>23</sup>“Horror,” 54.

<sup>24</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 35.

avoidance behavior, a sense of danger or impending doom, and even outright hostility.<sup>25</sup>

Douglas' book, which relies on cross-cultural anthropological data, presents a compelling case in favor of the view that perceptions of impurity are best explained with reference to their violating symbolic boundaries that serve to maintain culturally accepted ordering schemes. Her study, which examines concepts of pollution in a substantial sample of both primitive and developed cultures, shows that as a general rule, notions of purity and impurity are most consistently and comprehensively explained with reference to culturally shared assumptions about world and social order. But there are exceptions. Not every experience of ambiguity or anomaly generates a disturbed response. Poetry, sculpture, paintings, even music and jokes, for instance, rely on deviations from established patterns and forms for their aesthetic or humorous qualities.<sup>26</sup> She concludes that the propensity of violations of categorical schemes to disturb and offend depends on the degree of "distortion," as well as the context in which it occurs. In the above considered case of Zarathustra's tone, for instance, both the extent to which it undermines the reader's expectations and the context in which the violation takes place can be said to contribute to its unsettling effect.

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<sup>25</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 37.

<sup>26</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 37.

To illustrate Douglas' theory, it will be useful to look at a few everyday examples of violations of cultural cognitive schemes to which most individuals can relate. All of us, I assume, have found some dirt on our kitchen floors at one time or another. It could be soil from the garden, bread crumbs, dog hair, spilled soda, grass, etc. Any given number of "substances" can count as dirt, though as we can see from the list above, they need not have any common properties. Nor are they inherently dirty. The individual crumbs that collectively constitute a piece of bread are not dirty; neither are blades of grass in the lawn or soil in the garden or flower pot. What makes them dirty, according to Douglas, is that they are out of place with respect to a system of ordered relations. "Dirt," she argues, "is a by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements"—it is "a residual category, rejected from our normal scheme of classifications."<sup>27</sup>

Although few mentally balanced individuals would be significantly disturbed by dirt on the kitchen floor, aside from perhaps feeling some motivation to clean it up, other kinds of violations of classificatory schemes tend to provoke a stronger response. Let us imagine ourselves at our favorite Mexican restaurant, cheerfully munching away at the complementary chips and salsa before the entrée is served, when suddenly we notice a strange hair dangling from the chip we just used to scoop

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<sup>27</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 35-6.

salsa from the bowl. I would venture to guess that most individuals would refuse to eat that particular chip even after removing the hair. Somehow, it now seems “contaminated,” repulsive. Many would probably refrain from eating any more salsa from the bowl that contained the hair, and a few very sensitive souls might even get up and leave.

If this particular scenario does not pack the requisite punch, we could always modify the example to escalate its degree of offensiveness. We might stipulate that the hair does not look as if it originated from someone’s scalp, or we could suppose that it is not discovered until after we have chewed the chip for a while, or let it get stuck in our teeth to make it difficult to remove, thereby preventing us from exercising the appropriate avoidance behavior. At some point, most of us would probably be disgusted. I call this, generically, the “hair in the soup” phenomenon. We could theoretically substitute just about any eatable material for the soup, and a variety of bodily “substances,” i.e. a piece of skin or nail clippings, for the hair, and generate a relevantly similar reaction.

Although it is tempting to suppose that the perception of dirt or the disgust correlates with our knowledge of pathogens, that is, that these reactions are the result of hygienic considerations, this hypothesis does not hold. Not only does it fail to explain the phenomenon adequately, but it also gives rise to some inconsistencies. The kitchen floor is dirty even though we are not in the habit of eating off of it. And

it is difficult to see how grass clippings on the floor would affect the wholesomeness or sanitarianess of food on the plate. On the other hand, the possibility that a hair, even if ingested, might carry enough pathogens into our systems to make us sick is extremely remote. At the same time, foods that are likely to cause illness because they have been stored at inappropriate temperatures—not quite hot or cold enough, depending—are rarely perceived as disgusting before they are consumed, and sometimes not even after the fact. Yet to my knowledge, they are the primary source of food borne illnesses in developed countries. And lastly, as Douglas points out, ideas of dirt and pollution have been around for millennia whereas the discovery of pathogens is a nineteenth century discovery.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that our ideas about dirt often fail to correlate with our knowledge about viral and bacterial pathogens is significant. It indicates that what we perceive as impure and hence, threatening pollution, has little to do with our scientific knowledge of the causal mechanisms involved in the transmission of disease. This is not to deny that they frequently happen to coincide. Nonetheless, the examples just considered strongly suggest that the initial perception of impurity is not triggered by considerations of hygiene. We are not disgusted and try to avoid dirt and pollution *because* of any known physical threat, but because they threaten to violate boundaries and distinctions within, or underlying, the classificatory system that

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<sup>28</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 35.

allows us order our environment. Our association of purity or cleanliness with the accepted cognitive order, on the one hand, and impurity and danger with disarray and ambiguity, on the other, thus appears to be of a symbolic nature.<sup>29</sup>

By providing an account of the link between “reactions of impurity” and cognitive opacity consistent with empirical anthropological data, Douglas’ account offers an analytic framework that should allow us to discern whether *Zarathustra*’s disturbing quality is, indeed, correlated with textual violations of assumptions grounding the Western world view. Her theory has the additional virtue of allowing us to explain why readers’ negative emotional responses to the text tend to defy rational analysis. If cultural classificatory schemes are not themselves founded on rational principles, it would follow that negative reactions to violation(s) of their supporting assumptions cannot be rationalized by appealing to accepted categories of reason. A disgusted response to the hair in the soup, for instance, is not amenable to rational justification if the hair’s presence in the soup violates boundaries that support and maintain the framework that validates rational explanations in the first place. To make sense of the phenomenon, we would require a non-trivial explanation as to why we *should* consider the hair in the soup repulsive.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 35.

<sup>30</sup>By non-trivial I mean explanations other than “because hair belongs on people’s heads,” which begs the question.

Even if a satisfactory explanation were available upon reflection, however, it would remain unclear what triggers “reactions of impurity” in the first place. But with Douglas’ model at our disposal, we can locate their probable source. Given that their immediate nature, as well as the lack of rational justification for their occurrence, rule out the possibility that disturbed reactions to violations of culturally established categories are the result of conscious deliberation, we can conclude that these types of responses are generated at a prior stage. As Douglas notes,

it is generally agreed that all our impressions are schematically determined from the start. As perceivers we select from all the stimuli falling on our senses only those which interest us, and our interests are governed by a pattern-making tendency . . . . In perceiving we are building, taking in some cues and rejecting others. The most acceptable cues are those which fit most easily into the pattern that is being built up.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, “as time goes on and experiences pile up, we make a greater and greater investment in our system of labels” or classificatory schemes. Eventually, our sense of well-being, and ability successfully to negotiate and makes sense of our environment, comes to depend on the integrity of the framework of categories that structures our perceptions.

Nietzsche, too, thinks that the order and regularities we perceive in the world are due to our imposition of certain structures: “We have arranged for ourselves a world in which we can live—by positing bodies, lines, planes, causes and effects,

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<sup>31</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 36.

motion and rest, form and content; without these articles of faith nobody could endure life” (GS 121). He hastens to add, “But that does not prove them. Life is no argument. The conditions of life might include error.” Moreover, he ascribes our ancestors’ evolutionary success to their disposition to equivocate, to “filter out” nuance, gradation, and change, which in turn allowed them to perceive the world as ordered.<sup>32</sup>

The fact that Nietzsche recognizes a correlation between our ability to perceive the world as ordered and relatively predictable and our physical and emotional well-being is significant. His observation of this relationship, which corresponds with the results of Douglas’ study, increases the likelihood that his authorial strategy in *Zarathustra* is amenable to analysis by means of Douglas’ study. But we do not have to rely on inference alone to determine that Nietzsche is aware of the reverse side of the “equation” in order to suspect that *Zarathustra* exploits the correlation between cognitive disarray and consternation in an attempt to elicit the desired response from the reader.

The famous “madman” passage of *The Gay Science* (which is considered in detail in Chapter 3) illustrates the existential consequences of God’s death (GS 125).

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<sup>32</sup>Nietzsche writes: “Those, for example, who did not know how to find often enough what is ‘equal’ as regards both nourishment and hostile animals . . . were favored with a lesser probability of survival than those who guessed immediately upon encountering similar circumstances that they must be equal” (GS, 111).

According to the “madman,” the loss of foundation for the Western world view due to our having “murdered” God, that is, having ceased to believe in him, is equivalent to our having drunk “up the sea . . . wipe[d] away the entire horizon” and “unchained this earth from its sun” (GS 125). As a result, we no longer know where the earth is moving, or where we are moving along with it. “Are we not plunging continually?” he laments, “Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?” Of particular relevance in the current context, however, is that he connects the cognitive disarray caused by God’s death with emotional despair. Taking for granted that the absence of order and structure is emotionally devastating, he asks, “How shall we comfort ourselves . . . what festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?” (GS 125).

There is little question that Nietzsche considers the prospect of nihilism, the belief that without a transcendent source of values and structure our empirical existence lacks meaning and purpose, the most serious threat to modern culture. Yet in order to confront and, if possible, overcome the conditions that lead to widespread despair and the degeneration of humankind, the problem of nihilism must first be recognized. And while it is easy to grasp the implications of God’s death on an intellectual level, it is quite another matter to integrate them into the network of beliefs that determine our practical orientation toward the world and life. The above discussed “reactions of impurity” are cases in point. The fact that we tend

react with aversion to violations of accepted classificatory schemes shows that theoretical awareness of a given state of affairs (that the hair in the soup is harmless) does not automatically modify our cognitive habits. We may well be intellectually aware of the fact that God's death uproots established boundaries and distinctions, and at the same time, continue to rely upon them. As we will see in the coming chapters, habit, lack of a viable alternative, and emotional attachment to familiar modes of relating to our environment are responsible for this lack of integration between our explicit, theoretical beliefs and practical orientation.

As a result, the existential implications of God's death may go unnoticed while we continue implicitly to subscribe to the values and ideals embedded within traditional categories. The specific danger, according to Nietzsche, is that continued reliance on transcendent ideals without the positive benefits provided by belief in God will slowly erode our capacity to lead meaningful and worthwhile empirical lives. For instance, if we do not expect to be compensated for unjustified suffering while retaining the belief that its occurrence is objectionable, then it makes sense to avoid situations that would put us at risk of injury. But if risk avoidance and minimization of suffering become our highest good, we are likely to miss out on a broad range of potentially valuable experiences and events, become disengaged and apathetic, and eventually, incapable of tolerating the conditions of empirical

existence.<sup>33</sup>

It seems clear that if we cannot recognize the implications of God's death on an existential level we cannot confront nihilism in a potentially constructive manner. Given Nietzsche's concern, moreover, that the degeneration of the human race will eventually render individuals incapable of confronting nihilism, it stands to reason that he should attempt to convey to his readers the sense of despair and aimlessness he thinks necessary to grasp the problem. At the risk of redundancy, it is important to keep in mind that recognizing the implications of God's death on a theoretical or intellectual level alone does not put us into a position to confront the problem of nihilism. The absence of customary distinctions and boundaries, or their violation, as we have seen above, makes themselves known at a pre-cognitive stage and are best described as interference with our cognitive habits, which tends to evoke "reactions of impurity" in that order and predictability symbolize purity and hence, safety, whereas violations of habitual patterns signify danger.

In the chapters to follow, I make use of Douglas' theory to show that *Zarathustra* strategically violates certain foundational assumptions of the traditional Western cognitive scheme. The purpose of its transgressions against boundaries and distinctions that perpetuate the established moral and cognitive order, I argue, is to

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<sup>33</sup>The connection between subscription to traditional ideals and degeneration will receive more attention as we consider *Zarathustra*'s "last man" speech in Chapter 4.

allow readers to experience the existential repercussions of God's death as applied on a textual level. Practical implementation of the insight that cultural cognitive schemes and the values they embody are ungrounded has the further advantage of being able to "communicate" the problem on a level not directly responsive to reason. Since "reactions of impurity," such as confusion, revulsion, a sense of dread, etc., are correlated with violations of "legitimate" boundaries, the absence of which also characterizes the state of affairs following God's death, an applied demonstration of the existential implications of God's absence should generate a relevantly similar response. By implementing the ontological consequences of God's demise on a textual level, therefore, *Zarathustra* shows their existential repercussions in two senses: first, by exemplifying them and second, by enabling (or forcing) the reader to experience the sense of confusion and despair Nietzsche deems appropriate to the circumstances.

The reader's disturbed response to the text is thus a sign that one or more of the casual assumptions and expectations that characterize her orientation toward life have been violated. Assuming that most readers who persist in engaging *Zarathustra* in principle agree with the protagonist's observation, occurring early in the narrative, that "God is dead," their negative emotional reactions are indicative of a conflict between their explicit or conscious beliefs and the set of implicit presuppositions that determines how they do in fact relate to their environment on a

daily basis. Now whether most readers ever become aware of this incompatibility is an open question. If they do, then their own disturbed reactions to the text can be employed as a “nihilism detection device” that might allow them to launch a deliberate and conscious effort to modify their habits such that their explicit and implicit beliefs are rendered consistent. But even if they do not recognize the internal conflict, they may nevertheless come to appreciate *Zarathustra* in time, which in turn would be a sign that their nihilistic tendencies are no longer operative.

This possibility does not lie outside of the realm of possibilities for Nietzsche. As he tells us in *The Gay Science*,

*One must learn to love*—This is what happens to us in music: First one has to *learn to hear* a figure and melody at all . . . . Then it requires some exertion and good will to *tolerate* it in spite of its strangeness . . . . Finally, there comes a moment when we are *used* to it, when we wait for it, when we sense that we should miss it if it were missing; and now it continues to compel and enchant us relentlessly . . . .

But that is what happens to us not only in music. That is how we have *learned to love* all things that we now love. In the end we are always rewarded for our good will, our patience, fairmindedness and gentleness with what is strange . . . . That is its *thanks* for our hospitality (GS 334).

The latter path to modifying our orientation actually would be more in keeping with Nietzsche’s reservations about the idealization of reason. But either way, if *Zarathustra* is instrumental in putting readers into a position that allows them to confront and deal constructively with the existential crisis initiated by God’s death, it would be a great present, indeed.

Before we begin our analysis of *Zarathustra*, it will be helpful to have a more specific conception of the symbolic structures that underlie, and are expressed within, cultural cognitive schemes. This will give us a better idea as to where we might discover the types of violations responsible for *Zarathustra*'s disturbing and confusing character. According to Douglas, whose comparison of classificatory systems involves various types of cultures (primitive and more advanced), the basic symbolic structures that gives rise to more culture-specific interpretations are relatively uniform across cultures. Differences, by and large, "are only a matter of detail."<sup>34</sup> At a very basic level, Douglas' study shows, internal and external distinctions and boundaries are based on the symbolism of the body.<sup>35</sup> As regards internal boundaries, the head, which is associated with intellectual processes, represents the purest part, and is therefore to be distinguished and kept separate from the lower parts of the body. The lower regions of the body, commonly associated with procreative and digestive functions, are potentially more polluting because those processes are not ordinarily (though there are exceptions) subject to rational control.

The analogy between divisions of the parts of the body and ideas regarding

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<sup>34</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 35.

<sup>35</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 125.

proper social order seems obvious.<sup>36</sup> It suggests a hierarchy that places individuals engaged in intellectual pursuits at the top, those engaged in manual labor, but not involved in food preparation or the removal of waste, in the middle, and those whose status, gender, or occupation requires contact with polluting objects, at the bottom. In addition, the analogy implies that only those at the top of the social hierarchy are authorized to speak on matters of classification and order. This explains why Zarathustra's authoritative stance may be perceived as threatening.

As for external boundaries, the analogy with the body suggests that anything that has once transgressed its boundaries is of highly questionable status.<sup>37</sup> Just as all bodily waste products, fluids, and pieces of hair, nails or skin become objectionable once they have transgressed the physical boundaries of the body, or have been rendered incomplete in terms of categorical affiliation, so do members of the social body. Venturing beyond the confines of organized society is dangerous to the individual him- or herself because that person becomes exposed to disorder in the sense that the area beyond the social boundary lacks structure. It is potentially

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<sup>36</sup>Plato's *Republic* explicitly draws this type of analogy between the parts of the soul—the rational, spirited, and appetitive—and the justly ordered city, which consists of the ruling class (the philosopher kings), who live in isolation from, and are in charge of, the warrior class (in the middle), and the merchant class (which engages in “polluting” behavior) at the bottom.

Plato, *Republic*, ed. C.D.C. Reeve, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992) 434d-444c.

<sup>37</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 123.

“unlimited . . . because no pattern has been realised in it.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, individuals who have transgressed the external boundaries of society only to return are regarded as highly threatening because “the most dangerous pollution,” again based on the symbolism of the body, “is for anything which has once emerged [to gain] re-entry.”<sup>39</sup> In addition to the perils associated with transgressions against internal and external boundaries, there “is danger in the margins of the lines.” “Internal contradiction” poses a threat, as do objects, “substances,” and beings that are potentially polluting in virtue of their ambiguity, categorical incompleteness, interstitiality, formlessness, etc.

Obviously, *Zarathustra* cannot violate all of these boundaries and distinctions, or even some of them all of the time, without becoming utterly incoherent. But that seems perfectly in order. Given that Nietzsche’s major concern is the perpetuation of nihilistic ideals, it should suffice to undermine the assumptions that serve to maintain them. Aside from being superfluous and more than likely counterproductive, it is not his aim to destroy the entire Western framework of categories. As we have seen, he is well aware of the fact that without some means to order or structure our impressions, we would be unable to manage, or as he puts it, to “endure life” (GS 121). This narrows the list of possible targets, among which we

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<sup>38</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 94.

<sup>39</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 123.

might expect the above mentioned association between suffering and vice, the idealization of reason, and perhaps most importantly, the Christian-Platonic tradition's absolutism, our acceptance of which forestalls the possibility of alternative conceptions of human flourishing.

Although Nietzsche could not have known about Douglas' theory, given that it was not developed until her 1960s study, there is indication that he was aware of the connection between cognitive clarity and our mental and physical well-being, judging by the previously quoted passages from *The Gay Science* (121 & 125). Now this may not be sufficient to convince us that he deliberately manipulated the formal elements of *Zarathustra* in an effort to elicit the type of response that allows readers to experience the existential consequences of God's death first hand. He may, for all we know, simply have tried to deal with the problem of nihilism on a practical, applied level, and produced the disturbing effect incidentally. It is possible. There is no "hard" evidence to the contrary. All we can do is point to Nietzsche's own commentary regarding *Zarathustra's* intended effect, and examine his other works for clues.

Beyond that, there is only one other piece of "circumstantial" evidence in favor of the view that Nietzsche may have plotted a strategic assault against the formal boundaries that support the traditional view. James Trilling, in his study of ornament in modern aesthetics, argues that the idea that monstrosity and the

breakdown of conceptual categories are related became thematic in the modern period of Western history. “Monstrosity,” he writes, “is the image or embodiment of transformation. It combines features of two or more types of beings in a single entity, which we call a monster.”<sup>40</sup> What Trilling describes as monstrosity is what Douglas terms “categorical interstitiality,” which refers to a being or object that simultaneously belongs to two or more cognitive categories, such as a werewolf, for instance, because it is both human and wolf. If the idea that the lack of clear boundaries is related to monstrosity became thematic in modern aesthetics, there is a good chance that Nietzsche may have been aware of it, and hence, deliberately violated accepted form.

In the end, we cannot be certain about Nietzsche’s intent to employ the strategy suggested by Douglas and Trilling’s analyses. We can, however, make use of the theory in order to determine whether transgressions against Western cognitive categories are, indeed, the source of *Zarathustra*’s opacity and its unsettling quality. This, in turn, will allow us to make some headway in explaining why Nietzsche’s favorite work remains recalcitrant to rational analysis and why scholars in the field might be reluctant to discuss it, given that the philosophic community on the whole continues to take the validity of traditional categories of reason for granted. In

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<sup>40</sup>James Trilling, *Ornament: A Modern Perspective* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003) 153.

addition, insight into *Zarathustra's* structure or form will allow for future discussion of the book's development and resolution, or lack thereof, which has for far been minimal, as Pippin has noted. I do not think, however, this work is amenable to the construction of a standard reading insofar as its *Aussagekraft* (or what it tells the reader) depends on the specific set of assumptions each individual brings to it. The reasons for this will become clearer in the coming chapters. And lastly, by indicating a potentially fruitful approach to this enigmatic text, we will be able to specify *Zarathustra's* status in relation to Nietzsche's other works.

In the following chapters, therefore, I use Douglas' theory as a guideline for detecting textual transgressions against accepted cognitive and symbolic boundaries that serve to maintain the absolute authority of the Western world view and its ideals. Chapters 2-5 provide a detailed analysis of violations that occur within the relatively brief set of passages that constitute the Prologue. In addition to determining which of the established assumptions of the Christian-Platonic tradition are thereby attacked or called into question, I indicate their probable function in the context of the narrative and/or *Zarathustra's* speeches. Chapters 6 and 7 show that the pattern of transgression observed in the Prologue continues to structure the remainder of the work, though the intervals between individual violations is greatly increased, as I have already mentioned. Chapter 6 deals with Parts I and II while Chapter 7 examines Parts III and IV. I conclude that *Zarathustra* challenges its

readers to confront nihilism by re-assessing their priorities based on their actual empirical experiences because they constitute the primary source of value and significance following God's death. Let us then turn to the task of examining *Zarathustra's* opening passages.

## Chapter 2

### Zarathustra the Godless

“Holiness is the attribute of Godhead. Its root means ‘set apart’.”<sup>41</sup> With this definition in mind, “the last pope,” presumably the highest human authority in matters pertaining to the Christian faith, appears to have good cause to assert that the protagonist, Zarathustra, is “the most pious of all those who do not believe in God” (Z, IV, 6). From the outset, *Zarathustra’s* setting and narrative signal the work’s opposition to distinctions fundamental to the Christian-Socratic world view by transgressing against the underlying symbolic boundary between order and chaos as outlined by Douglas. Zarathustra, we learn in the course of the first paragraph, has spent ten years prior to the commencement of the current narrative in solitude on a mountain (Z, Prologue, 1). The fact that *Zarathustra’s* opening scene places the protagonist beyond the limits and structure of society indicates that the work is motivated by considerations that do not respect the established order. But *Zarathustra/Zarathustra’s* projected non-conformity is neither due to ignorance nor

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<sup>41</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 49. Specifically, “holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination, and order” (53). Because the precepts essential to the creation of order are held to be efficacious in the Old Testament, working through blessings and curses, “observing them draws down prosperity, infringing them brings danger,” unleashing “barrenness, pestilence,” and “confusion” (50).

merely incidental. The protagonist, we are told, had been a member of organized society before leaving his home there to go into solitude at age thirty. This means that he was familiar with, and subject to, the laws, rules, and conventions of organized society for an extended period of time. His initial departure, moreover, which seems to have been voluntary, appears to have been occasioned by his experience of the predominant social conditions in general. Since Zarathustra did not simply move to another community, his choice of solitude suggests that he rejected not only the injunctions implicit in the conventions of a particular community, but the terms of the culturally predominant cognitive scheme that authorizes and informs the priorities and values of Western society as a whole.

This inference, I think, is confirmed by the fact that the pivotal events of Zarathustra's personal history share a number of contingent similarities with the narrative history of the protagonist of the New Testament, Jesus Christ. *Zarathustra* thereby establishes reference to the Bible, clearly a culturally central text, only to overturn the significance of transgressions committed against the divine order. The fact that Zarathustra happens to have been thirty years old when he went into solitude is quite evidently an allusion to Jesus Christ, who, according to the New Testament narrative, left human society to go into the desert at the same age.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Bernd Magnus et al. claim that *Zarathustra* is the antitext to the Bible, Nietzsche's "gospel to end all gospels (including itself)." Bernd Magnus, Stanley Stewart, and Jean-Pierre Mileur, *Nietzsche's Case: Philosophy as/and Literature* (New

Unlike Jesus, however, whose forty day journey into the desert is a dangerous, agonizing ordeal during which he is tempted by the devil, Zarathustra thoroughly “enjoyed his spirit and his solitude, and for ten years did not tire of it” (Z, Prologue, 1). The fact that Christ’s greatest danger—ambiguity, indistinctness, in short, the absence of holiness in the above sense symbolized by the devil<sup>43</sup>—is a source of nourishment and rejuvenation for Zarathustra constitutes one such subversion of a central biblical theme. It indicates that Zarathustra’s transgression against social boundaries challenges not only the established human order, but, by modifying, and hence, substantially altering the significance of the transgression theme depicted in Scripture, the authority of the sacred foundational text that legitimizes and confers normative force on the former. In other words, *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra does not merely intend to challenge specific lines of interpretation within the culturally predominant cognitive scheme, but its foundational beliefs and assumptions.

Another theme common to the narrative history of the two protagonists is that

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York: Routledge, 1993) 95.

<sup>43</sup>Holiness, according to the definition given above, is aligned with maintaining proper order. The significance of the narrative of Christ’s journey into the desert thus seems to be that transgression of the boundary between order and chaos, structure and non-structure, being and non-being, symbolized by the desert, is equivalent to separation from God. This is highly dangerous in that it exposes the transgressor to the ultimate source of evil represented by the devil.

both eventually rejoin human society and civilization in order to spread their revolutionary gospels. Jesus' teachings, however, while subversive of the established human order, are ultimately sanctioned by divine authority whereas Zarathustra's "gospel" transgresses against both. Having acquired much wisdom during his ten years of solitude, "like a bee that has gathered too much honey," Zarathustra now feels compelled to share his insight with others. Contrary to the expectation raised by his two-fold transgression against the established order, however, he seems oblivious to the potential dangers of preaching his revolutionary gospel. Instead, he considers his insight a "gift," which he plans to "give away and distribute, until the wise among men find joy once again in their folly, and the poor in their riches" (Z, Prologue, 1&2). This disregard for the dangerous quality of his gift, whether deliberate or not, renders Zarathustra a danger to himself and to others despite the apparent innocence and purity of his intent. Since his "gift" originates from an unholy source, a place beyond the order and structure of society, his apparently wholehearted endorsement of, and intent to distribute, what amounts to illegitimate or forbidden knowledge is dangerous. It constitutes a threat both to the established order, as well as to Zarathustra himself insofar as he is likely to incur the wrath of those who have an interest in maintaining this order.

But Zarathustra is a danger to the established social order not only in virtue of the "gift" he brings. He also constitutes a threat in light of the fact that he intends

to re-enter the social body from which he had once become separated. This, as Douglas explains, constitutes one of the most dangerous forms of social pollution insofar as the boundaries of society are modeled largely on the symbolism of the human body. For that reason, his intent to cross its external boundary for a second time, but in the opposite direction, is symbolically equivalent to re-admitting bodily substances or fluids to the system from which they have previously emerged.<sup>44</sup> So just as the idea of licking up spittle, blood, or in the worst case, consuming feces or urine, is likely to evoke pollution behavior, such as disgust and revulsion, the idea of a previously separated member of society rejoining the social body might cause the reader to experience a sense of apprehension and unease. Although this is not presently an issue since we have not yet considered the narrative, where Zarathustra carries out his intent, I think it is worth keeping in mind because it helps to explain how this text manages to undermine its readers' implicit expectations and sense of propriety.

So far, application of Douglas' framework to the first section of the Prologue has turned up some fairly specific subversions of Scriptural references that provide some indication in regard to the terms of the project Zarathustra is about to launch. He evidently plans, quite innocent in spirit, to deliver to humankind "glad tidings," although his message, paradoxically, is projected to challenge the very authority that

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<sup>44</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 123.

sanctioned the conception of order and purity that rendered the innocent sacrifice of the Great Redeemer efficacious, allowing it to mediate between the human and divine order. This suggests that the insight that motivates Zarathustra's desire to spread his "gospel" has an essentially different aim despite the fact that we know very little about the specific content of Zarathustra's insight and message, or about his motive for challenging the divine authority. Before turning to a consideration of the content of Zarathustra's message, however, I think it pays to examine the imagery used in this section, which, in conjunction with some narrative references, targets some of the foundational conceptions of the other culturally central text, namely, Plato's *Republic*.<sup>45</sup> Awareness of the grounding assumptions *Zarathustra* seeks to call into question will put us into a better position to deal with the frequently opaque content of Zarathustra's speeches.

The first reference to one of the guiding images of the Western philosophical tradition is, again, provided by *Zarathustra's* initial setting, which is strikingly similar to the imagery employed by Plato's allegory of the cave.<sup>46</sup> Zarathustra's ten years of solitude are spent in a cave high in the mountains, whose close proximity to the sun, as Kathleen Higgins argues, "symbolizes a rejection of the Platonic Myth's

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<sup>45</sup>Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Cambridge: Hackett, 1992).

<sup>46</sup>*Republic*, 514-515b.

opposition of Apollonian rationality and earthly existence.”<sup>47</sup> The theme of rejecting distinctions based on the Platonic model is further reinforced by the narrative. When Zarathustra emerges from his cave, having decided to leave his home in the mountains to share his insight, he addresses the sun: “You great star, what would your happiness be had you not those for whom you shine?” (Z, Prologue, 1). The sun is Plato’s symbol for the Form of the Good,<sup>48</sup> the transcendent source of the highest value, but Zarathustra speaks to it as if he and the sun had equal status, which signals a shift of authority from the transcendent to the human or earthly realm. His tone, as well as the fact that he speaks to it at all, suggest that Zarathustra intends to challenge the traditional notion that standards of truth and morality originate from another realm, above and beyond the human sphere of influence, and apart from human interests. It is implied, in other words, that interests and concerns grounded in the visible or earthly realm are capable of affecting or modifying the Good symbolized by the sun.

Furthermore, the content of Zarathustra’s words suggests that the sun’s powers and essential characteristics (symbolic and actual) are not inherently or necessarily valuable. If the sun’s happiness, as Zarathustra implies, depends on those “who [take] its overflow from [it],” then it is to be classified among the goods

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<sup>47</sup>*Nietzsche’s Zarathustra*, 74.

<sup>48</sup>Plato, *Republic*, Bk. VI, 508b-509a, Bk. VII, 517b-c.

to be valued for the sake of their effects, rather than among the highest goods—those to be valued for their own sake, as well as for their consequences.<sup>49</sup> It is also noteworthy that Zarathustra attributes to the sun human-like motives, and specifically, happiness. He thereby invokes a competing account of the good, namely Aristotle’s, according to whom happiness is a “human good.” Moreover, happiness is “that at which everything aims,” and for the sake of which all other actions are undertaken, that is, an intrinsic good.<sup>50</sup> As such, Plato’s conception of the Good is subjected to evaluation based on values inherent in the human or earthly realm. In addition to shifting priority from the transcendent to the empirical realm, the reference to Aristotle’s discussion of happiness sets up markers for his critique of Plato’s conception of the good, which constitutes the subject matter of the section following his definition of happiness. Zarathustra, as we will see shortly, implements the points of Aristotle’s critique on an imagistic level by anthropomorphizing Plato’s symbol of the Form of the Good further.

In another line of attack on Plato’s conception of the Good, Zarathustra makes it quite clear at the beginning of the narrative that the sun to which he speaks is not a fixed entity, transcendent and immutable, but subject to movement. It

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<sup>49</sup>Plato, *Republic*, Bk. II, 357a-358a.

<sup>50</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a-1094b5, ed. and trans. Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, in *Aristotle: Selections* (Cambridge: Hackett, 1995).

“climbs” up to Zarathustra’s cave in the morning and “must descend . . . in the evening when [it goes] behind the sea and still bring[s] light to the underworld” (Z, Prologue, 1). Moreover, Zarathustra refers to it as a “quiet *eye* that can look even upon an all-too-great happiness *without envy*” (emphasis mine). This characterization, in conjunction with the earlier reference to the sun’s overflow, is an allusion to the image that immediately precedes, and sets the stage for, the allegory of the cave: Plato’s famous sun analogy. Here, Socrates claims that the (human) eye “receives from the sun the power it has, just like an influx from an overflowing treasury.”<sup>51</sup> I think this reference, along with *Zarathustra’s* modifications, is worth exploring in some detail because it will help to clarify the motive, as well as the specific target, of its planned transgression against the Christian-Platonic tradition.

Initially, it seems notable that according to Socrates, the eye, “the most sunlike of the senses,” which represents the most sun-like part of the human soul, that is, the intellect, is characterized as a passive, receptive sense organ. Its ability to see (know) both the sun itself (the Good), and the things made visible by the sun’s overflow (Truth, Beauty, Virtue), is entirely dependent on the active, illuminating power of the sun. And since knowledge and vision depend entirely upon the receptive organs’ proper attunement with the active source, neither the eye nor the human soul can carry out their functions unless they are properly attuned to, or

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<sup>51</sup>*Republic*, 508b.

focused on, that which is illuminated by the Good or the sun, respectively.

Knowledge, on Plato's model, is thus a matter of subordination to the order imposed by the transcendent Form of the Good—a one way relation, issuing from the transcendent Good and terminating in the passive reception by the intellect. And because the form of the Good illuminates only its “offspring,”<sup>52</sup> it follows that anything not illuminated cannot produce knowledge.

Zarathustra's characterization of the sun as an eye, however, alters the dynamics, and by extension, the significance of Plato's analogy rather substantially. By projecting physical, receptive sense organs (the eye) onto the sun, which for Plato represents the active, value-positing principle, he suggests that Plato's conception of the Form of the Good, rather than having been divined in a purely receptive manner, reflects its creator's vision. The attribution of physical characteristics to the sun, first of all, “demotes” Plato's symbol of the Good to the spatio-temporal realm. But if the Good itself does not transcend space and time, then what it illuminates, its “offspring,” likewise cannot be timelessly eternal. Moreover, given that the sun-as-eye is located at a particular point in space at any given time, it is necessarily tied to a certain perspective; hence, it cannot be absolute. And if, as an eye, it must be focused in order to see, then what it renders visible by directing its gaze are those aspects of its object(s) that draw its attention and hence reflect the interests of the

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<sup>52</sup>*Republic*, 508b.

beholder. So rather than having offered a neutral and disinterested description of the Form of the Good, Zarathustra seems to suggest that Plato made himself the absolute standard of value, which apparently cannot look down upon alternative conceptions of the good without envy.<sup>53</sup>

But Zarathustra's modification of the sun analogy, I think, does more than accuse Plato of self-aggrandizement; nor does it simply offer an alternative to Plato's account of the Good. His modification, it seems, is targeted at a specific problem inherent in Plato's theory of the Forms, already pointed out by Aristotle, namely that the idea of "the Good itself" is at best unclear, and at worst, inconceivable.<sup>54</sup> This possibility, I think, becomes more compelling after a consideration of Aristotle's criticism, as does the force of Zarathustra's alterations of the analogy.

Specifically, Aristotle argues that since the term "good" refers to a vast number of different concepts, most of which have no elements in common, there cannot be a universal "good" that subsumes all of them. But because it is applied in various logical categories, i.e., to substances, qualities, relations, quantities, etc., it

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<sup>53</sup>Nietzsche makes a similar point in TI, where he sums up Plato's contribution to "The History of an Error" in his pronouncement, "I, Plato, *am* the truth." TI, "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable." Also in TI, "The Problem of Socrates," 4, Nietzsche writes: "I seek to comprehend what idiosyncrasy begot that Socratic equation of reason, virtue, and happiness: that most bizarre of all equations, which, moreover, is opposed to all the instincts of the earlier Greeks," an expression of "plebeian *ressentiment*," 7.

<sup>54</sup>*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1096a10-1097a10.

cannot be “single,” either.<sup>55</sup> Hence, it is not clear how one is to conceive of the Form of the Good, or the relation of a universal Form to the various things that participate in it. Next, Aristotle considers the possibility that the universal, or the “good-as-such” is subject to a different definition than the particular good, but finds that “the selfsame definition of ‘man’ applies to both ‘man-as-such’ and a particular man.”<sup>56</sup> Alternatively, if the definition or conception of the Good itself is so radically different from that which participates in it (presumably due to its transcendent nature) that it fails to encompass or define particular goods, then, as Aristotle puts it, “the Form will be pointless.”<sup>57</sup> “Nor, indeed,” he adds, “will the ‘good-as-such’ be more of a good because it is everlasting: after all, whiteness which lasts for a long time is no whiter than whiteness which lasts only for a day.”<sup>58</sup> So the fact that the Good itself is said to be timelessly eternal because it transcends the realm of becoming does not contribute to its perfection.

The most obvious way of rendering Plato’s “conception” of the Good meaningful, therefore, is to transport it out of the transcendent realm. In order to be conceptually sound it would have to stand in some specifiable relation to what it

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<sup>55</sup>*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1096a25.

<sup>56</sup>*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1096b.

<sup>57</sup>*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1096b20. This would be the case, Aristotle argues, even if the account is limited to things that are intrinsically good.

<sup>58</sup>*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1096b.

defines. This move from the transcendent to the spatio-temporal realm, I think, is illustrated by Zarathustra's projecting physical sense organs onto the sun, emphasizing that, as a physical object, it occupies a particular space. He also makes clear, however, that the sun's location continually changes during the course of the day. It "climbs" to his cave in the morning and "*must* descend to the depths . . . in the evening" (emphasis mine), which implies that the sun's subjection to the laws of space and time is in some sense necessary or compulsory. The reason the sun must be located in the realm it illuminates may be that the notion of a transcendent, absolute standard seems incoherent. As a result of its changed status, however, the Good can no longer "illuminate" more than those aspects of an object that participate in its form than are accessible from its current perspective at a given time. To some extent, this solves one of the problems Aristotle's criticism raises, namely that the term "good" has multiple meanings, many of which appear to be mutually exclusive. Because the sun-as-eye can only focus on one particular at a time, it is single in the sense that what counts as good is defined relative to the object in question (which is very close to Aristotle's own view, though Nietzsche would reject his teleological account).<sup>59</sup> The multiplicity of meanings of the term "good" could thus at least in

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<sup>59</sup>Nietzsche rejects teleological conceptions of the world on the grounds that they imply the possibility of a God's eye view. There is, he argues in TI, "The Four Great Errors," 8, "nothing which could judge, measure, compare, or sentence our being, for that would mean judging, measuring, comparing, or sentencing the whole. But there is nothing besides the whole."

part be attributed to the sun's changing perspective and focus.

At the same time, however, it remains unclear how a fixed, universal standard could generate mutually incompatible concepts. The only way one could even attempt to make sense of it would be to suppose, hypothetically, that the Good encompasses all of them at once. Aside from the fact that it would be questionable in what sense a standard that encompasses a variety of incompatible concepts at once could be called a universal, this option appears, again, incoherent. I think this becomes even more obvious when the problem is stated in terms of Plato's own analogy. Essentially, it would require the eye, which represents the rational part of the soul, to focus on all relevant aspects of every single thing that participates in the Form of the Good at once. But because the features in virtue of which various things (qualities, behaviors, events, objects, etc.) are called "good" differ from case to case, individual focal points would be widely scattered. And since it seems at least humanly impossible to focus on more than one point at a time, it appears that the goodness of the diversity of things in the earthly realm cannot be encompassed by a single fixed, universal standard—at least not from a human perspective. Of course, that might just mean, as Aristotle has pointed out, that nothing is good in the sense in which the Form is considered good, but such a concession would render the Form superfluous. And since Plato does, indeed, posit the existence of the Good itself, as well as various types of subordinate goods, such as the Form of Virtue, Beauty, and

Truth, whose respective extensions (the objects they qualify) may not have any features in common, it seems that Plato himself could not have had a coherent conception of a Form that encompasses all of them.<sup>60</sup> Hence, his conception of the Good must be subordinate to some other standards or interests, which leads back to the conclusion that the sun's happiness, or the value of Plato's conception of the Good, depends on those for whom it shines.

Zarathustra's characterization of the sun as an eye that occupies particular spatio-temporal locations can thus be read as an illustration of the limitations necessary to render Plato's account of the Good comprehensible from a human perspective. Since this allows the reader to adopt Plato's point of view to some extent,<sup>61</sup> Zarathustra's modification of the sun analogy *shows*, in the sense of letting the reader see for him- or herself, that accepting Plato's account cannot be justified on rational grounds. If it is true that value standards are incoherent as fixed, transcendent universals, then accepting any sort of "right answer" account, including Plato's, as authoritative with respect to this-worldly affairs would require a blind leap of faith in two respects. First, since privileging Plato's account over alternative

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<sup>60</sup>The problem seems to be particularly evident with reference to truth. If truth is defined as a matching relation between certain beliefs and the form of truth, then individual true beliefs may not share any characteristics. As such, the notion of a form that subsumes a set of mutually distinct items appears fundamentally flawed.

<sup>61</sup>Plato, though perhaps extra-ordinarily creative and intelligent, was still human, and hence, subject to the same cognitive limitations as other human beings.

conceptions of the good, other things being equal, is justifiable only on the assumption that Plato somehow transcended the limitations of human cognition, one would simply have to take him at his word that he did, indeed, have such privileged access. Second, because anyone who has to accept his word as justification (ordinary humans) presumably cannot form a coherent conception of transcendent, absolute principles and by extension, their relation to this-worldly order, it is unclear how the first belief could have any meaningful content.

The problem with Plato's ontology is that attributes the highest value to rational insight, making it a precondition of happiness and virtue. But as Zarathustra's modification of the analogy shows, acceptance of its authority and hence its priorities, is a matter of faith. One must simply take Plato at his word without any justification, thereby violating the very precepts upon which his world view is based. This should give pause, especially to the reader who is tempted to justify his or her rejection of the Christian world view on similar grounds.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, Zarathustra's main concern is not so much to reveal the hypocrisy of Plato's advocacy of an incoherent and unattainable ideal for its own sake, but to show that unquestioning submission to its authority blinds us to the possibility that our lives may be more satisfying and worthwhile without it. More to the point, if

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<sup>62</sup>If the reader rejects the authority of the Christian world view because s/he is unable or unwilling to allow the value of his or her existence to depend on faith in an indemonstrable God, then she should reject the Platonic world view for the same reason.

happiness is unattainable on the Platonic model due to its dependence on an incoherent and unjustifiable ideal, then it is also beyond the grasp of the predominant Western cognitive scheme insofar as the latter shares its belief in a rational world order and hence, continues to embody the same set of ideals. In other words, as long as the conditions that would allow for the imposition and discernment of rational order (in an absolute sense) are valued more highly than the conditions that characterize our actual existence, acceptance of the authority of the established order implicitly leads us to subscribe to an unattainable conception of the Good. But such faith, as Zarathustra will point out during his first public speech following his descent from the mountain, “is now the most dreadful thing” because it means “to esteem the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth” (Z, Prologue, 3).<sup>63</sup>

The projected aim of *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra’s transgressions against the established order, therefore, as its modifications of scriptural themes and of the guiding images of Plato’s theory suggest, is to deflate the authority of the culturally

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<sup>63</sup>It seems worth noting here that Zarathustra, as will soon become clear explicitly, is not opposed to faith *per se*, but only to faith in the sorts of ideals that deprive our empirical existence of value and meaning. It is also notable that the sentiment expressed here, though stated in more dramatic terms, is quite similar to the conclusion Aristotle draws from his discussion of Plato’s theory: “assuming that there is some single good which different things possess in common, or that there exists a good absolutely in itself and by itself, it is evidently something which cannot be realized in action or attained by man. But the good which we are now seeking must be attainable.” *Ethics*, 13.

predominant cognitive scheme by undermining the credibility of its foundational assumptions. The point of doing so, it appears, is to put the reader into a position to recognize the harm of continuing to worship the values and ideals of the Christian-Platonic world view embodied in the framework of Western cognitive categories. Since those ideals lose their power to bestow meaning and purpose on our empirical existence in proportion with the loss of faith in their foundational conceptions, they become harmful insofar as they lead to the devaluation of our empirical existence without any positive benefit. This situation, whether explicitly recognized or hidden below the surface, is what Nietzsche defines as nihilism, a state of affairs in which “*the highest values devalue themselves,*” leaving human existence without meaning, purpose, or goal.<sup>64</sup>

But all of this, it seems, is not exactly news to the reader who is already somewhat familiar with the central themes of Nietzsche’s thought. Nietzsche states his critique of the Western tradition clearly enough elsewhere in his writings; so why force the reader to go through the fairly painstaking process of considering various possible interpretations of the imagery in order to learn something he or she already knows? What, in other words, would be the purpose of making the reader invest time and effort in this whole exercise only to see for herself what she may not have

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<sup>64</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufman, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968) 1; hereafter referred to as WP, followed by the section number.

questioned in the first place? Although it is conceivable that Nietzsche may just be setting the stage for Zarathustra's upcoming journey, that supposition would immediately raise a number of additional questions. Specifically, it would remain unclear why he did not simply state the problem that motivates Zarathustra's resolve to bring his gift of insight to humankind in a more straightforward manner. Nor would it shed any light on the purpose of employing imagery and allusion to make his point or, for that matter, of his reasons for choosing to communicate a philosophical problem by way of what is now clearly recognizable as a fictional work.

There are, it seems to me, a number of possible reasons for Nietzsche's choice to communicate the critique of the Christian-Platonic world view in just this manner. The most obvious of these has to do with the problem of epistemic justification. Clearly, mere assertion of one's view does not make it true—no matter how many times it is iterated. So even though he could assert in a fairly straightforward manner that Plato's theory of the Forms or the Christian notion of a perfect God lack coherence, and that their ideals have become harmful, the claim itself would remain unjustified. But if the text enables its readers somehow to recognize these problems for themselves, the issue of Nietzsche's authority becomes moot. This leads to the second and related reason for choosing to cause the reader a considerable amount of inconvenience in order to *show* his point: even if

Nietzsche/Zarathustra were to offer a valid argument for this assertion, its force would depend on acceptance of the very ideals it aims to reject. In other words, for rational justification to suffice in establishing the soundness of Nietzsche/Zarathustra's assertion, one would have to commit to accepting the authority of reason, a grounding assumptions of the Platonic world view. And since this is precisely the target of Nietzsche's critique, making use of the framework of rational justification and argument would undermine his project by exposing his assertions to the problem of self-reference.

Nonetheless, while epistemic considerations are almost certainly an issue, and might even offer an adequate explanation as to why Nietzsche thought it necessary to make the reader reconstruct the basic problem, I think that his more pressing concern in *Zarathustra* is to select, and to some extent create, the kind of reader who may eventually be able to move beyond nihilism.<sup>65</sup> To that end, the reader must be made to *see*, that is, to experience the demise of traditional Western ideals as problematic in the course of attempting to make sense of *Zarathustra*. Although its subversions of guiding images and themes of the foundational texts of Western culture and tradition in the opening section should, theoretically speaking, put the reader on notice, translating even an ideal intellectual grasp of the problem

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<sup>65</sup>I take this to be at least partly a self-selective process, given that reading is a reciprocal endeavor that depends as much on the individual attitudes, responses, and mental habits of the reader as it does on the linguistic cues provided by the written work.

into practice is another matter entirely. Since the culturally predominant cognitive framework remains *the* standard for imposing order on environmental and verbal cues, solidified by unconscious habit and constant social reinforcement, it may well be expected that many readers would continue to search for a message of redemption that is ultimately inconsistent with their explicit recognition of the consequences of God's death. In other words, the conservative bias built into any culturally predominant categorical framework provides Nietzsche with the means to entice the reader inadvertently to set him- or herself up for failure.<sup>66</sup> And because this failure is largely self-generated, one should not be too surprised if the reader who comes to recognize that his or her expectations and mental habits implicitly affirm the ideals of the Christian-Platonic world view (perpetuated by the predominant Western cognitive scheme) should feel "profoundly wounded."

Now one might be struck by the seemingly odd suggestion that Nietzsche's target audience should consist of readers who are flawed insofar as their propensity to become entrapped in the kinds of expectations that undermine their explicit

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<sup>66</sup>The conservative bias built into any widely shared cognitive framework is in part due to the fact we tend to develop an interest in maintaining the structure that enables us to make sense of our environment on a consistent basis. Given that proper discernment of patterns and ordered relations is necessary to succeed in a social setting, it seems only natural that we should become invested in the system that enables us to achieve our goals and satisfy our interests. Moreover, since changing or eliminating categories would require widespread agreement among precisely those individuals most biased in favor of maintaining the status quo, the cultural elite, conservation of the predominant framework is likely to be the prevailing tendency.

beliefs, again and again, in the process of attempting to make sense of this book may be an essential component of the insight *Zarathustra* aims to convey. The ideal reader, one might suppose to the contrary, is the reader who is not tripped up by the sorts of beliefs or expectation that would commit her to some of the implicit foundational assumptions, and hence, the ideals of the explicitly rejected world view. But that would be to assume that it is in principle possible to make sense of experience, as well as books, without presupposition, which seems to me highly implausible. Specifically, it seems unavoidable to assume, tentatively at least, that the concepts or words we use to think and speak properly label the objects or ideas to which they refer; this alone implies some sort of commitment, however weak or provisional, to a certain set of ordered relations. But since it is clearly not the case that the word “bird,” for example, must refer to a bird—we could label birds with a different term entirely—what counts as proper or appropriate use of terminology is ultimately arbitrary. The same considerations apply, of course, to every other term in our language. And for that reason, our entire linguistic system is subject to the same criticism. Nonetheless, any attempt to generate meaningful propositions entails the assumption that the terms and concepts used properly refer to their objects, which in turn belongs to a certain cognitive category, thereby specifying its relations to other concepts.

Even if it were possible to order our experiences and sense perceptions

without these kinds of presuppositions, this conception of the ideal reader would nevertheless fail to avoid the trappings of the Socratic world view. It would, in effect, affirm the Socratic ideal, which Nietzsche diagnoses as a symptom of decline and degeneration, because it demands “that one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark appetites with a permanent daylight—the daylight of reason. One must be clever, clear, bright at any price: any concession to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads *downward*.”<sup>67</sup> But as I have argued in the previous chapter, *Zarathustra* offers an empirical refutation of the notion that reason is in charge of emotion and unconscious habit by generating an emotional response that often does not fit the reader’s explicit belief scheme. Moreover, to suppose that the ideal reader is one who is perfectly aware of all of his or her assumptions is to concede the point that conscious, rational insight is inherently preferable to other modes of ordering experience—aesthetically perhaps, or based on emotion. Since we do not have epistemic access to any transcendent ordering principle, however, or for that matter, to our unconscious habits and instincts, this assumption may once again amount to positing an unjustifiable and unattainable ideal.

Hence, if Nietzsche/Zarathustra have in mind any kind of conversion project, it must be to a world view that recognizes the following predicament resulting from God’s death: that we can neither do without some culturally shared framework of

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<sup>67</sup>TI, “The Problem of Socrates,” 10.

conceptual categories, nor believe in its capacity to represent reality in any ultimate sense. One cannot, it seems to me, make sense of one's perceptions and/or thoughts while at the same time subjecting the very means of imposing order to radical doubt. That does not mean, of course, that one cannot step back, once sense has been made of a situation, to examine some of the conditions and assumptions necessary for the imposition of order. But if it is true that our sense of order is deeply entrenched in habit, and depends on implicit recognition of the symbolic boundaries between order and chaos, then any deliberate effort to examine the conditions of cognitive order is limited to those more or less readily accessible by the conscious intellect. Moreover, since such inquiry into the conditions of cognitive order is itself subject to certain assumptions, as shown by Descartes' attempt to recover from his method of radical doubt, the process of examination would soon hit a dead end.

The way *Zarathustra* attempts to raise awareness to this predicament, by making the reader experience it directly, is to cause the reader's explicit and implicit sets of beliefs regarding cognitive order to come into conflict. Without this conflict, it seems, one would be faced with a situation in which one is either stuck with the culturally dominant framework of cognitive categories, accepting them at least for the time being, or with rejecting the possibility of making sense of oneself and one's environment altogether. Neither alternative, however, is an acceptable mode of conducting one's life—the former because it implicitly validates the Christian-

Platonic evaluative scheme, the latter because it succumbs to radical skepticism and doubt. Both are nihilistic insofar as their absolutist tendencies lead us to reject the value of our empirical existence.

Given the extreme difficulty of becoming aware of the entirety of one's casual, implicit commitments or "pieties,"<sup>68</sup> Zarathustra's pronouncement before descending from the mountain, that he, like the sun, must go under to "bring light to the underworld" is significant (Z, Prologue, 1). It projects his intent to uncover this "underworld" of implicit belief structures—a realm popularly characterized by perpetual darkness—by shedding light on the essential conflict between explicit recognition of God's death and continued submission to the authority of the traditional cognitive scheme that perpetuates Christian-Platonic ideals. In addition to alluding to Christ's mission to bring light to the world, this reference to the underworld may be intended as a criticism of the Western tradition's tendency to over-emphasize, or place undue value on, conscious, rational insight, which Nietzsche considers a surface phenomenon.<sup>69</sup> If it is true that conscious, rational

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<sup>68</sup>Kenneth Burke, in *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (California: Hermes Publications, 1954), 74, defines piety simply as our "sense of what properly goes with what," or alternatively, as "a schema of orientation" (76). More significant in the current context, however, is his claim that one of the notable features of piety is that it links past events and experiences by way of "emotional categories" (73). For that reason, violations of our pious attachments to these associations are often painful (74), and sometimes run counter to rational categories (73). Moreover, he argues that piety is "a response which extends through all the texture of our lives but has been concealed from us because we think we are so thoroughly without religion . . ." (75).

<sup>69</sup>EH, "Why I am So Clever," 9.

insight cannot provide us with a justification of human existence, and God's death is synonymous with the loss of belief in a transcendent foundation of order and value, then the possibility of overcoming nihilism requires a radical restructuring of our basic orientation toward the world.<sup>70</sup>

Of course, the possibility of restructuring or transforming one's orientation toward the world presupposes a certain measure of awareness of one's current stance. And since the sorts of assumptions regarding proper order that make up one's orientation, or constitute one's pieties, are largely implicit, one might expect *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra's "gift" to entail some deliberate violations of the reader's casual, habitual expectations in order to raise awareness of the problem. Kenneth Burke's terminology, I think, offers an apt description of Nietzsche's method of implementation. According to Burke, most of Nietzsche's works, but *Zarathustra* in particular, establish "perspectives by incongruity, . . . by violating the 'proprieties' of the word in its previous linkages." Using "constant juxtaposition of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names . . . [Nietzsche] writes by the same constant reordering of categories that we find in the Shakespearean metaphor."<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, Burke

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<sup>70</sup>Z, II, 9, "On Redemption," suggests that it is madness to suppose that "things are ordered morally according to justice and punishment" because it leads to the condemnation of life in this world. See also Z, I, 3, "On the Afterworldly," for Zarathustra's criticism of the traditional rationalistic attempt to "crash through these ultimate walls [of empirical existence] with its head."

<sup>71</sup>*Permanence and Change*, 90.

remarks that Nietzsche, “though he “*exemplified* the procedure consistently enough . . . did not, to my [Burke’s] knowledge, give us a specific rationalization of it.”<sup>72</sup>

This seems to me entirely appropriate, given that such rationalization would serve to validate the authority of the world view the procedure sets out to undermine.<sup>73</sup>

Returning now to the text, we find Zarathustra setting out on his journey. He descends from the mountain alone and without encountering anyone. The imagery of the setting, as Bernd Magnus et al. point out,<sup>74</sup> is an allusion to Jesus’ descent from heaven, reinforcing the previous pattern of references to scriptural narrative. When Zarathustra reaches the forest, however, he is suddenly confronted by an old man, who recognizes Zarathustra—having met him when he ascended the mountain ten years prior. Most of the ensuing conversation is strange and quite confusing because it subverts not only the significance of central biblical themes, but in doing so, blurs the lines (in the context of the narrative) between truth and fiction, metaphor and literal reference in a manner that leaves the status of the expressed propositions undecidable. As such, it affirms the expectation issuing from the foregoing analysis that Zarathustra’s “gift” entails violations of the reader’s implicit

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<sup>72</sup>*Permanence and Change*, 92.

<sup>73</sup>One might object here that this is precisely what I am doing: rationalizing or explaining Nietzsche’s method. But since my aim is essentially a different one, that is, not to undermine, but to examine the text for sources of *Zarathustra*’s disturbing effect in order to elicit some answers regarding Nietzsche’s authorial intent and strategy, this seems both unavoidable and legitimate.

<sup>74</sup>*Nietzsche’s Case*, 97.

framework of assumptions. Unlike the previous section, however, whose content is mainly preparatory, Zarathustra's descent from the mountain—appropriately—signals the beginning of the book's applied transgressions against a set of foundational assumptions of the traditional Western cognitive scheme.

Interestingly, the first transgression is committed not by Zarathustra, but by the old man who, as we learn shortly, is a saint.<sup>75</sup> Having turned away from human society, he now lives alone in the forest devoted entirely to making and singing songs to praise God. He addresses Zarathustra with the following words: “No stranger to me is this wanderer: many years ago he passed this way. Zarathustra he was called, but he has changed. At that time you carried your ashes to the mountains; would you now carry your fire into the valleys? Do you not fear to be punished as an arsonist?” (Z, Prologue, 2). This warning is strange because it seems to come out of nowhere, disrupting the flow of the text in two respects. First, it is unclear what occasions the old man's perception of danger. Zarathustra has not yet told him of his intention to deliver a “gift” to humankind, nor what that “gift” might be. All the old man knows, as far as the reader is concerned, is that Zarathustra has descended from the mountain after his decade long solitude. Moreover, nothing about the saint's description of Zarathustra would suggest any vicious or criminal intent: “His eyes are pure, and around his mouth there hides no disgust. Does he not

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<sup>75</sup>The German term for “saint,” used in the original, is “Heiliger.” “Heilig,” in turn, means “holy” or “sacred,” so the relation of “Heiliger” to its etymological root, defined in the beginning of this chapter, is more direct and obvious.

walk like a dancer?” And further, “Zarathustra has become a child, Zarathustra is an awakened one” (Z, Prologue, 2). Depicted as pure, innocent, and filled with good intentions (Zarathustra says he loves man), it is difficult to see why Zarathustra should be considered a danger to anyone. Of course, the text once again invites comparison here to the fate of Christ of whom the same could be said, and who was crucified for bringing his message of redemption to humankind.<sup>76</sup> There is, however, one significant disanalogy: the charges against Jesus for transgressing against the established order were blasphemy and treason, not arson, though one might argue that his words and deeds could be considered “inflammatory” in a metaphorical sense.

Although this possibility cannot be dismissed out of hand, I think the contextually disconnected nature of the warning is intended to draw attention to a second disruption of a previously established pattern. The saint’s choice of terminology, that is, the reference to fire and arson, invites comparison to an “arsonist” in a more literal sense, namely the tragic hero of Aeschelus’ *Prometheus*. According to the myth, Prometheus<sup>77</sup> steals the sacred fire from the gods and gives it to humankind, which, much like the delivery of Christ’s “glad tidings,” involves

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<sup>76</sup>In fact, the imagery depicting Zarathustra as “rising from the ashes,” as well as the saint’s subsequent description, invokes the resurrection theme of the New Testament. Zarathustra is described as “awakened,” childlike and eager to deliver a gift to humankind, much like Jesus Christ, whose purity and innocence made possible his own resurrection, as well as that of humankind.

<sup>77</sup>Etymologically, “Prometheus” means “forethought.”

personal sacrifice and suffering, as well as the protagonist's descent from heaven to earth. Unlike Jesus, however, Prometheus commits sacrilege, causing Zeus to condemn him to the eternal punishment of having his liver, which will be renewed every day, eaten by an eagle (or vulture). In addition to the myth of Prometheus, Zarathustra's rise from the ashes also invites comparison to the Phoenix myth. According to the myth, there exists only one Phoenix bird, a most beautiful creature whose plumage contains every color of the rainbow, which lives for 500 years before deliberately setting its own nest on fire. After being consumed by the flames, it rises again from its own ashes. These mythical references, much like the warning itself, seems out of place, considering that the speaker is a saint whose description of Zarathustra, quoted above, seems to attribute to the latter a remarkable number of Christ-like features. Moreover, since virtually all prior references alluding to the figure of Zarathustra have some connection to the scriptural narrative of the life of Christ, the fact that the old man's warning so obviously disrupts not only the flow of the narrative, but also the preceding pattern of reference, suggests that this juxtaposition is deliberate, intended to "shock" the reader out of the passive reading mode.

In addition to these intra-textual markers, the connection between the tragic world view illustrated by Promethean myth and the Christian view of the world is not without precedent in Nietzsche's works. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche favorably compares the myth's illustration of the notion of "active sin as the characteristically Promethean virtue" to the Christian conception of sin, which he

considers passive insofar as it is the result of what he calls “pre-eminently feminine affects” (BT, 9).<sup>78</sup> Of particular interest in the current context is the difference in normative value the Christian and the tragic world view assign to transgressions against the divine order, which directly affects their respective interpretations of the significance of suffering. While sin, moral vice, and suffering are correlative concepts according to the Christian world view, the Promethean myth, Nietzsche argues, illustrates the tragic insight that “the best and highest possession mankind can acquire is obtained by sacrilege, and must be paid for with consequences that involve the whole flood of sufferings and sorrows . . . “ (BT, 9). This means that transgression against the divine order and the suffering it draws in its wake are balanced by a prized achievement on the tragic world view, seen as the consequence of a courageous, virtuous act. I think what Nietzsche admires most about the Promethean myth, aside from its celebration of a defiant spirit quite contrary to the humble, obedient posture encouraged by Christianity, is that it illustrates the heroism involved in such tragic acceptance of suffering. Suffering, in other words, is not necessarily objectionable because it is not directly correlated with the idea that it constitutes punishment for a morally wrong act and hence, ought not to occur.<sup>79</sup>

This precedent in conjunction with the fact that Nietzsche characterizes

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<sup>78</sup>The affects he lists are “curiosity, mendacious deception, susceptibility to seduction,” and “lust” (BT, 9).

<sup>79</sup>The significance of this will become clearer in the context of Book IV, where Zarathustra wages battle against his “final sin,” which is his “pity for suffering” (Z, IV, 20).

*Zarathustra* as a tragedy in *The Gay Science* strongly suggests that the reader is invited to draw certain inferences in regard to Zarathustra's character, intent, and consequently, the nature of his gift, from the tragic myth (GS, 342). But this is by no means an easy project even for the reader reasonably familiar with the literature, since it is unclear which aspects of the Promethean myth are to be considered analogous to Zarathustra's case, and hence, supercede prior and subsequent references to Christ. Although it is true that most previous allusions to scripture have subsequently been inverted, inversion of their significance depends on prior establishment of recognizable similarities. The text, in other words, must allow the reader to pick up on a particular reference or allusion before any reversal is perceptible as such. And because the Promethean myth has some elements in common with the biblical narrative, it adds another layer of complexity by introducing a set of evaluative criteria whose divergence from the Christian moral scheme is not always clear. For example, we do not know whether the character traits the saint ascribes to Zarathustra immediately following this passage, his purity and innocence, are attributable to Prometheus as well. Though their centrality and meaning with respect to Christian morality is well established within the context of the predominant Western cognitive scheme, it is unclear how this set of traits is to be evaluated in terms of the tragic world view, or whether it is even relevant. If so, it seems quite clear that purity and innocence cannot mean what they do to the Christian, that is, obedience of God's commandments leading to a state of eternal bliss, since Prometheus' virtue, according to Nietzsche, is precisely his planned

transgression against the divine order in full awareness of its consequences: great suffering.<sup>80</sup>

At bottom, it is unclear how the various differences between the two protagonists, Jesus and Prometheus, as well as the respective world views they represent, are to be interpreted as far as Zarathustra's character and intent are concerned. Even the fact that the narrative texts themselves have unequal status in Western culture and tradition—one, the New Testament, claiming to offer a truthful account, the other, the story of Prometheus, labeled a myth—is of little help, since *Zarathustra* itself is presumably a fictional work.<sup>81</sup> Hence, it appears that the text leaves the reader with few options for eliminating the indeterminacy of these references. By this I mean that the text seems to entrap the reader by first presenting him or her with a questionable or problematic passage, then offering suggestive hints to raise a set of expectations that seems to promise resolution. Such resolution, however, remains elusive if the reader's attempt to make sense of the problem, by force of habit or for lack of alternative means, follows the predictable path and brings to bear the sorts of assumptions that, due to their familiarity and cultural

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<sup>80</sup>In contrast, Jesus' cry of distress during the crucifixion, "why hast thou forsaken me?" illustrates that suffering can never be a legitimate part of a Christian life because it always points to sin and wrongdoing.

<sup>81</sup>That *Zarathustra* is a fictional work seems relatively uncontroversial. Zarathustra, as Kathleen Higgins argues, is presented "as a rival of Christ and Socrates," whose fictional biography allows Nietzsche to demonstrate "the experiential consequences of adopting Nietzsche's alternative worldview." *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 104.

predominance, implicitly affirm the Christian-Platonic world view. As a result, the cognitive opacity of the problematic passage, far from being resolved by the reader's endeavor to designate the status and meaning of its propositional content by way of classification, is amplified, leaving the reader hopelessly entangled in a web of equally likely possibilities.

It is in this manner, I think, that the reference to Prometheus serves to undermine the reader's culturally conditioned expectations; that is, it levels or erases its own tracks after raising implicit assumptions to the surface, leaving in its wake a sense of indeterminacy. This kind of pattern, in which the text provides cues apparently intended to entice the reader to follow a predictable path only to frustrate her expectations, as we will see, recurs throughout the text. The remainder of the book, distinguished by a remarkable lack of progress with respect to the cognitive clarity of what appears to be its essential message, seems like an elaborate explication of the themes and patterns introduced in the prologue. The reader is repeatedly tempted, encouraged, and pulled along by Zarathustra's promise of a "gift" only to be left with the same sense of frustration and confusion at the end of the book (which, as has been consistently noted by scholars, is not an ending at all) that marks its beginning. Although certain interpretive possibilities are more clearly excluded in the process, they leave in their wake an open field of alternatives in regard to the content of the book's message. In contrast to this lack of progress with respect to *Zarathustra's* argumentative structure, the development of which we tend to take for granted, the fact that there is an obviously discernable progression with

respect to Zarathustra's character seems particularly suggestive as far as Nietzsche's authorial intent and motive are concerned. Zarathustra, in the course of the narrative, is depicted as undergoing a "ripening" process during which he becomes increasingly self aware; notably, awareness of his own presuppositions and prejudices is heightened each time he undergoes one in a series of failures and crises. This suggests rather strongly, I think, that the work's intended effect or aim is to encourage its readers to use their similarly recurring failure to achieve cognitive clarity as a means to become aware of their own implicit commitments to the Christian-Platonic world view.<sup>82</sup>

In fact, I think that Zarathustra's self-addressed remarks, concluding his conversation with the saint at the end of this section, are at minimum consistent with this hypothesis. Following the old man's unsuccessful efforts to convince Zarathustra to spare himself the danger and disappointment of attempting to benefit humankind, Zarathustra first "spares" the saint by refusing to give him his gift. In light of the latter's devotion to God, Zarathustra is careful not to deprive him of the belief that centers, and gives meaning to, his existence. Instead, he tells the saint, "What could I have to give you? But let me leave quickly lest I take something from you!" (Z, Prologue, 2).<sup>83</sup> After they part, however, Zarathustra says to himself:

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<sup>82</sup>This offers support for Heidegger's claim, already mentioned in Chapter 1, that Zarathustra teaches by showing.

<sup>83</sup>Zarathustra's respect for the saint's sensitivities provides good indication that *Zarathustra* is not addressed to devoted Christians, who, on the one hand, tend to be aware of their pieties, and on the other, are not threatened by nihilism.

“Could it be possible? This old saint in the forest has not yet heard anything of this, that *God is dead!*” (Z, Prologue, 2). Though presented as a monologue, and in subjunctive form, this casually dropped remark is quite obviously meant to be “overheard” by the reader, which suggests that the text intends to provide interpretive guidance by way of self-commentary. Moreover, the strategic placement (in italics!) of what is presented as a basic, foundational *presupposition* at the *end* of this rather puzzling section indicates that the implications of God’s death are to be considered both retro- and prospectively.

Upon revisiting the problematic interpretive issues discussed above, I think it does in fact become embarrassingly clear at some point that a comprehensive working awareness of the implications of God’s death would have forestalled much of the confusion. If God is dead, then not only the sinners, as Zarathustra tells the townsfolk in the next section, “died with him,” but so did the cultural suppositions that lead us to believe in Christ-like figures. The question of how the differences between Christ and Prometheus are to be interpreted insofar as they reflect on Zarathustra’s character and mission becomes at least partly obsolete once references to the transcendent order are “deflated,” so to speak. Purity and innocence, for example, cannot be a matter of obeying a set of divine commandments if there is no divine commander to prescribe and enforce them. This, in turn, reflects not only on the question of Zarathustra’s character, but also alters the nature of the respective gifts substantially. Christ’s message of redemption and sacrifice, paving the way for humanity to regain a state of purity and innocence by way of repentance and

submission to the divine order, is deprived of its unequivocally beneficial quality if the idea of eternal justice is no longer believable. As a result, the gift he brings to humankind has dual potential, much like Prometheus' gift of fire, which can be beneficial as well as destructive depending on the circumstances and manner of its use. Even the apparently substantial dissimilarity in regard to the status of the texts is leveled. The Bible becomes a myth or fable—a fictional work at any rate—once the foundation of its authority is undermined or recognized as lacking credibility. What remains is the common theme of transgression against the established order, which in each case results in a radical transformation of the existing world view. Destruction or violation of the traditional order, moreover, though it leads to immense suffering for both protagonists, is in each case necessary to create new possibilities for humankind as a whole.

### Chapter 3

#### The Madman

Given the “revelatory” nature of Zarathustra’s remark, concluding section 2 by casually informing us that “*God is dead*,” it is probably no coincidence that the image of his bursting onto the scene in the following section bears a striking resemblance to the madman of *The Gay Science*, who announces the news of God’s death (GS, 125). Zarathustra, apparently eager to deliver his “gift” to humankind, literally pounces on the unsuspecting townspeople assembled in the marketplace expecting to see a tightrope walker act, and proceeds to deliver what sounds a lot like a sermon. “*I teach you the overman*,” he begins, immediately followed by a challenge: “Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?” (Z, Prologue, 3). Much like “that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace, and cried incessantly, ‘I seek God! I seek God!’” (GS, 125), Zarathustra makes a very sudden appearance in the midst of town bearing a seemingly bizarre message. The similarity of the imagery, I think, is intended to refer the reader to the thematic background that occasions the madman’s public cry of distress in search of an answer to the nihilism and despair following what he describes as God’s murder. The madman, at whom the people stare in silence and astonishment, eventually realizes that “this tremendous event . . . has not yet reached the ears of men,” that it will “still require time to be seen and heard” (GS, 125). This suggests that Zarathustra’s announced intent to teach the overman,

given that it is premised on his belief that the “news” of God’s death has by now reverberated throughout organized society, is an attempt to offer a solution to the problem of nihilism.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to guiding the reader toward the relevant motivational and thematic context for Zarathustra’s current speech, this reference also offers some insight into Nietzsche’s authorial strategy and motive by providing what appears to be customized textual commentary that responds to the needs and concerns of two distinct groups of readers. The main character’s decision to spare the “saint” in light of his advanced age<sup>85</sup> shows that he shares the madman’s awareness of the fact that not all members of his audience are in a position to hear his message. To “enlighten” the old man regarding God’s death would have been an act of cruelty if recognition of its existential implications and hence, a perceived need for a solution, take time, which the old man does not have. The reference to the passage from *The Gay Science*, therefore, acknowledges the author’s awareness of the effect Zarathustra’s speeches are bound to have on those whose lives, much like the saint’s, are grounded on their Christian faith. To those for whom the news of God’s death “is still more distant . . . than the most distant stars,” Zarathustra’s attempt to provide

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<sup>84</sup>The fact that “*God is dead*” and “*I teach you the overman*” are italicized in the text likewise indicates that the overman ideal is intended to fill the void left by God’s demise, a situation Nietzsche thought would lead to nihilism and despair if it was not addressed.

<sup>85</sup>The “saint” is described as a *Greis* in the German original, a term used to refer only to *very* old persons.

a solution to the problem of nihilism would, indeed, seem like the ravings of a madman if their lived reality constitutes a denial of the main premise, that God is dead, which motivates his mission. Zarathustra's sensitivity toward the old man's needs and concerns, therefore, may be intended to reassure readers of similar persuasion that sparing themselves the trouble of reading any further is an appropriate response under the circumstances.

At the same time, however, reference to the madman passage offers some possible feedback and reassurance to the set of readers who may be disturbed by the fact that their response to the previous section cannot be attributed to their "ignorance" regarding God's death *per se*. Zarathustra's claim that God is dead, in other words, does not explain away the reader's sense of disorientation, since most self-proclaimed non-Christians are likely to be unaware of their dependance on the kinds of explanations and assumptions this passage negates and undermines. But individuals' explicit beliefs, as I have argued previously, are not necessarily consistent with their implicit, and largely unconscious, commitments to the terms and conditions of the culturally predominant cognitive framework. And as long as key concepts of the Christian world view remain integrated into the Western cognitive framework, which validates their authority insofar as their placement among accepted categories of reason serves to define and hence, attribute meaning to them, it seems that the reader's mere familiarity with those concepts is sufficient to allow for violations of his or her expectations. For example, allusions to Christ's resurrection in the course of the narrative that depicts Zarathustra in a similar

position are likely to raise certain expectations about the latter's motivation, intent, and character. But since those expectations and inferences are valid only against the backdrop of the Christian world view, God's death invalidates the meaning of those concepts and, by extension, the reader's inferences. But if violations of individuals' sensibilities, as Douglas' study shows, tends to give rise to what she calls "pollution behavior" or "reactions of impurity,"<sup>86</sup> then it is possible that the reader's disturbed response to the cognitive opacity of the previous section is precisely the effect Nietzsche hoped to generate.

If it is true that most readers' sense of cognitive order is informed by a culturally accepted categorical framework that continues implicitly to validate the Christian world view, then the news of God's death has, for all practical purposes, not yet arrived. As such, the cognitive opacity generated by *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra's violation of concepts whose meaning depends on the reader's inadvertent acceptance of the Christian world view is a direct and necessary consequence of the purging process that *shows* the effects of God's death in application. By referring its readers to the madman passage, therefore, *Zarathustra* offers them an opportunity to interpret their disturbed response from a different, and I think immensely more attractive, perspective. Although a more comprehensive sort of explanation, such as the one afforded by application of Douglas' study, may not be available to the majority of readers, the madman's prediction that recognition

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<sup>86</sup>*Purity and Danger*,

of God's death would be accompanied by a sense of aimlessness, confusion, and despair might serve to assure them of the appropriateness of their response. Since a disturbed and confused reaction to the text seems to mirror the experience of nihilism described in *The Gay Science*, 125, which stresses both its emotional and cognitive dimensions, the reader may even be positively encouraged to read on. Given that aimlessness and confusion are depicted as signs of a more comprehensive or adequate grasp of the situation created by God's murder than the dumbfounded astonishment exhibited by the townspeople, who seem to interpret this sense of despair as insanity, Zarathustra's affinity to the original herald of God's death seems to provide customized feedback and encouragement to the reader, who has until now shared the townspeople's casual attitude.

Although it seems unlikely that the first-time reader is beset by consternation and despair at this point in the text, I think that many a sincere effort to come to terms with this book on the whole will be "rewarded" in kind. This is not to say that the book's specific effect on individual readers, as well as the insights they may gain in the process, will not differ depending on their mental habits, attitude, and general orientation. Since *Zarathustra's* ability to violate its readers' composure is contingent upon the extent and strength of their implicit commitments to the underlying assumptions of the culturally predominant cognitive framework, it is to be expected that reactions will vary. But most, if not all, Western readers are bound to refer to established definitions and categories of reason in their attempts to elicit the meaning of this questionable book, which renders them vulnerable to an attack of

their unrecognized pieties and hence, an experience of nihilism. Despite the potentially encouraging insight that a disturbed response may be a sign of the reader's readiness to hear Zarathustra's message, however, reference to the madman passage also carries some less attractive implications. Specifically, it suggests that whenever the reader is completely baffled by Zarathustra's speeches, he or she shares some of the qualities and frame of mind that characterize the townsfolk. Assuming that Zarathustra is fully aware of the consequences of God's death, this implication tends to be no more flattering here than it is in the context of the "madman" passage from *The Gay Science*.

As Zarathustra continues to explicate his vision of the overman—presumably his solution to the problem of nihilism—one soon gets the impression that he is either not afraid to use whatever rhetorical device he deems necessary to make his point, including insult, or that he is hopelessly out of touch with the customs and proprieties of organized society.<sup>87</sup> Drawing on a metaphor from evolutionary theory, Zarathustra picks out the two developmental stages that suit his rhetorical purposes to inform the people in an incredibly haughty, arrogant tone of voice that "much in

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<sup>87</sup>Zarathustra eventually abandons the "overman ideal," and places it on a par with other conceptions of transcendent principles that lack substantive value. "Alas, there are so many things between heaven and earth of which only the poets have dreamed," he tells us in Part II, section 17. "And especially *above* the heavens: for all gods are poets' parables, poets' prevarications. Verily, it always lifts us higher—specifically, to the realm of the clouds: upon these we place our motley bastards and call them gods and overmen. For they are just light enough for these chairs—all these gods and overmen."

you is still worm” (Z, Prologue, 3).<sup>88</sup> He proclaims, further, that man will some day be “a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment” to the overman, just as the ape is to man, and concludes the paragraph by informing the people of the town that “even now, too, man is more ape than any ape” (Z, Prologue, 3). He resumes in similar fashion, this time specifically targeting the intellectual and moral leaders of the community. Among the more prominent targets of his contempt are “whoever is the wisest among you,”<sup>89</sup> as well as “those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes,” whom he calls “poison-mixers” and “despisers of life” who are “decaying and poisoned themselves” (Z, Prologue, 3). Only then does he attempt to offer some justification for his assault: “Once the sin against God was the greatest sin; but God died, and these sinners died with him. To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing, and to esteem the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth” (Z, Prologue, 3).

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<sup>88</sup>Worms are emblematic of cowardly, submissive demeanor. Whether they slither across the ground or burrow into the soil, their typical mode of behavior places them, literally, into a lower position with respect to most other beings. The fact that they feed on decomposing substances, including dead bodies, also puts them at the bottom of the food chain. Worms also tend to double over when disturbed—a type of behavior interpreted as a cowardly posture in humans.

<sup>89</sup>Zarathustra characterizes “the wisest” as “a mere conflict and cross between plant and ghost.” One possible reading of this is that Zarathustra thinks modern scholars share the ghostlike existence of their intellectual ancestor, Socrates, who haunts the Platonic dialogues, in that they mimic or ape his application of the dialectic method to synthesize conscious phenomena. The suggestion is that the mode of reasoning considered authoritative is similar to photosynthesis, an automated process of which even plants are capable insofar as they convert sunlight into nutrition just as the light of reason, by way of dialectic, produces knowledge.

Things do not improve in the paragraphs to follow as Zarathustra continues his diatribe, characterizing the modern individual as “a polluted stream,” whose idea of happiness “is poverty and filth and wretched contentment” (*Z*, Prologue, 3). To all of this, he opposes his conception of the overman, whose uncompromising affirmation of empirical existence, he claims, is “the meaning of the earth.” Describing him as the sea in which “[their] great contempt [for their virtue, happiness, and reason] can go under,” as well as “lightning and frenzy,” Zarathustra’s attempt to communicate his highly abstract concept of the overman to the assembled crowd fails rather miserably. It is clear that, much like the madman’s announcement, Zarathustra’s message does not reach its audience. In fact, the people do not even appear to realize that they have been insulted, as one of them informs him, “now we have heard enough about the tightrope walker; now let us see him too!” (*Z*, Prologue, 3).

Given that the reader has been set up to expect a sincere and well-intentioned attempt to address what may well constitute the most profound existential problem facing humankind after God’s death, the problem of nihilism, this ending makes the entire section seem like a very bad and unfunny practical joke. Although Zarathustra’s description of the overman is less ambiguous than it initially appears if one takes the time to trace out all of the leads and suggestions offered by way of the imagery, it remains unclear how the transformation from worm or ape to overman is to be accomplished. Ironically, readers who recognize that Zarathustra’s speech is intended to show how pathetic and degrading a mode of existence that continues to

affirm the ideals of the Christian-Platonic world view may appear from the kind of perspective instantiated by the overman, appear worse off for knowing a little more than the townspeople. Not only are they deprived of the spectacle they may have come to expect (a crucifixion perhaps, or a stoning), but they are given the impression that a seemingly essential piece of information has been withheld: a clear set of definitions that would allow them to classify themselves and others in terms of the relevant pseudo-evolutionary categories.

Lack of cognitive clarity in this respect, I think, is intended to convey a sense of self-doubt and uncertainty that renders Zarathustra's characterization of the situation following God's death personally relevant to the individual reader. Unlike the previous textual transgression against the reader's expectations, which exploited a predictable approach to interpreting references concerning Zarathustra's character and intent, the implications of this passage more directly threaten to undermine the reader's sense of self worth. Specifically, they suggest that the reader's perception of cognitive opacity here is indicative of her inability to comprehend self and world from a more evolved point of view, such as the overman's. This would mean that the reader might share the townspeople's frame of mind and orientation, and hence, lead the kind of existence Zarathustra characterizes as disgusting and contemptible. At the same time, however, God's death renders any appeal to a set of fixed cognitive categories moot, making it impossible for the reader to gain any firm footing that would allow for resolution of the confusion and doubt. The "joke," it seems, is entirely on the reader, who, unlike the marketplace crowd, knows just

enough to approach Zarathustra's projected task with the sincerity appropriate to the problem—only to be repaid with insult and uncertainty. This, I think, is one instance in which *Zarathustra's* aim to “profoundly wound” precisely those who have gained a more comprehensive understanding (insights gained by reflecting on the effects of prior sections of the book) of the existential implications of God's death is fairly obvious, and seems consistent with Nietzsche's subsequent commentary (GM, Preface, 8).<sup>90</sup> Complete ignorance, on the other hand, although clearly not blameworthy in the case of the townspeople, who are unaware of the context and Zarathustra's motivation, spares them not only the confusion and doubt, but also the insult.

Of course, to feel addressed and hence, insulted by Zarathustra's speeches at some point presupposes that textual violations of the reader's expectations do, indeed, constitute a threat to the established cognitive order and are thus perceived as disturbing by individuals unaware of their implicit commitments to its underlying assumptions. Although some violations seem fairly obvious, such as the fact that insult is not ordinarily considered a gift, and that one would not expect a character described as innocent, pure, and filled with good intentions to heap “filthy” insults

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<sup>90</sup>The fact that greater understanding can lead to increased vulnerability contradicts the Socratic dictum as expressed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “Virtue is knowledge” . . . “he who is virtuous is happy” (BT, 14). Nietzsche appears not to have changed his view in this respect, as he reiterates his dissent from the maxim in *Twilight of the Idols*: “Reason-virtue-happiness, that means merely that one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark appetites with a permanent daylight—the daylight of reason” (TI, “The Problem of Socrates, 10).

upon his listeners (among the terms used are “death,” “decay,” “poison,” “pollution,” “poverty,” “filth,” and “wretchedness”), others are quite subtle. The obvious transgressions, however, are not inherently problematic, since the violations they commit are readily apparent and, beyond causing some puzzlement perhaps, may even be helpful insofar as they indicate a strategy. It seems reasonable, in other words, to feel somewhat taken aback by the fact that Zarathustra delivers a string of insults after having indicated his intention to bring men a gift. The more subtle violations, on the other hand, are serious because they retain their disturbing effects, which cannot be explained away by reference to a specific cause and hence, are exacerbated by the fact that the reader’s response to them is not subject to any reasonable explanation.

Among the latter, perhaps the most cognitively threatening one uncovered by applying Douglas’ model, which outlines the underlying symbolic boundaries of cultural cognitive schemes, is the violation committed by Zarathustra’s re-entry into organized society. By transgressing the line separating the social body from chaos and indistinctness (the proverbial desert), Zarathustra’s bursting onto the marketplace into the midst of the assembled crowd after his prolonged separation from society is symbolically equivalent to reintroducing a previously expelled substance or fluid into the body. In addition to arousing what Douglas calls “social pollution” fears,<sup>91</sup> the threat posed by Zarathustra’s violation of the external

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<sup>91</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 122.

boundaries of the community is exacerbated further by the fact that his speech, both in terms of form and content, is clearly subversive of the established social order. From that point of view, it seems quite perverse that Zarathustra should be the one to characterize the members of the community as disgusting and impure, considering that he is “the hair in the soup” here, taking a tone, moreover, appropriate to someone whose authority is firmly established. Given that his haughty, sermonizing tone is not commensurate with his social status, it raises the expectation that it is justified by the content of his message, which, as we have seen, remains opaque in seemingly essential respects and hence violates the culturally established cognitive order in that sense as well.

Zarathustra, however, is a threat not only to the established order, but to himself as well. Having transgressed the external boundaries of the community, Zarathustra’s behavior seems highly inappropriate to a person whose very presence signals danger. Instead of attempting to diffuse the threat he poses, he seems too eager to deliver his message to bother becoming attuned to the social conventions or the particular context, and as a result, ends up violating the expectations of all of his audience members. The reader anticipating an answer to the problem of nihilism may be just as annoyed by the fact that Zarathustra’s speech, despite its sermonizing tone, does not seem to deliver any solution as the townspeople are by their perception that his verbosity is delaying the performance. Ironically, it appears that background, perspective, and context make a great deal of difference when it comes to perception and evaluation of the nature of his transgressions. While the

townspeople are merely becoming impatient with Zarathustra's "dramatics," dismissing them as the affectations of a traveling performer, the reader is more likely to consider his words and actions severe violations of the established order and hence, may well experience some apprehension. Prior references to the fate of those who dared transgress against the established order, as well as recognition of the offensiveness of Zarathustra's speech—in addition to his violating the external boundary of the community—all tend to generate a sense of impending doom. But even the expectation that Zarathustra is about to meet a fate similar to Jesus' and Prometheus' is violated. Saved by a contingency of the circumstances of which he himself appears unaware, that is, the reason for the townspeople's assembly, Zarathustra gets away with his seemingly reckless and inconsiderate behavior for the time being.

Though perhaps physically safe at this point, Zarathustra may have forfeited the unequivocal sympathy of the readers, who may well feel ambivalent about the "injustice" they have just witnessed. From the reader's perspective, aware of Zarathustra's origin, status, and intent, and hence, unknowingly receptive to transgressions against the underlying symbolic boundaries of the communal body, his punishment may appear imminent and perhaps even warranted.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, given that his disregard for the sensibilities of his audience stands in stark contrast to

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<sup>92</sup>The townspeople, by contrast, can tolerate his presence and "theatrics" because they consider him a traveling entertainer, not to be taken seriously, and only temporarily disruptive of the ordinary course and order of events.

the character sketch of the previous section, which portrayed him as a thoughtful, well-intentioned individual, Zarathustra ceases to be the sort of protagonist with whom one would readily identify. The text, violating the casual assumption that protagonists ought to garner the reader's sympathies, appears deliberately to dissuade its audience from bonding with the main character. Portrayed as possessing characteristics and virtues considered contrary in terms of the traditional cognitive scheme, Zarathustra himself becomes questionable and hence, is likely to generate an ambivalent response. Although this does defy convention, it makes sense that the book's implementation of the consequences of God's death, which renders seemingly essential aspects of the propositional content of Zarathustra's message ambiguous, should affect the virtues and characteristics of the main character in a similar manner. No longer a protagonist in an unequivocal sense, which may, of course, be a real possibility only for a saint whose character and behavior is in compliance with an absolute moral code, the figure of Zarathustra seems nevertheless appropriate to the message he promulgates. The ambivalence his character generates, in other words, just like the ambiguity of his speech, is appropriate to the situation, and thereby *shows* how the problem of nihilism affects our ability to judge both our own and others' characters because the value of traditional virtues is no longer to be taken for granted.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Another reason for generating an ambivalent response may be that Nietzsche wants the reader to follow Zarathustra's journey not for the sake of the protagonist, but for his or her own benefit. This seems consistent with, and to some extent explains, Zarathustra's otherwise cryptic remark at the end of the Prologue, where he resolves from

The following section consists largely of Zarathustra's elaboration on the kinds of virtues that will make the overman possible, which again provides some textual commentary on prior violations of the reader's expectations. Though also highly abstract and imagistic, one can see how Zarathustra's outrageous behavior in the previous section, and in particular his reckless disregard for his own safety, could be counted among the virtues he praises here.<sup>94</sup> Aside from advancing the rather controversial claim that human beings are not intrinsically valuable, however, which is obviously contrary to Christian (and humanistic) doctrine,<sup>95</sup> this section does not seem to attempt to violate the reader's culturally conditioned assumptions of expectations directly. Instead, it offers an alternative to the Christian-Platonic world view by describing the kinds of virtues someone dedicated entirely to this-worldly existence might value and practice. Although helpful insofar as it provides a more detailed description of the overman as a supremely active-affirmative individual, I think the main function of this section is to reconcile the reader, whose sensibilities have been offended by previous violations of his or her implicit expectations, with Zarathustra's project. By promising to define a set of virtues, albeit not the

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then on to speak to a more select audience: "Living companions I need, who follow me because they want to follow themselves—wherever I want" (Z, Prologue, 9).

<sup>94</sup>This does not mean that the actions of Jesus, which led to his crucifixion, as well as those of the philosopher in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, do not indicate similar traits.

<sup>95</sup>Zarathustra claims that "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss." More specifically, "What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end" (Z, Prologue, 4).

traditional kind, potentially capable of subsuming the behavior and events that may have caused the reader to distance him- or herself emotionally from the main character, it holds out a potentially reasonable explanation that may lead the reader to continue reading.

This is not to say that Zarathustra's description of the new virtues does not require extensive interpretation. On the contrary: his mode of expression remains very general, abstract, and imagistic, making it quite impossible to determine whether the set of qualities he advocates is internally consistent.<sup>96</sup> In fact, often the only way to be sure that the content of a particular proposition describes a virtue rather than a vice is that each paragraph is prefaced by the words "I love him who . . ." (Z, Prologue, 4). It does not, in other words, provide the sorts of clear definitions or prescriptions that would allow the reader to determine with any degree of certainty whether he or she possesses any of the virtues Zarathustra considers praiseworthy. As before, the text is barely transparent, though perhaps sufficiently so to tempt the reader to put him- or herself into a position to be wounded by attempting to interpret a passage that has some possible personal relevance. At the same time, however, it is too opaque to construct an internally coherent account of the kinds of particular actions, behaviors, or dispositions that would qualify as

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<sup>96</sup>For example, Zarathustra says, "I love him whose soul is overfull so that he forgets himself, and all things are in him: thus all things spell his going under." And further, "I love all those who are as heavy drops, falling one by one out of the dark cloud that hangs over men: they herald the advent of lightning, and, as heralds, they perish" (Z, Prologue, 4).

virtues. For that reason, the reader who understands the general thrust of the passage is, once again, in a worse position than the townspeople, who continue to misunderstand completely and hence can simply laugh him off.

It is the townspeople's laughter that finally gets Zarathustra's attention in the next section. Realizing that his communicative efforts have so far failed, he pauses to reflect on the possible causes of this failure. Speaking again "to his heart," as he had done previously, upon parting from the saint, it immediately becomes clear that Zarathustra has no intention to make things easier by presenting the reader with a set of fixed doctrines or prescriptions, or by bringing his message into alignment with the culturally accepted communicative and cognitive framework.<sup>97</sup> Instead, he seems to add to the complexity and confusion by introducing a non-standard metaphor that cuts across cognitive categories, thereby committing a dual violation: against the readers expectations, on the one hand, and against established categories of reason on the other. "There they stand," he says to himself, "there they laugh. They do not understand me; I am not the mouth for these ears. Must one smash their ears before they learn to listen with their eyes?" (Z, Prologue, 5). Clearly not an explanation or clarification in any conventional sense, Zarathustra's monologue here (much like the previous one) seems nevertheless intended to provide some sort of guidance or feedback to the reader. Its obvious refusal to bow to traditional or conventional

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<sup>97</sup>This is consistent with, and provides potential insight into, Zarathustra's earlier remark to the "saint" during their conversation: "I give no alms. For that I am not poor enough" (Z, Prologue, 2).

conceptions of what constitutes meaningful and/or cognitively clear discourse, I think, is yet another applied reminder of the existential consequences of God's death. It *shows* what it is like to take the loss of a transcendent source of value and meaning seriously, such that its absence reverberates throughout human activities and endeavors, including the way we think, read, and write. In other words, the meaningfulness and coherence of our words and thoughts cannot be taken for granted when the categorical framework in terms of which they are meaningful is uprooted.

Unlike Zarathustra's previous monologue, however, this conversation "with his heart" presents the reader with a more overt challenge, or occasion, to become personally invested in Zarathustra's project. Whereas the previous monologue (=private conversation with the reader) offered directions that could be implemented by ruling out the set of possible readings that lack plausibility once the consequences of God's death are taken into consideration, interpretation of this metaphor calls for active engagement. The main reason for this, I think, has to do with the indeterminacy of this phrase in terms of the established categories of reason. Zarathustra's demand that his audience "listen with their eyes" is plainly asking the impossible on a "literal" reading. But even a reading that considers the phrase a metaphor does little to render it more determinate, since appeal to convention or tradition is, for obvious reasons, futile. The reader is thus left to her own devices—not only in regard to interpreting the phrase, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in deciding whether to accept the challenge to take an active, creative

stance toward the text, and by extension, the problem of meaning in the wake of God's death more generally.

The alternatives to accepting the challenge are clear: one could simply put the book down, or bracket the problem for the time being and continue reading, hoping that the text will eventually yield some clues as to the possible meaning of this phrase. The latter option may, indeed, repay the reader's patience (and persistence), even though the hints offered are not particularly obvious. Nonetheless, the mere fact that some readers stick with the book in the face of indeterminacy, while others may not be able to tolerate it, seems to me significant as an indicator of their potential for dealing with nihilism in a creative manner, even if they should fail to pick up on certain clues that may provide some insight.

One of these hints connecting this metaphor to Zarathustra's larger project may be found in the context of his first speech following the Prologue (Z, I, 1). Entitled "On the Three Metamorphoses," Zarathustra describes the stages of transformation any potentially creative spirit must undergo: the camel, lion, and finally, the child stage. The first requires acceptance of the set of traditional values that are most burdensome, which the "camel-spirit" carries with itself into the desert. In the "loneliest desert, however, the second metamorphosis occurs: here the spirit becomes a lion who would conquer his freedom" by rejecting the established set of values (Z, I, 1). The third and final transformation is from lion to child because "the child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes'" (Z, I, 1).

In addition to suggesting that the reader might want to adopt a playful attitude in dealing with non-standard metaphors that occur throughout this text, this passage seems to me particularly telling in regard to the metaphor that transgresses against accepted distinctions between sense modalities. Child psychologists have noted that synesthesia, or cross-modal perception, “seems more common in childhood than adulthood.”<sup>98</sup> This is of interest here with respect to the final spiritual transformation in that it establishes a relation between cross-modal metaphors and the child stage. Since cross-modal metaphors “suggest ways in which language incorporates perceptual knowledge, especially in children’s acquisition of semantic relations,”<sup>99</sup> Zarathustra’s coinage of this sort of metaphor may serve to reiterate the point that his is a child-like spirit, creatively forging new connections and exploring new possibilities. Indeed, the narrative setting describing his solitude on the mountain in a manner that bears striking similarities to Christ’s journey into the desert, as well as the saint’s description of Zarathustra, all correspond to the pattern of transformation laid out in “On the Three Metamorphoses.” The saint explicitly remarks, “Zarathustra has changed, Zarathustra has become a child again, Zarathustra is an awakened one . . .” (Z, Prologue, 2). Evidently, Zarathustra has undergone the relevant changes, which enable him to perceive the world anew, with

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<sup>98</sup>Lawrence E. Marks, Robin J. Hammeal, and Marc H. Bornstein, “Perceiving Similarity and Comprehending Metaphor,” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, Vol. 52, No. 1, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup>Marks et. al., 2. Examples of cross-modal metaphors are “dim noise,” or “loud colors.”

a child-like receptivity capable of attending to experiences on their own terms. This in mind, it appears unavoidable that he should have to express himself by means of verbal constructions that cannot be subsumed within the confines of accepted cognitive categories, which inherently limit the range of experiences capable of linguistic representation.<sup>100</sup>

Although it brings us no closer to explaining what Nietzsche/Zarathustra means when he tells his readers that they must “learn to listen with their eyes,” this connection to the metamorphoses of the spirit provides a rough outline of the conditions under which engagement with the text may prove rewarding. It suggests to the reader, in other words, that coming to know and accept the weight of her cultural baggage is a precondition for its negation, which in turn allows her to approach this book creatively. But one cannot reject or disown what one does not recognize as one’s externally imposed burden, or that of which one is unaware. Becoming conscious of deeply ingrained habits, however, such as reference to perceptual and conceptual schemes that pattern potential sense impressions from the outset<sup>101</sup> is not an easy task. Although most readers are consciously aware of *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra’s presumption, at least on a textual level, that God is dead, the act of reading and comprehending necessitates practical reliance on culturally

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<sup>100</sup>The converse appears to hold as well: culturally accepted cognitive categories and their linguistic counterparts determine the range of possible experiences.

<sup>101</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 36. Douglas claims that it is “generally agreed that all our impressions are schematically determined . . . “

grounded cognitive categories and value schemes.

The jarring discontinuities, therefore, that repeatedly tear the reader out of the habitual, passive mode of assimilating new information into the established framework, force the reader willing to deal with them “into the desert,” so to speak, given that appeal to convention, tradition, and even consensus, is to little avail. The metaphor at issue here is one of the more overt instances of transgression against accepted cognitive categories, which is significant insofar as structural components of the text parallel the narrative content. Zarathustra’s frustration with the ineffectiveness of his attempts to warn the townspeople of the impending existential crisis escalates at this juncture, and is reflected by the drastically obvious incompatibility of the frameworks of reference assumed by Zarathustra and his audience, respectively. They are, almost literally, worlds apart.

The journey beyond the boundaries of established order, therefore, is a solitary one for those who dare embark upon it. Even Zarathustra cannot lighten their load, given that everyone’s burden is determined by “what is most difficult” for that individual (Z, I, 1). Every person has to fight his own demons, that is, the unique set of habits, fears, and tendencies that threaten to destroy those who seek to create their own meaning and overcome nihilism.<sup>102</sup> This raises the question why it

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<sup>102</sup>This is suggested by Z, I, 17, entitled “On the Way of the Creator,” which elaborates on the emotional and psychological challenges of cultivating one’s unique virtues insofar as those are distinct from the interests and values of “the herd.” The connection between this section and “On the Three Metamorphoses” is drawn by its reiterating the characteristics of the child stage.

is necessary for these potential creators to set themselves apart from accepted social and cultural conventions. Assuming that Zarathustra is correct in taking for granted that God is dead for modern culture, it is not immediately obvious why the secularization of Western societies should fail to provide an adequate response to the loss of a transcendent source of order and value. Although culturally accepted cognitive and moral categories whose foundation has been eliminated are equivalent, in terms of ontological status, to a metaphorical desert devoid of structure and boundaries, it seems to me that few of our contemporaries would even think to question the foundation of established moral and rational categories. So from a psychological and existential standpoint, the difference between an individual for whom the problem of nihilism is a personal concern, and one who is content to allow common consensus to dictate the value and meaning of his or her existence, is enormous. The former, assuming the overman paradigm is indicative of the appropriate attitude, would rather risk failure, even death, than lead a risk free, but ultimately meaningless life seeking merely to minimize pain and discomfort by subordinating his interests to majority opinion. Accordingly, Nietzsche/Zarathustra's primary concern is not only to spread the message *that* God's death threatens to deprive human existence of all meaning and value, but more importantly, to get his audience to recognize *how*, or under what conditions, nihilism is most likely to flourish—a most repulsive prospect, as we will see.



## Chapter 4

### The Last Man

The conditions under which nihilism will thrive, as Zarathustra will soon make clear, all involve the degeneration of humankind to the point where passivity and risk avoidance are considered the greatest good on both a personal and societal level.<sup>103</sup> Assuming this is correct, then the offensive character of Zarathustra's speeches, behavior, and tone—in short, his strategic violations of established cognitive schemes, may be considered demonstrative or diagnostic tools that allow each individual reader to gauge his or her own nihilistic tendencies. If indifference, apathy, and the thoughtless, habitual conformism, illustrated by the “last man,” constitute the last stage in the degeneration of humankind, then every time the text succeeds in jolting the reader out of the habitual mode of passive assimilation marks an opportunity to take an active, creative stance toward the problem that constitutes its subject matter. There is a sense, in other words, in which Zarathustra's gift *is* his repeated violation of the reader's casual expectations that implicitly validate the established framework of reference. Assuming that at least some of *Zarathustra's* readers come to realize, and are bothered by, the discovery that their conscious beliefs are, to a greater or lesser extent, contradicted or undermined by their

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<sup>103</sup>Zarathustra's description of the last man's ideal form of social and political organization is a socialist/utilitarian utopia which, ironically perhaps, bears some similarities to the Christian conception of heaven in that the ideal state is incompatible with suffering, strife, or controversy.

unconscious, habitual orientation, as indicated by their emotional response to the text, this strategy could prove effective in averting the impending crisis. As a first step, however, the very choice to continue reading despite the text's tendency to generate conflict and confusion is a sign that the reader has not yet capitulated to the last man's ideal.

This characterization of Nietzsche's possible authorial intent, I think, resonates with Zarathustra's transitional remarks from his monologue to his "sermon" on the last man. In a shift of strategy intended to "address their pride," he tells the people that "one must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star" (Z, Prologue, 5). The chaos, I think, refers at least in part to the internal conflict between our social and individual tendencies. Although it also quite likely refers to an individual's ability to tolerate conflicting or incompatible traits and characteristics internally,<sup>104</sup> it seems that it is at least possible to create order among one's internal drives whereas the conflict between individuating and socializing tendencies is essential. By that I mean that the need or desire to be part of a group or community seems necessarily opposed to the drive toward self-actualization, given that the development of one's individuating virtues and characteristics presupposes that one distinguish and set oneself apart from others. Moreover, realization of one's individual potential likely requires conscious, deliberate effort and entails a certain amount of risk. Conformity to the norm, by

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<sup>104</sup>Robert Gooding-Williams argues that this "Dionysian chaos" is "essential to self-overcoming" and the creation of new values. *Dionysian*, 89.

contrast, requires little risk or effort, given that social pressures, as well as a long standing moral tradition, provide both positive and negative incentive to subordinate individual interests to those of the collective. This suggests another level on which an individual might experience some internal tension, namely in respect to the attitude toward the primary conflict. Someone who finds it problematic that his or her conscious beliefs are betrayed and sabotaged by unconscious habits and unexpected emotions<sup>105</sup> is likely to take a very different stance toward the problem of nihilism than a person who is content to bow to public pressure as a matter of course. Since the latter's response to potential conflict is already predetermined, the conflict itself seems unproblematic.

“‘What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?’ thus asks the last man, and he blinks” (Z, Prologue, 5). The last man, as Zarathustra describes him, is entirely reconciled to the idea of leading an undistinguished, uneventful, safe, and comfortable life. Having degenerated to the point where creativity, love, and desire are unfamiliar concepts, the last man's myopia prevents him from seeing beyond his immediate surroundings. Stars are beyond his field of vision, and his constant blinking allows him to block out any alternative modes of living. In fact, the last men collectively blink after announcing that they have “invented happiness.” This indicates an essential connection, I will show, between

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<sup>105</sup>As Zarathustra counsels prospective creators, who consider setting themselves apart from the established order, “the worst enemy you can encounter will always be you, yourself; you lie in wait for yourself in caves and woods” (Z, I, 17).

the last men's notion of happiness and their blindness toward elements of their experience that would threaten the established order. Their blinking may also be suggestive of a conspiracy among them, as Heidegger proposes,<sup>106</sup> or their inability to "listen with their eyes," as Gooding-Williams argues.<sup>107</sup> While I agree with Gooding-Williams' reading, Heidegger's "conspiracy theory" requires equivocation between 'blinking' and 'winking at' to succeed and is thus not entirely convincing. The German *blinzeln*, used in the original, can mean both "to blink" or "to wink." Nonetheless, if the latter were intended, it seems that Nietzsche would have written "*Wir haben das Glueck erfunden' – sagen die letzten Menschen und blinzeln sich zu,*" rather than "*. . . und blinzeln.*" The case is similar in English. Although a distinction is made by means of the verb itself, unlike the German, it is customary to say "wink *at* (each other)," if it is to be understood that a secret, non-verbal message is transmitted between members of a select group.

Heidegger does have a point, though. The last men's claim to have invented happiness, in conjunction with their blinking, does appear somewhat suspicious in that it suggests a relationship between happiness and blinking. Still, it seems to me out of character for the last men, who have made a virtue of avoiding risk in any form, deliberately to initiate a conspiracy. This does not mean that the proliferation of the established order by those who stand to benefit from it, does not share certain

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<sup>106</sup>Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 82-85.

<sup>107</sup>*Dionysian*, 89.

features with conspiracies; the authoritative, absolutist demeanor of its champions, “the good and the just,”<sup>108</sup> does have the tendency to conceal the absence of any valid foundation. Alternatively, proponents of the established order may be said to have forged an unconscious conspiracy insofar as their advocacy of the traditional moral framework serves their interests. But their success depends largely on the “cooperation” of its victims, who *in principle* have access to the same information to which members of the supposed conspiracy are privy. Presumably, everyone (except for the saint in the forest) knows that God is dead; hence, some other factor(s) must be responsible for the continued authoritative force of the traditional moral and cognitive framework that will lead to the degeneration of humankind exemplified by the last man. And judging by subsequent occasions on which Zarathustra makes use of the term, ‘blinking’ appears to be symptomatic of at least one of these contributing factors, namely, the set of behavioral dispositions and attitudes resulting from cultivation of the Christian virtues.

Before turning to the instances in Parts III and IV of the text, which show that blinking characterizes the state of affairs Christian practices and ideals have produced as a pathological condition, it seems useful to have in mind what Zarathustra considers the worst possible outcome for human culture and civilization. Although I generally tend to avoid lengthy quotes, I think an exception is warranted in this case, since the vividness of the description indicates the vehemence of

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<sup>108</sup>Zarathustra’s term for the powerful elite of the traditional moral establishment (Z, Prologue, 9).

Nietzsche's efforts to alert us to the problem of nihilism:

The earth has become small, and on it hops the last man, who makes everything small. His race is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle; the last man lives longest.

'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one's neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.

Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. A fool, whoever still stumbles over stones or human beings!<sup>109</sup> A little poison now and then: that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end, for an agreeable death.

One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion.

No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into a madhouse.

'Formerly, all the world was mad' say the most refined, and they blink.

One is clever and knows everything that has ever happened: so there is no end of derision. One still quarrels, but one is soon reconciled—else it might spoil the digestion.

One has one's little pleasure for the day and one's little pleasure for the night: but one has a regard for health.

'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink (Z, Prologue, 5).

Framed by the claim to have invented happiness, which is accompanied by compulsive blinking, the last men are *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra's imagistic representation of Nietzsche's critique of Christianity. By demonizing natural, life-affirming drives and instincts, as the section "On The Three Evils" will illustrate

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<sup>109</sup>In Part IV, Zarathustra, following a cry of distress, "went farther and deeper, through woods and past swampy valleys," where he stumbles over one of the higher men in a chapter entitled "The Leech" (Z IV, 4). The setting is what Douglas characterizes as a marginal area, located, symbolically, outside of the boundaries of cultural cognitive schemes.

more clearly, Christianity has ingrained the kinds of values that render human beings incapable of life outside of God's shadows (*Z*, III, 10). They are compelled to blink because their senses, bodies, instincts and passions, in short, all aspects of their being that make them earthly creatures, have been corrupted by two millennia of persecution during which they were forced to wither in darkness.<sup>110</sup> Now that God is dead and the lie that has woven "reward and punishment into the foundation of things" is brought to light, the empirical repercussions of the Christian battle against "sin" are exposed as well.<sup>111</sup>

The "Three Evils," sex, the lust to rule, and selfishness are paradigm examples of potentially healthy, life affirming instincts and passions that have been vilified by the leaders of the Christian moral establishment. Given that the grounds on which they were deemed harmful are no longer considered sound, Zarathustra, inspired by one of his "glowing morning dreams" in which he "weighed the world," resolves to "imitate it by day and to learn from it what was best in it" (*Z*, III, 10, 1). His dream cut short because "the jealous dawn came too early and glowed [him] awake," the imagery suggests that evaluating moral values in the light of day, wide awake, constitutes a novel undertaking in that it brings to light what has previously

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<sup>110</sup>As anyone has likely experienced, exposure to sunlight after having been in a dark environment causes one to blink until the eyes become adjusted to the conditions.

<sup>111</sup>Zarathustra's harshness seems suited to express the urgency with which Nietzsche sought to alert us to the impending problem of nihilism: "All the secrets of your foundation shall come to light; and when you lie uprooted and broken in the sun, then will your lies also be separated from your truths" (*Z*, II, 5).

been pushed below the surface.<sup>112</sup> After “plac[ing] the three most evil things on the scales and weigh[ing] them humanly well,” the selfless, submissive demeanor traditionally labeled Christian humility fares worst. Examined in broad daylight, it pales in comparison to “the wholesome, healthy selfishness that wells from a powerful soul—from a powerful soul to which belongs the high body, beautiful, triumphant, refreshing . . .” (Z, III, 10, 2). Zarathustra’s *word*,<sup>113</sup> therefore, “pronounced *selfishness* blessed,” overturning the value of humility: “Whether one be servile before gods and gods’ kicks or before men and stupid mens’ opinions—whatever is servile it spits on, this blessed selfishness. Bad: that is what it calls everything that is sorely stooped and sordidly servile, unfree *blink-eyes*, oppressed hearts, and that false yielding manner that kisses with wide cowardly lips” (Z, III, 10, 2; emphasis mine).

One additional reference that helps to round out the general connotative force of ‘blinking’ occurs in Part IV. Again it characterizes servility, submissiveness,

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<sup>112</sup>The section “On Apostates” draws a similar connection between submission to the Christian conception of virtue and darkness. Zarathustra here characterizes newly discovered piety as “the cowardly devil within you, who would like to fold his hands and rest his hands in his lap and be more comfortable—this cowardly devil urges you, “There *is* a God.” With this, however, you belong to the light-shunning kind who cannot rest where there is light; now you must daily bury your head deeper in night and haze” (Z, III, 8, 2).

<sup>113</sup>Emphasis mine, to stress the reference to Genesis, where God’s word is said to have created the world. Much like Zarathustra’s address of the sun in the opening passage, this appropriation of the efficacious word to the human sphere signifies a radical departure from the tradition while demonstrating a viable alternative stance toward the issue of authority.

prudence, and resignation: the “small virtues” whose aim is “wretched contentment” (Z, IV, 13, 3). Adherents to the set of beliefs sheltered by God’s shadows are compelled to blink when the mode of life it is supposed to justify is exposed to the sun (Apollonian insight?). One of these beliefs, which remains at the center of controversy even today, is singled out by Zarathustra as one of the most pernicious insofar as it serves to sabotage the possibility of humankind’s future development from the outset: the idea that all human beings are equal. Although invalidated by God’s death because it was Christianity that first introduced the idea of human equality, appeals to equality continue to be used to “justify” any belief that happens to garner majority support.<sup>114</sup> Hence, Zarathustra advises the higher men against placing any value on the opinions of the “mob” because, as his own experience has taught him, “in the marketplace nobody believes in higher men” (Z, IV, 13, 1). The mob, which blinks while it declares that ““there are no higher men, we are all equal, man is man; before God we are all equal”” casually glosses over the fact that “this god has died” (Z, IV, 13, 1). People continue, as is made almost excessively clear here, to draw inferences and conduct their everyday business on the basis of a defunct world view, their blinking a symptom of either their incapacity, or their unwillingness, to face the situation.

In addition to clarifying Zarathustra’s earlier reasoning from a point in the

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<sup>114</sup>This is clearly circular, since the belief in equality is justified by majority opinion, and the validity of majority opinion, in turn, is justified with reference to equality.

narrative where his communicative skills have undergone considerable development, his revisiting the theme in different contexts allows us to connect this passage, which in the Prologue is “bracketed” by the blinking of the last men, with the more familiar terms of Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity. Nietzsche’s choice to “bracket” the passages that show humankind’s “most contemptible” possibility seems to constitute a structural reflection of Zarathustra’s misguided assumption in the Prologue that its “soil is still rich enough” to avoid utter degeneration. There is still hope, in other words, that humankind as a whole might be capable of averting nihilism and decline, in which case this worst case scenario could simply be cut from the narrative. Later on, however, the blinking “mob” is inextricably woven into the fabric of the text—a sign, I think, of Zarathustra’s attained insight that remaining “faithful to the earth” does not permit of selective editing.

Although they do not constitute generally accepted terms of philosophical argument, the violations of the established order marked by Zarathustra’s visual metaphors are remarkably congruent with those indicated by Douglas’ model. Despite the demand that we “listen” with our eyes, the book’s assault on accepted categorical schemes stirs up dirt,<sup>115</sup> which makes it virtually impossible to refrain from blinking in reaction to the irritant. Blinking thus emerges as an involuntary, but intended response to textual transgressions of the established cultural cognitive

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<sup>115</sup>This may be taken almost literally, given that Douglas’ most basic definition of dirt is that it constitutes “a by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, insofar as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements,” *Purity and Danger*, 35.

scheme. The fact that the last men blink each time they claim to have invented happiness suggests that blinking, which closes their eyes to any potential threats to existing cognitive categories, is key to their happiness. This means that their happiness consists of maintaining the established order. Of course, this raises the question as to their invention. How, one might ask, can they be said to have invented this happiness? Presumably, they invented neither the set of traditional Western categories, nor the definition of happiness as a state that follows directly from obedience to the prescribed order. Both can be traced straightforwardly to the Christian-Platonic model that conceives of happiness as the absence of sin or error (sin being a violation against the order of God's creation). Moreover, blinking cannot be the sole criterion, since it fails to distinguish readers, who inadvertently blink in reaction to cognitive violations, from these last men, even though they may not share their conception of happiness.

That leaves us with the possibility that the last man is distinguished by the fact that he welcomes his compulsion to blink whenever the established order is threatened. Content to bow to the lowest common denominator, the conflict between his individuating and social tendencies has been resolved; he has, as Zarathustra puts it, become "domesticated" (*Z*, Prologue, 5). The determining factor here, and I think this is significant, is not so much the last man's condition, but his attitude toward it. He is happy with who he is, which sets him apart from those who, though compelled to blink, would be deeply offended by the suggestion that this reaction may be an indication of their kinship with the last man. The last men's clever invention,

therefore, appears to be a culture that constitutes the practical equivalent of heaven, or eternal bliss, though without God or a realm of Forms, possibly because their blinking renders them blind to precedent. Given that the last men are virtually indistinguishable from each other, there is no relevant difference between the life of one of them and that of another because the range of their possible experiences have been limited to the point where all is the same. Insofar as the last man, given his extreme prudence and risk averseness, “is as ineradicable as the flea-beetle,” according to Zarathustra, the state of bliss, in the sense of “invented happiness,” is potentially endless. It is difficult to escape the impression that the last men are in many ways like apes who have constructed their own artificial habitat. By mimicking each other in ape-like fashion, on the one hand, and carefully removing or ignoring potentially discordant elements in their environment, on the other, their achievement, paradoxically, looks like the Christian-Platonic ideal in terms of its stability. Perhaps this why Zarathustra tells the townspeople during his first speech that “man is more ape than any ape” (*Z*, Prologue, 3). It seems sadly ironic that the “rational animal” should, by means of the very capacity that was thought to elevate and set it apart from the beasts, have become progressively similar to others of its kind, while apes are known to draw distinctions based on rank and personality within their social structure. But this human development toward similarity by no means proves humankind’s “grandeur and kinship with God,” Nietzsche claims in *Daybreak*. “However high mankind may have evolved—and perhaps at the end it will stand even lower than at the beginning!—it cannot pass over into another order . . .

.<sup>116</sup> In fact, the further away it moves from its natural, biological roots, the closer it is to death, for “at the end of this way stands the funeral urn of the *last* man and gravedigger” (D, 49).<sup>117</sup>

The townspeople’s enthusiastic applause of Zarathustra’s description of the last men, and their expressed desire to become like them, further reifies the problematic nature of Zarathustra’s relationship with organized society on a symbolic level. Clearly contrary to the reaction he intended to elicit, and almost absurdly ignorant of the thrust of his message, the crowd proposes a bargain: “Turn us into these last men! Then we shall make you a gift of the overman!” Although the text may be cognitively opaque in many respects, there is no mistaking the fact that the last man is meant to represent “what is most contemptible.” Zarathustra says so explicitly while prefacing his description of the last man. Moreover, Zarathustra’s tactical reversal of strategy upon realizing that his attempt to outline a positive ideal has failed leaves little doubt that the overman and the last man stand at opposing ends on a spectrum of possible developmental trends. Given that the townspeople’s misconstrual of Zarathustra’s message in these respects seems

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<sup>116</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 49; hereafter referred to as D, followed by the section number.

<sup>117</sup>This reference to a gravedigger is of interest in terms of *Zarathustra’s* plot. When Zarathustra is about to leave the town, he is mocked by two gravediggers, whose occupation places them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This equivocation between the last man and the gravedigger, therefore, indicates that the last man exemplifies the lowest common denominator.

incredible, their response suggests that they are at this point desperately trying to get rid of him. Hence, they do what is necessary, even if that includes making promises apparently impossible to keep. At the same time, however, their mockery of Zarathustra's cause suggests that they have caught on to his tactic and are adopting a rebellious stance typical of children who have seen through their parents' attempt to use "reverse psychology" to deter them from a course of action.

As inappropriate as their reaction may appear in the context of Zarathustra's speech, their response to the speaker is directly analogous to the way in which a healthy immune system would deal with a foreign substance threatening the body's proper functions and integrity. It would seek to neutralize, and, failing that, put its efforts toward expelling, the irritant without regard to the intruder's intentions or welfare. Of course, the issue of consideration for the interests of threats to the body is largely moot, since most substances or objects that endanger it tend to lack sentience as far as we know. Nonetheless, if my own experience is any indication, the capacity of such assailants to form any kind of intent may well be irrelevant to our reaction toward them once the threshold of tolerance has been crossed. For instance, as most Texans know first hand, there is something infuriating about being bitten by fire ants that has nothing to do with the cognitive or moral status of these insects. And conversely, there appears to be a perverse satisfaction in knowing that the bee that has just stung you is going to die. But despite the knowledge that bee stings and ant bites are defensive reactions, and that these insects clearly do not bear

any moral responsibility, one feels violated and angry.<sup>118</sup> The same may be said of the crowd's disregard for the nature of Zarathustra's intentions or welfare, which become irrelevant once its efforts are turned toward defending the social body.

The implications of this correspondence between a well-functioning human organism and a healthy community are fairly clear in terms of characterizing Zarathustra's relationship to the town. Not only does he represent a foreign body that has transgressed the communal boundaries, thereby causing irritation, but the fact that he has once been a member of society, who has become separated and obviously estranged from it, renders him highly dangerous. As Douglas' model suggests, his return constitutes symbolic defilement of the social body on a cognitive level just as the readmission of substances or fluids that have once emerged from the body of an individual render it impure in a more physical sense.<sup>119</sup> Although a strong, healthy body should be able to tolerate and eventually neutralize a certain level of toxins, an excessive amount will trigger an often violent reaction to purge the system of the harmful substance. Applying this principle to Zarathustra's irritating presence in the community, the crowd's increasing annoyance is a sign that it is approaching its tolerance threshold. The only factor staving off the purging process is their belief that Zarathustra is part of the act and therefore, not to be taken

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<sup>118</sup>Zarathustra reacts quite differently to the adder's bite. After expressing his gratitude for waking him, he asks the adder to take back its potentially deadly poison because it is "not rich enough to give it" to him (Z, I, 19). In contrast to this, he beats the "leech" with his staff after having stepped on him (Z, IV, 4).

<sup>119</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 123.

seriously.

Finally even Zarathustra begins to realize that the townspeople's disposition toward him has changed. Their mockery and laughter are no longer good natured. His previous frustration giving way to sadness, he speaks again to his heart: "They do not understand me: I am not the mouth for these ears. . . . And now they look at me and laugh: and as they laugh they even hate me. There is ice in their laughter" (Z, Prologue, 5). Given that even the protagonist, who has so far appeared completely oblivious to his audience's mood, comments on the rising level of hostility, it seems natural that sympathetic readers would feel somewhat uneasy by now. Both the frequency and the severity of violations of underlying symbolic boundaries are adding up, and might well convey a sense of impending doom for Zarathustra. To compound the tension further, it has become quite evident that the charged atmosphere is largely due to the incompatibility of the parties' discursive frameworks. Since this decreases the possibility that conflict can be resolved by verbal means, one would expect any escalation to result in some form of violence.

Nonetheless, despite his verbal acknowledgment of the growing hostility, Zarathustra does not appear to take the people, as well as the threat they pose, seriously. This is evident both from his rhetorical tactics and the nature of his emotional response to the crowd's request to be turned into "last men." The fact that he feels sad, rather than angry, or as one may deem fitting, afraid that the townspeople might turn on him, betrays a distinctly paternalistic stance toward them. Although this could be considered one of numerous manifestations of his social

ineptitude, paternalism is diametrically opposed to his message of emancipation from the Christian-Platonic tradition.<sup>120</sup> And to make matters worse, it seems that the very set of dispositional traits in virtue of which he himself embodies his conception of the overman—a wholehearted, passionate, potentially reckless dedication to the enhancement of life in this world—is the major obstacle to his communicative success. Not only does he cast himself in a father role, thereby belittling his audience, but he seems to be a complete miscast insofar as his lack of attunement to existing conditions alienates his “children” (the small people). Again, his words and deeds contradict each other at a fundamental level: he preaches faith to the earth, but at the same time, ignores the circumstances that characterize the state of affairs to which he vows allegiance.

Does this mean that Zarathustra is a hypocrite on a par with the “‘Improvers’ of Mankind,” whom Nietzsche takes to task in *Twilight of the Idols* for establishing their respective moralities by immoral means? “Neither Manu nor Plato nor Confucius nor the Jewish and Christian teachers have ever doubted their *right* to lie,” Nietzsche writes (TI, 7, 5). His obvious point, of course, is that all of these “‘improvers’ of mankind” have founded their moral systems on a lie, which constitutes an existential contradiction, since lying violates the rules. While it is not entirely clear that Zarathustra is lying when he advocates the kinds of values

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<sup>120</sup>Zarathustra takes a similarly paternalistic stance toward the higher men when he finds them worshipping an ass in “The Ass Festival” (Z, IV, 18). The higher men, however, respond to his admonishment of their celebration by pointing out the inconsistency of this position with his doctrine of emancipation.

represented by the overman, the general features of his case are alarmingly similar to those of traditional “improvement moralities.” First, as I have shown above, Zarathustra himself does not appear to act in accordance with the principles he preaches. Second, paternalism, which disenfranchises certain segments of society, justly or not, on the grounds that they do not know their own good, is one of the main characteristics of the Christian-Platonic world view, which ultimately demands the blind acceptance of its values and ideals.<sup>121</sup> The Christian God, according to the New Testament, is the spiritual father of humankind. Plato’s *Republic* defines justice as the proper hierarchical ordering of society, putting the philosopher kings, who are most adept at following and hence, implementing Plato’s ideals, in charge of the other classes. Both are consistently targeted by Nietzsche on the grounds that they attempt to force all people to evaluate themselves and their lives in terms of an externally imposed, “top down” set of standards and ideals, thereby harming precisely the most valuable members of the human race: those capable of adopting an active, creative stance toward the problem of nihilism. And third, Zarathustra depicts the last man and the overman as binary opposites—an overly simplistic view with the same absolutist tendencies that characterize the Christian-Platonic world view. As such, acceptance of the corresponding moral framework would have a similarly life-negating influence, given that, as Zarathustra himself later claims, “never yet has truth hung on the arm of the unconditional” (Z, I, 12).

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<sup>121</sup>This issue is discussed more extensively in Chapter 2.

The correlation between Zarathustra's words, tone, attitude, and behavior and that of the founders and champions of traditional Western cognitive and moral categories is probably most evident to readers who are familiar with some of Nietzsche's other works, since the protagonist embodies, in hyperbolic fashion, every major aspect of the world view Nietzsche usually attacks. But even within the comparatively minor portion of the text considered so far, there is a marked dissonance between the symbolism of the opening sections and Zarathustra's interaction with the townsfolk. One cannot help but wonder, it seems to me, why Nietzsche would have his protagonist exemplify the very views, characteristics, and attitudes he so passionately despises, especially during his initial attempt to teach redemption after God's death. Indeed, what could motivate Nietzsche to construct an internally inconsistent account, given that he considers the threat of nihilism of utmost concern? It seems that inconsistencies, in addition to their being gratuitous, would undermine his mission—a perversely self-defeating move in light of the book's fictional status.

Although perplexing at first glance, I think this move can be explained by considering the possibility and likely consequences of employing the contrary strategy. To be consistent, Zarathustra, after setting out on his journey to save humankind from the impending existential crisis, would have to act in accordance with the precepts that enable individuals to create their own life-affirming values. Moreover, he would have to do so in a manner that avoids the trappings of the traditional Western cognitive scheme. Zarathustra, it seems, would be unable to

make any general or universal statements, since doing so would immediately compromise his position. Specifically, the dilemma he faces is that in order to communicate his message, he has to use a framework of reference shared by his audience without invoking the authority of established cognitive and moral categories. Nietzsche cannot consistently have Zarathustra tell his audience directly to create their own earthly, life-affirming values now that God is dead. Although this is presumably the message he seeks to convey, saying so straightforwardly not only prescribes a set of priorities and values, which is contrary to the content of his message, but it places Zarathustra in an authoritative position that implies epistemic privilege on his part. In other words, why should Zarathustra's audience believe that creating their own values is the appropriate response to God's death? Even if they were to accept his word as justification, doing so would be to follow the authoritarian precedent set by the Christian-Platonic tradition, thereby failing from the outset to become engaged with the project on their own terms.

The main difficulty faced by Nietzsche, as anyone in the teaching profession probably knows, is that the line between effective communication and indoctrination is very narrow. And, to complicate matters, the "location" of this line between clarity and imposition differs among individual listeners, which raises the probability of both falling short, and of exceeding the mark, in proportion to the number of individuals addressed.<sup>122</sup> This seems to me a fundamental and irreducible problem

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<sup>122</sup>This may be what motivates the subtitle "for all and none." Although it addresses an unspecified general readership, as it true of any publication presented to all

with any communicative effort that seeks to enable or empower. Considering that Zarathustra's mission, given the above discussed dilemma, cannot succeed by way of forced compliance or imposition, one might expect the problem to be addressed or illustrated on a narrative level. And indeed, it is. Zarathustra's highly abstract description of the overman, which allows for a wide range of possible instantiations while eschewing reference to the traditional Western cognitive scheme, illustrates a situation where avoidance of indoctrination takes precedence over clarity. His attempt to describe the positive features of a type of over-human being fails, and is clearly portrayed as a failure, due to a lack of shared communicative ground. The subsequent strategic shift intended to demonstrate "what is most contemptible," by contrast, exceeds the mark in terms of clarity, though as Zarathustra himself notes, even this amounts to indoctrination.<sup>123</sup>

If it is true that successful, cognitively transparent discourse is necessarily doomed to re-commit the "sins of the fathers," so to speak, then *Zarathustra* must prod its readers in some other fashion to adopt the type of stance Nietzsche thinks indispensable to a constructive confrontation of the problem of nihilism. Rational argumentation with reference to the traditional cognitive framework having been

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choosing to read it, *Zarathustra* seeks to avoid imposition and indoctrination, aiming instead to provide its readers with opportunities to gain their own insights. In that sense, the text tells no one what to think or believe, leaving the construction of a meaningful dialogue in the hands of the individual reader.

<sup>123</sup>Zarathustra is still speaking to his heart here, and after wondering whether his audiences ears must be smashed, he questions further, "Must one clatter like kettledrums and preachers of repentance? Or do they believe only the stammerer?" (Z, Prologue, 5).

excluded as a suitable vehicle, there remains the possibility of eliciting an emotional response that may serve as a catalyst for the reader's more active, self-directed orientation toward the text. To that end, I argue, Zarathustra adopts a posture that imitates in an absurdly exaggerated manner the paternalistic, imposing demeanor of our "fathers," that is, the intellectual heritage of the Western tradition. The aim of Nietzsche's authorial strategy, I think, is to take what cannot be avoided—the fact that meaningful, successful communication depends on a shared set of cognitive categories—and turn its undesirable implications to his advantage. He does so by portraying his protagonist in a role that caricatures paradigmatic features of the supposedly defunct Western metaphysical tradition, which serves to arouse and channel the reader's indignation and disgust, and directing it toward Zarathustra's obviously hypocritical authoritative tone and demeanor.

The incompatibility between Zarathustra as the childlike "awakened" one, introduced in the opening sections of the Prologue, and as the arrogant, paternalistic proselytizer, is rather plain, I think. Were it not for their nominal identity, which indicates that the narrative follows the journey of a single individual, one would probably be quite surprised to learn that the two descriptions refer to the same fictional character. There is a similarly jarring discontinuity between Zarathustra's message and his method of delivery, his "gift" and the effect it produces, the overman and last man speeches, respectively. Each of these opposing pairs, and I am fairly certain that many more of them could be found, involve contradiction on some level. For instance, a message that is intended to offend and disturb is not

ordinarily considered a gift, at least not from the recipient's point of view. Also, if Zarathustra's last man speech were successful in persuading his audience to avoid the attitude and lifestyle he considers contemptible, then it would by that very token fail, since passive compliance with externally imposed values characterizes the last men. All of this suggests a deliberate effort on Nietzsche's part to incite rebellion and protest, or perhaps to generate confusion and disgust. Even the most sympathetic reader, it seems, cannot accommodate or reconcile contradictory demands and may be expected to respond by rejecting discordant elements.

The (tragic) hero of this narrative, therefore, in accordance with the earlier reference to the Promethean myth, is an arsonist whose hyperbolic personification of the groundless air of authority exuded by the established order is intended to incense and repulse the reader. Aside from the arguments presented thus far, there is reason to think that Nietzsche was well aware of the effect his creation of a pompous, sermonizing protagonist might generate. In fact, he is quite likely speaking from personal experience (with Richard Wagner) when he tries to explain "that sudden deep repugnance" we feel when someone who once "*had* all the freedom of spirit" turns into a "believer." The similarities between the experience discussed in *Daybreak* and the nature of Zarathustra's transgressions against the reader's expectations I have outlined are really quite astonishing:

If we recall it, it is as if we had beheld some disgusting sight which we want to expunge from our soul as quickly as we can! Would we not turn our back even upon the person we most revered if he became suspicious to us in this respect? And not at all on account of a moral prejudice, but out of a sudden disgust and horror! . . . how then could he [who honors the capacity to

change his opinions] appear before the apostate of spiritual freedom in the role of judge and hangman! The sight of him would, rather, touch him as the sight of someone with a repulsive disease touches a physician: physical disgust at something fungous, mollified, bloated, suppurating, momentarily overpowers reason and the will to help. . . . It is in this way that our goodwill is overcome by the idea of the tremendous *dishonesty* which must have prevailed in the apostate of the free spirit: by the idea of a general degeneration reaching even into the skeleton of his character (D, 56).<sup>124</sup>

It seems to me that any reader acquainted with Nietzsche's works, even if only by reputation, is bound to expect the protagonist of *Zarathustra* to be a free spirit. That frame of mind, moreover, is reinforced by the opening passages' reversals of the significance of pivotal themes propagated by culturally central texts, as well as Zarathustra's strikingly casual mention of God's death. By all (early) indications, the hero of this narrative does not bow to tradition, thereby rendering his use of rhetorical and stylistic devices whose tenor resonates with the voice of the foundational texts of Western philosophy and religion particularly jarring. Moreover, the response to an "apostate of the free spirit" described by Nietzsche is remarkably similar to what Douglas designates a "reaction of impurity:" an immediate, pre-cognitive feeling of disgust and revulsion in the face of certain transgressions against the symbolic boundaries underlying cultural cognitive categories that (temporarily) suspends rational considerations. Nietzsche even characterizes the "sudden deep repugnance" in terms of a typical emotional response toward disease or contamination; his description, notably, focusing on the same

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<sup>124</sup>See also "On Apostates," where the reference to Wagner is rather obvious: "Or they learn to play the harp with pious pleasure—from a composer of songs who would like to harp himself right into the hearts of young females . . ." (Z, III, 8, 2).

types of substances evocative of “pollution behavior” on Douglas’ model due to their categorical ambiguity, incompleteness, or amorphous qualities, among others.<sup>125</sup>

Whether or not Nietzsche was explicitly aware of the correlation between violations of established cognitive categories and ideas regarding pollution or contamination, his discussion of the effect of a “free spirit’s” transgression against expectations raised by the definition of the term shows that he was alert to the matter at least in this specific instance. And given the astonishing correspondence between the *Daybreak* passage and Zarathustra’s case, there is good indication that he intentionally sought to arouse his readers’ indignation and disgust. Granted that the similarities are brought into relief more obtrusively against the background of Douglas’ model, there are additional reasons for attributing this authorial motive to Nietzsche. One is the previously addressed problem of communicating an insight that is strictly speaking incommunicable within the confines of the predominant cultural cognitive framework. As such, the hyperbolic mimicry of the tradition creates an ironic distance between the medium of meaningful discourse and the absolutist tendencies of its semantic underpinnings.

The other reason to suppose that Nietzsche may have sought to elicit a repulsed response is suggested by the narrative itself. The townspeople reject Zarathustra’s attempt to impose his values immediately following the “last man” speech, setting a precedent to be affirmed at the end of Part I by none other than

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<sup>125</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 51-56.

Zarathustra himself. Having attracted an unspecified number of followers,<sup>126</sup> Zarathustra proceeds to deliver a series of speeches that revisit themes familiar from Nietzsche's other works. At the end of Part I, he somewhat abruptly takes his leave from his "disciples" to return to his mountain cave: "Now I go alone, my disciples. You too go now, alone. Thus I want it. Verily, I counsel you: go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And even better: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he deceived you" (Z, I, 22). Aside from the obvious reference to the New Testament narrative of the life of Christ, Zarathustra's rather unusual request confirms that passive compliance based on belief in his doctrines is ineffective against the threat of nihilism. Given that unquestioning belief in the authority of the "fathers" of the Western tradition is precisely what left their progeny vulnerable to the threat of nihilism, Zarathustra seeks to avoid repetition of that mistake. Instead, he challenges his followers to reject him, as well as his teachings, on the grounds that his words are subject to the same criticisms he launches against the Christian-Platonic tradition.<sup>127</sup>

This in mind, the townspeople's rejection of Zarathustra's sermon on the "last man" appears to be precisely the response Nietzsche would have sought to

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<sup>126</sup>The fact that neither the number of disciples nor the manner in which Zarathustra has managed to persuade them to follow him is addressed by the narrative suggests that perhaps the readers who continue to follow his journey are his disciples. Though essential to marking the protagonist's point of departure from the tradition, the disciples' presence is tangential throughout Part I.

<sup>127</sup>Part III, "On the Spirit of Gravity," again illustrates Zarathustra's resolve to avoid dogmatism: "'This is *my* way; where is yours?'—thus I answered those who asked me 'the way.' For *the* way—that does not exist" (Z, III, 11, 2).

elicit. Moreover, Zarathustra's encouragement of a critical stance toward himself places the crowd's request to be turned into last men in a different light; it now seems a lot more unclear whether their expressed desire is motivated by misunderstanding. In fact, I want to suggest that Nietzsche's intent is to provoke the reader to follow suit, and to reject Zarathustra's "sermons" because the problem of nihilism cannot be conquered by dogmatic acceptance of externally imposed values and doctrines. Nietzsche's reason for eliciting a disgusted response toward Zarathustra's arrogation of the cloak of traditional authority, therefore, is to incite the reader to become a lion—to declare the "sacred 'No'" necessary to "the creation of freedom for oneself for new creation" (Z, I, 1). The protagonist, in other words, adopts the mask of the dragon as a means to guide the reader toward his or her own emancipation.

## Chapter 5

### Corpses, Jesters, Gravediggers, and Swamps

Let us now return to the text following this admittedly lengthy analysis. The people, whose request to become like the last men is an endorsement of the established order, deliver on their promise to give Zarathustra the overman, though in a most bizarre manner. Section 6 of the Prologue begins with the tightrope walker's fall, occasioned by a jester, who "uttered a devilish cry and jumped over the man who stood in his way . . ." (Z, Prologue, 6). The jester, claiming to be "better than" the tightrope walker, most likely represents the moral establishment, the "good and the just." Sure footed and confident, he takes his superiority for granted, a sign that his actions and estimation of himself are sanctioned by the powers that be while the performer, perhaps a literal instantiation of the overman, seems aware of the risk he takes in his attempt to "go over." Assuming that the people consider themselves good and just, the intimidation tactics of their representative, the jester, implicate them directly in the tightrope walker's fall and subsequent death. As such, the townspeople's promise to make Zarathustra "a gift of the overman" if he turns them into last men is fulfilled in a rather perverse twist.

Zarathustra, for his part, accepts this gift. While the crowd scatters to get away from the site of impact, he remains in place even as the man, "badly maimed and disfigured, but not yet dead" falls to the ground. Upon regaining consciousness, the tightrope walker confesses to Zarathustra, who kneels beside him, his fear of the

afterlife: “I have long known that the devil would trip me. Now he will drag me to hell. Would you prevent him?” (Z, Prologue, 6). In a parody of the New Testament narrative of Christ’s crucifixion, as well as the Christian “last rites,” Zarathustra comforts the dying man by assuring him that there is no afterlife. He further allays his fears that his life may not have been worthwhile in its absence: “You have made danger your vocation; there is nothing contemptible in that. Now you perish of your vocation: for that I will bury you with my own hands” (Z, Prologue, 6). Thereupon, the tightrope walker dies, peacefully.

Aside from presenting yet another inversion of themes and rituals central to the Western religious tradition, this section sets the stage for further violations of symbolic boundaries underlying the established cognitive order. The tightrope walker’s mangled body transgresses against an idea directly related to the root meaning of “holiness:” the notion of physical wholeness and completeness.<sup>128</sup> Leviticus, whose abominations include physical deformities, explicitly prohibits those suffering from any flaws or imperfections from entering the temple:

*Levit. xxxi*

17. ‘Say to Aaron, None of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. 18. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long. 19. or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, 20. or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs, or crushed testicles; . . .’

Given that Zarathustra is portrayed as a pseudo-religious figure by repeated, albeit

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<sup>128</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 51.

inverted, references to the life of Christ, it is suggested that his status is roughly equivalent; a revolutionary himself, Jesus remains the paradigm of purity and innocence. Unlike Christ, however, Zarathustra does not heal physical ailments.<sup>129</sup> Instead, he accepts disorder and death as part of the natural course of things in the empirical world, illustrated by his contact with the mutilated man, and thereby seriously compromises his purity on a symbolic level.<sup>130</sup>

Although this act of compassion happens to save Zarathustra from the mob's wrath because it appears to affirm one of their highest values, pity, he continues to pose a cognitive threat to the reader. While the townspeople leave the marketplace at nightfall, and by doing so distance themselves from disfigurement, death, and darkness, the reader who does not put the book down is practically forced to share Zarathustra's experiences even though his actions and choices may be distressing insofar as they violate symbolic boundaries. Sitting alone in the dark with a maimed corpse does just that—in a number of ways. The darkness, by obliterating visible boundaries and distinctions, opposes the imposition of order and structure due to its all encompassing formless, amorphous quality. The tightrope walker's mutilated

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<sup>129</sup>Zarathustra even makes it clear during his subsequent encounter with the hunchback, who asks him to perform a healing miracle, that he would not do so if he could (*Z*, II, 20).

<sup>130</sup>Douglas stresses that priests, and especially high priests, must strictly observe the precepts of physical completeness: "Priests may only come into contact with death when their own close kin die. But the high priest must never have contact with death" *Purity and Danger*, 51. As a high ranking quasi-religious figure then, Zarathustra would be expected to maintain a level of purity at least equal to that of a high priest.

body defies the idea of physical wholeness and completeness. And lastly, the idea of death itself is creepy and unsettling because it signifies non-being, disintegration, and chaos, all of which remain utterly unknowable. Given that the setting multiplies violations of symbolic boundaries, Zarathustra's decision to remain in the midst of it exposes the reader to images with great potential to be emotionally unsettling, a situation, moreover, that cannot be avoided except by following the townspeople's precedent and putting physical distance between herself and the book.

As before, it seems noteworthy that the threat is not of a physical nature. Darkness, while concealing whatever may be present from sight, presumably does not cause any boundaries or distinctions to vanish. Similarly, a relatively fresh corpse that did not succumb to any contagious disease is not a threat in any pathogenic sense—nor are displaced or even unattached limbs and other body parts. Nonetheless, the idea of being in close proximity to a mutilated corpse in the dark is creepy and disturbing because it constitutes a three-fold transgression against fundamental symbolic boundaries between structure and chaos. Although the case is readily made by applying Douglas' theory, Nietzsche himself characterizes the emotional impact of violating the established moral order as similar to the kind of dread one might experience when faced with a corpse. Everything becomes questionable when accepted cognitive and moral categories are overthrown. The potential creator of a new moral order, according to Nietzsche, would exclaim: "I am consumed by doubt, I have killed the law, the law anguishes me as a corpse does a

living man . . .” (D, 14).<sup>131</sup> This follows a discussion of the history of madness as mask and vehicle to break “the spell of a venerated usage and superstition,” as well as the means to “make oneself mad when one is not mad and does not dare to appear so,” which include “going into the desert or ascending a mountain or a pillar.” As such, it seems that *Zarathustra* once again demonstrates the practical and emotional aspects of Nietzsche’s theory.<sup>132</sup>

Nietzsche’s awareness of the correlation between our emotional attachment to established values and bodily integrity is particularly significant in the present context insofar as it corresponds directly to the connection between cultural cognitive categories and their structural underpinnings, which Douglas shows to be based largely on the symbolism of the body. There seems to be a certain symbolic equivalence, in other words, recognized by both Douglas and Nietzsche, between the emotional repercussions of transgressions against naturalized cognitive categories and the natural boundaries of the human body. If this is true, then *Zarathustra*’s conceptual violations of the reader’s implicit assumptions regarding proper cognitive

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<sup>131</sup>See also Z, I, 17, “On the Way of the Creator,” which describes the agony experienced by those who separate themselves from the herd and its values. “There are feelings which want to kill the lonely,” Zarathustra tells us, “and if they do not succeed, well, then they themselves must die. But are you capable of this—to be a murderer?”

<sup>132</sup>By spending ten years in solitude on a mountain, bursting onto the scene at the marketplace like the madman of *The Gay Science* 125, and keeping vigil over the tightrope walker’s dead body, *Zarathustra*’s actions follow the sequential order of *Daybreak* 14. The parallels might indicate an acknowledgment on Nietzsche’s part that the reader may well interpret *Zarathustra*’s aberrant behavior as madness on the basis of historical precedent.

order and the image of the tightrope walker's dead, mutilated body are merely different avenues of approach to the productions of the desired emotional response: revulsion, disgust, and horror. The point of provoking the reader to react to transgressions against the established cognitive and moral order, again, is to expose his or her unrecognized pieties and inadvertent commitments to foundational assumptions of the Christian-Platonic world view. For instance, the notion that life and death are fundamentally opposed, rather than part of a natural continuum, suggests that death is a state to be avoided. Given that this is not a realistic prospect, as far as we can tell from our empirical experience, this binary opposition has led the Christian-Platonic tradition to invent an afterworld or transcendent realm in which the ideal (eternal life) may be realized. Empirical existence, which cannot measure up to the ideal, is subsequently devalued in favor of the "unknowable," as Zarathustra puts it in the course of his first speech (Z, Prologue, 3).

It is not difficult to see how God's death, in conjunction with the cognitive habits cultivated and ingrained by the Western tradition's largely unchallenged framework of rational categories, might prove to be calamitous. Empirical existence, reduced to instrumental value by the Christian-Platonic world view, is rendered worthless by the demise of its justification by way of otherworldly ideal(s). Nonetheless, we retain the habit of evaluating situations and events in terms of concepts and categories that have become deeply entrenched by two millennia of exclusive predominance even if we "know better" on an intellectual level. Despite any explicit, conscious rejection of established values, concepts, and definitions,

unconscious habit and emotional bias in favor of the status quo tend to sabotage “translation” of our intellectual beliefs into everyday practice. As Nietzsche tells us in an aphorism entitled “*Wherein we are all irrational*. – We still draw conclusions of judgments we consider false, of teaching in which we no longer believe – our feelings make us do it” (D, 99). Although alignment of explicit, intellectual beliefs with the unconscious habits and drives that regulate most of our daily activities is not in itself desirable, the threat of nihilism continues to persist as long as our actual lives do not reflect an appreciation of empirical existence on its own terms.

This means that the “default function,” so to speak, of our emotions and habits, given their conservative bias, works in favor of nihilism—despite rational, conscious efforts to avoid it. Under these circumstances then, it makes perfect sense to attach emotional disvalue to the retention and exercise of cognitive habits detrimental to the endeavor to lead a meaningful and worthwhile life.<sup>133</sup> Indeed, this may well be the only way to counteract or disrupt the short range emotional profitability of maintaining an ultimately destructive habit merely to avoid the discomfort and pain of confronting and overcoming it. Without an incentive (or deterrent) that operates by means of the very mechanism that tends to undermine our conscious resolve, that is, our emotional disposition, there seems to be little chance

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<sup>133</sup>I will say more about *Zarathustra*'s role in providing its readers with opportunity to replace harmful habits with new ones in my discussion of section 9. Substitution of healthy habits for those violated by targeted textual transgressions against the predominant Western cognitive and moral framework (and hence, perceived as painful or distressing), should restore emotional composure.

for success, contrary to Socrates' claim that reason, with the aid of spirit, is uniquely suited to rule the appetitive parts of the soul.<sup>134</sup> Socrates' conclusion, interestingly, follows an anecdote about Leontius' anger at his inability to refrain from satisfying the desire to look at corpses, a sight that evokes his disgust. The story is intended to show that, in addition to the rational and appetitive parts, the soul also has a spirited part that joins forces with the intellect when the appetites threaten to subvert the soul's proper order. Moreover, Socrates claims, "I don't think you can say that you've ever seen spirit . . . ally itself with an appetite to do what reason has decided must not be done."<sup>135</sup> Leontius' anger, assumed to establish the existence of spirit, is said to join forces with reason against the appetites, but whence his disgust? Socrates, it seems, provides no reasonable explanation for the revulsion itself, and hence, no justification for the belief that avoiding sight of the corpses is the rational mode of action—unless one considers the brute fact that something evokes disgust sufficient to provide a rational basis for the corresponding normative judgment.

Socrates, in other words, is begging the question with respect to justifying the judgment that disgust is to be avoided. If Leontius' disgust, presumably a response generated by the appetitive part of his soul, is sufficient to warrant the belief that it is irrational knowingly to expose oneself to a source of distress, then our appetites and emotions indirectly determine what counts as reasonable and hence, moral.

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<sup>134</sup>*Republic*, 441e-442b.

<sup>135</sup>*Republic*, 440b.

Zarathustra's guardianship of the mangled corpse, therefore, challenges the Christian-Platonic world view by *showing* that its rejection of death and decay is based on considerations that are inconsistent with its own fundamental principles. It shows, in other words, that just because a situation or state of affairs causes emotional distress, it does not follow that it is therefore morally objectionable.<sup>136</sup> Although this is problematic in its own right from a philosophical point of view, the practical, existential implications of continued acceptance of precepts that lead to the condemnation of natural processes are potentially devastating. As such, Nietzsche's construction of a literary device that turns the reader's own destructive tendencies into "nihilism-detection instruments" is quite ingenious. Insofar as readers react negatively to textual violations of culturally accepted cognitive and symbolic boundaries, their own emotions may be said to betray their nihilistic tendencies. The strategy, to put this somewhat differently, is to disturb the reader's emotional equilibrium by attacking unconscious beliefs and assumptions that implicitly affirm nihilistic values and ideals. If this is correct, and I think the evidence strongly suggests that Nietzsche intended to produce a disturbing effect, then his strategic violations of the reader's pieties not only manage to act upon an aspect of human experience inaccessible by means of rational persuasion, but they simultaneously expose the arbitrariness of the Western traditions' fundamental rational and moral

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<sup>136</sup>This appears to be the implication Socrates draws from Leontius' case. Christianity, likewise, considers suffering and distress objectionable insofar as they are indicative of sin. I provide a more extensive discussion of this in Chapter 2.

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This dual function is highly significant for two reasons. First, it allows for engagement with the reader on a personal, individual level, since a disturbed emotional response to cognitive or symbolic violations depends on the reader's inadvertent commitments to the established order. The strength of certain commitments and pieties, moreover, are likely to differ somewhat among individuals due to variations in their upbringing, life experience, and other contingent factors that shape their personal priorities and outlook. As such, the text's tendency to generate distress only when it does in fact transgress against cognitive or symbolic boundaries valued by the reader renders it responsive to each individual's unique sensibilities. And because the readers who are disturbed by certain violations are, in a sense, members of a self-selected set, *Zarathustra* does not run the risk of undermining its efforts to enable, rather than indoctrinate, given that any potential insight gained by its readers is a product of their coming to terms with their own distressed response.

The second, and related, reason empowerment of the target audience is crucial to Nietzsche's attempt to avert an existential crisis has to do with the nature of the problem itself. It seems that nihilism is not an abstract, theoretical concern amenable to intellectual grasp. Although one can be told that the framework of accepted rational and moral categories as a whole is ungrounded, it is far from self-evident why this state of affairs, supposing it is true, should lead us to react like the madman of *The Gay Science*. There is a distinct sense in which the matter of God's

death is incommunicable because his death undermines the possibility that the concepts used to convey the idea refer to a state of affairs that is true in the strong (metaphysical) sense. Given that we have little choice but to use some framework of reference shared by speaker and listener, or author and reader, alike, and that the soundness of any categorical framework is compromised by the demise of a transcendent source of order, the claim that God is dead presupposes the very idea it seeks to negate.<sup>137</sup> Even if one were to suppose that the message regarding God's death could be conveyed without contradiction, though this may well be impossible, it would nevertheless remain unclear why one should be alarmed by God's absence.

The point is that nihilism is not an intellectual problem that can be grasped and dealt with on an objective, abstract level. And to think one has understood its implications when one has processed the message regarding God's death in theory is to miss the problem Nietzsche sought to call to our attention (almost) entirely. In fact, it seems to me that one fails to grasp the problem precisely to the extent to which one thinks one has clearly understood, since one ought not to be able to understand what it means for all established meaning and value to be uprooted. One should not be able to conceive of a state of affairs characterized by the absence of truth and moral values, in other words, because in order to formulate coherent thoughts one must assume that there exists some independent order or structure in

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<sup>137</sup>Bernd Magnus and his co-authors argue that a number of Nietzsche's central concepts, such as the will to power and eternal recurrence, are of this nature. He calls these concepts, whose conceivability depends on the very notions they seek to set aside "self-consuming." *Nietzsche's Case*, 25.

terms of which ideas are meaningful. Yet this is precisely what God's death calls into question. These considerations, I think, shed light on the virtues of *Zarathustra's* approach. While the gravity of the impending crisis cannot be conveyed by appeal to reason alone, due to the contradiction involved, as well as to the fact that stating the matter in universal terms fails to impart its relevance, making it available in terms of the mode of experience in which the problem of nihilism would be manifested avoids these obstacles. By problematizing specific sets of priorities and values that arise from within the context of the reader's own experience, therefore, *Zarathustra* addresses the reader as a unique individual actually engaged in the process of attempting to make sense of its subject matter.

In contrast to the universal claim that God's death leads to the devaluation of the highest values, generally speaking, Nietzsche allows the reader's own priorities and values to determine which among the countless implications of God's death affect his or her view of world and self specifically. While one individual may be devastated by the realization that without God there is no afterlife, another, such as the tightrope walker, for instance, may be quite relieved depending on his or her specific beliefs and experiences, and yet a third entirely indifferent because he or she has never believed in an afterlife. But even this third person may not be immune to Nietzsche's strategy, since God's death has more far reaching consequences than the existence of an afterlife. To the extent that the issues and problems raised by the text emerge from the set of habits reflecting the priorities and values that characterize individuals' practical orientation toward life, *Zarathustra* challenges its readers to

explore the implications of God's death actually relevant to their lived experience. After all, nihilism is a problem that concerns the value and meaning of our empirical existence, that is, of the unique series of particular experiences that shapes, and is shaped by, its subjects. That in mind, it seems worth noting here that I do not think nihilism is to be considered an exclusively emotional or psychological problem. Mental and intellectual habits, as well as the degree of a person's emphasis on reason in conducting his or her affairs, contribute to the whole of experience no less than emotional or psychological states and dispositions.

It may be objected that the sense of distress generated by a text, though an experience of sorts, is not equivalent to the kind of distress caused by an actually occurring event. For that reason, inferences drawn on the basis of one's reaction to a literary work may not be valid in the context of "real" events and situations. While I agree that reading about, and actually experiencing, a disturbing event are not the same thing, it seems to me that the difference between reactions to each is one of degree rather than in kind. I do not see why one should think that a person who feels disgust at a certain event actually experienced would remain entirely indifferent toward the same event depicted within the context of a narrative and vice versa. The same set of habits, beliefs, and dispositions that generate distress under certain circumstances in one context, one would think, are brought to bear in the other. The idea that someone should be untouched when reading about the torture of another sentient being, for instance, yet be highly distressed when witnessing the actual occurrence of a similar event seems rather implausible. It would presuppose that

one's habits, beliefs, and sensibilities can be dropped and reinstated whenever contextual changes take place. I grant that most people probably approach texts, and especially works of fiction, with a less critical or serious mind set than they do actual events because their value and import depends on a different set of criteria.

Nonetheless, the reader's understanding of an event or situation depicted in the context of written discourse depends on acceptance of the same set of criteria that allows her to make sense of, and evaluate, actual events. Moreover, if a fictional state of affairs, subject to a less rigorous set of criteria in terms of credibility, is capable of generating a disturbed response, there is little reason to believe that a similar situation encountered in the course of real life experience would not have a comparable effect. So although inductive inferences drawn from a set of circumstances in one context cannot automatically be presumed to hold in another, I think that the factors determining a person's stance toward fictional and non-fictional (or real) problems, as well as her manner of dealing with them, are relevantly similar in each case.

Another reason to suppose that Nietzsche considers certain cross-contextual applications of inductive inferences legitimate is that the lesson Zarathustra draws from the tightrope walker's tragic fall demonstrates just this kind of reasoning. Speaking once more to his heart, he infers from his most recent experience that "human existence is uncanny and still without meaning: a jester can become man's fatality" (Z, Prologue, 7). Apparently, Zarathustra considers the cause of the deadly incident indicative of the general state of affairs. His conclusion that existence as a

whole lacks meaning and purpose follows from the realization that the character who instantiates the moral establishment's pretense of authority still has the power to inflict considerable harm, despite the fact that this authority is baseless. The jester's ability to cause the tightrope walkers's downfall, in other words, depends on the fact that the state of indeterminacy left by God's death allows the moral establishment to continue to assert its power. Only in such a void, or so Zarathustra seems to believe, can the mere fact that a certain moral order happens to be established cause the downfall of those attempting to defy it. His solution, presented as if it follows directly from the above diagnosis, confirms that certain cross-contextual generalizations and inferences are valid: "I will teach men the meaning of their existence—the overman, the lightning out of the dark cloud of man" (Z, Prologue, 7). Zarathustra's reasoning here implies his belief that "a *counterideal* [is] lacking," that is, the possibility of an alternative mode of imposing order on, and explicating the meaning of, our empirical experience.<sup>138</sup>

The similarities between the line of reasoning exhibited above and the thesis that the reader's response to textual violations of established cognitive schemes provides significant indication as to his or her general orientation toward the *state of indeterminacy* created by God's death suggest that the reader ought to follow

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<sup>138</sup>TI, "Genealogy of Morals." Nietzsche's characterizes *Zarathustra* as a counterideal in the context of his discussion of part III of GM: "The *third* inquiry offers the answer to the question whence the ascetic ideal, the priest's ideal, derives its tremendous *power* although it is the *harmful* idea *par excellence*, a will to the end, an ideal of decadence." His response is that it is not from God, but owing to the fact that something better is lacking—"because it was the only ideal so far, because it had no rival."

Zarathustra's example. Whereas Zarathustra, still standing next to the tightrope walker's dead body in the dark marketplace, finally resolves to leave, carrying with him the corpse he intends to bury with his own hands, the reader's task is to dispose of the equally mangled, soul-less remnants of the value structure that surreptitiously undermines her ability to affirm life on its own terms, and for its own sake. In fact, I think that the protagonist's stance toward, and manner of dealing with, conditions conducive to nihilism on a narrative level is intended to provide some fairly straightforward directives to the reader. By having Zarathustra model the behavior, speech, and thoughts of a person "awake"<sup>139</sup> to the implications of God's death under the sorts of circumstances likely to cause distress to those who have not yet incorporated them, Nietzsche provides his readers with a symbolic guide to their own journey should they decide to embark upon it. But because he *shows*, as we will see, with Zarathustra leading the way only in a figurative sense, how to deal with those aspects of God's death perceived as problematic insofar as they conflict with the set of values and priorities that characterizes each individual's orientation, the specific meaning and relevance of these demonstrations remain in the reader's hands.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup>Recall the saint's observation in section 2 that "Zarathustra is an awakened one" who is about to find himself "among the sleepers."

<sup>140</sup>I have in mind here a person's contingent life experiences, personal priorities, values, matters of pride, etc. For example, the son or daughter of a funeral director is likely to be less squeamish about corpses, having been exposed to an environment that deals with dead bodies as a matter of course, than someone who lacks such experience. The image of Zarathustra's tending to a mangled corpse, therefore, will not have the

The intent to provide guidance without imposing is explicitly reiterated in section 9, where Zarathustra evaluates the entire sequence of events following his descent from the mountain. In an effort to adjust to the state of affairs he actually encountered, apparently contrary to his expectations,<sup>141</sup> he decides that the “madman” approach to communication was misguided: “An insight has come to me: companions I need, living ones—not dead companions and corpses whom I carry with myself wherever I want to. Living companions I need, who follow me because they want to follow themselves—wherever I want” (Z, Prologue, 9). Although the second sentence may seem rather obscure, even contradictory, on its own, it not only makes sense in the above context, but affirms that Zarathustra is a guide, intended to lend a helping hand in readers’ essentially self-motivated efforts to confront nihilism—not to carry the out the project for them.<sup>142</sup> I will say more about the conditions or ground

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same effect on all readers depending on their experience, which means that individuals’ perceptions of what counts as problematic vary.

<sup>141</sup>This, too, may reflect the reader’s situation if the text succeeds in raising awareness to previously unrecognized nihilistic tendencies.

<sup>142</sup>This point is reiterated numerous times throughout the book. For instance, at the end of Part I, Zarathustra leaves his disciples, instructing them to renounce him because he does not want any believers or mere followers (Z, I, 22). In Part III, 7, “On Passing By,” Zarathustra rebukes his “ape” for imitating his words, demeanor, mode of expression, and sentiments on the grounds that they are used to conceal the “ape’s” true motive: revenge. The ape’s words, though they may be consistent with Zarathustra’s message, are betrayed by his deeds, which show that they are not the “ape’s” own.

And perhaps most significantly in the current context, Zarathustra rejects the notion of a universally valid set of values, claiming the idea is the work of the devil of gravity: “This is *my* way; where is yours?”—thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ ‘For *the* way—that does not exist” (Z, III, 11).

rules Zarathustra seems to impose on his readers for following his journey further after considering his encounter with the second hermit, since their meeting sheds some light on the matter of life and death.

Before turning to section 9 in more detail, however, I shall point out additional devices that amplify the cognitively threatening character of the text's transgressions against culturally entrenched ideas regarding death in the preceding section. We will see that after adding further violations of symbolic boundaries to produce a setting one might easily picture in the context of a horror novel, Zarathustra draws a distinction between life and death that arises naturally, that is, on the basis of empirical experience. His drawing the distinction after violating the cognitive and moral framework that supports transcendent ideals suggests that destruction of harmful ideals alone, though necessary, does not suffice to avert the impending existential crisis. Those ideals must be replaced by distinctions and values that reflect "the meaning of the earth" in the sense that they emerge out of the context of this-worldly experience. Section 8 will also *show* the appropriate attitude toward situations that tend to be perceived as threatening solely in virtue of their violations of the predominant cognitive framework, in contrast to circumstances under which the difference between a living and a dead body is actually relevant. In a rather comical scene toward the end of the section, Zarathustra is going to inform an old hermit of a "fact" regarding the dead—a piece of advice that, ironically, applies to his own prior dealings with the townspeople, albeit in a metaphorical sense.

As Zarathustra leaves the dark marketplace, the mutilated corpse on his back,

to make his way out of town he is confronted by the jester who had crept up behind him. The jester whispers a warning: “Go away from this town, Zarathustra, . . . there are too many here who hate you. You are hated by the good and the just, and they call you their enemy and despiser; you are hated by the believers in the true faith, and they call you the danger of the multitude” (Z, Prologue, 8). After confirming, as a representative of the moral establishment, that Zarathustra had escaped the crowd’s wrath by sheer luck of the circumstances, he disappears into the darkness.

Zarathustra, without responding, “went on through the dark lanes.” The jester’s observation that by stooping “to the dead dog,” Zarathustra lowered himself, thereby saving his life for the time being, is consistent with the idea that social order requires the separation of “marginal” figures from the rest of society.<sup>143</sup> In addition to showing pity, Zarathustra’s stooping to tend to the injured tightrope walker, whose status as a stranger is acknowledged, since he is part of a traveling act and hence, only a temporary intruder, the protagonist aligns himself with the former’s status. Although both constitute a symbolic threat to the town in virtue of their having crossed its physical boundaries, Zarathustra’s implied recognition of his marginal status sets him apart from the established order, thereby acknowledging his threatening quality. This phenomenon is also reflected by the setting and events that

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<sup>143</sup>Prisons and mental health facilities are cases in point. Putting aside the matter of punishment, both are instances in which the principle of separation has become institutionalized. Neither every prisoner nor every mental patient is a physical threat to others—yet their transgressions against the social order are considered justification for their exclusion from the rest of society.

surround the tightrope walker's fall. Whereas the people scatter in anticipation of the falling body, Zarathustra remains in place. Although bodies falling from some height are obviously dangerous in a physical sense, the emphasis placed on the people's reaction suggests that Nietzsche, by way of contrast, intends to stress the point that "herd" behavior coincides with, or favors, avoidance of danger.

In fact, this alliance in defense of the established order includes even those at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. As Zarathustra is about to pass the town gate, carrying the tightrope walker's body, he is accosted by a pair of gravediggers. Shining their torches in his face, they begin to mock him: "how nice that Zarathustra has become a gravedigger! For our hands are too *clean* for this roast" (Z, Prologue, 8, emphasis mine). Given that their occupation, in addition to involving manual labor, puts them into direct physical contact with the soil at the cemetery, a marginal area, their "craft's" connection with non-being and disintegration has traditionally been associated with pollution and impurity. The implication that contact with the tightrope walker's corpse constitutes a higher degree of pollution than that to which the gravediggers are routinely exposed is indicative of Zarathustra's position from the point of view of the established order. If he is considered unclean by those whose social status reflects the highest degree of impurity tolerable within the communal structure, in other words, then the cognitive threat posed by Zarathustra is off the scale.

The idea that Zarathustra's fully integrated, practical awareness of the implications of God's death is radically incommensurable with the conditions

necessary to maintain social order is reinforced by the setting, as well as by the gravediggers' parting comments. He literally has no place within the structured limits of the community, the physical boundary of which is clearly marked by the town gate. Crossing through the gate, moreover, symbolizes transgression of the line between order and chaos, being and non-being; in terms of the underlying symbolic structure, the gate leading out of the town is the gate to hell, for on the other side lies the realm of the unholy.<sup>144</sup> The gravediggers' final remarks appear to acknowledge the correlation between the physical and symbolic boundaries of the setting: "Would Zarathustra steal this bite from the devil? Well then, we wish you a good meal. If only the devil were not a better thief than Zarathustra: he will steal them both, he will gobble up both" (Z, Prologue, 8). Zarathustra's previous assurance to the dying tightrope walker that he need not fear being dragged off to hell in effect deprived the devil of his meal. This is assuming that people who consider themselves sinners are "roasted" by their own fear of hell. By crossing the line that delimits the scope of order, structure, and civilization, however, Zarathustra, along with the corpse, will quickly become indistinguishable from their surroundings in the dark. Hence, from the gravediggers' perspective, they will be swallowed by the territory ruled by the devil.

Undaunted, "Zarathustra never said a word and went on his way" (Z, Prologue, 8). Carrying the dead body on his back, he walks for two hours, "past

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<sup>144</sup>In the sense of "unstructured" or "lacking order," *Purity and Danger*, 49.

forests and swamps”—a setting reminiscent of the kind of scenery that typically precedes the appearance of monsters or some other hair-raising event in works of the horror genre. The sense of impending danger conveyed by settings such as these, as Noël Carroll argues in his analysis of “art-horror,” also based on Douglas’ model, is due in part to their categorically indistinct or interstitial characteristics.<sup>145</sup> A swamp, for instance, is neither land nor water, and so cannot be classified as solid or liquid, since it is a combination of the two. Moreover, like other locations from which monsters tend to emerge, such as forests, cemeteries, sewers, and abandoned warehouses, swamps “belong to environs outside of and unknown to ordinary social life.”<sup>146</sup> Adding to the creepy scenery the fact that Zarathustra is carrying a mutilated corpse through the dark of night while hungry wolves howl in the background, multiple violations of cultural cognitive categories committed by way of the narrative and setting converge at this juncture. The only way to escalate the tension further, it seems, would be to introduce the monster.

Just as the sense of impending doom appears to approach its climax, however, the narrative takes a decidedly comical turn. Zarathustra, reminded by the howling of the wolves, notices that he, too, is hungry. Although taking note of one’s bodily needs is rarely a particularly funny or momentous event, Zarathustra’s apparently warped sense of priority, against the backdrop of the current setting,

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<sup>145</sup>Noël Carroll, “The Nature of Horror,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46: 1, Fall 1987, 52-59.

<sup>146</sup>“The Nature of Horror,” 57.

produces a rather jarring discontinuity that diffuses the volatile atmosphere. Since few individuals would think about food while facing mortal danger, this seemingly inappropriate response directs the reader's attention toward a potentially questionable set of assumptions on his or her part. Probably the most central assumption open to doubt in the current context has to do with the implicit inference that places beyond the ordered social realm, because they violate the symbolic underpinnings that give rise to cultural cognitive categories and their attendant social structures, are inherently dangerous. Zarathustra's indifference toward this state of affairs, therefore, can be read as an applied reiteration of the italicized verbal statement at the end of section 2, immediately prior to his violent penetration of the social body: "*God is dead.*" If God is dead, as Zarathustra believes, and the source or first principle of all created order has ceased to exist, then inferences or conclusions derived from the implicit assumption that the world has a certain order or structure prior to, or apart from, empirical experience are invalid.

Despite the fact that Zarathustra's attitude toward the state of the world following God's death is essentially correct, however, there appears to be substantial gap between his attunement to the epistemological and ontological consequences of this event, on the one hand, and his almost palpable resistance against existing social/cultural conditions, on the other. His attempts, so far, to deliver his gift to humankind has assumed a set of ideal recipients—the kind whose understanding of the existential significance of God's death exceeds a merely theoretical grasp. Even though his initial series of attempts to communicate have been varied, they seem to

have neglected to take into account the rather crucial fact that the recipients of Zarathustra's message have not directly experienced the absence of social/cultural structure and order as he has. Zarathustra's ten year stay in the metaphorical desert allows him to occupy what may be called, for lack of a better term and in a limited sense, an epistemically privileged position with respect to God's death.<sup>147</sup> But contrary to expectation, this epistemic privilege, rather than facilitate or expand the range of meaningful discourse between the parties, sets up seemingly insurmountable obstacles to communication.

Indeed, Zarathustra's apparent refusal to adjust his message to existing social and cultural conditions, which thwarts the delivery of his gift to most ordinary individuals, receives further commentary in the image of his carrying the dead tightrope walker away from human civilization. Recalling, very literally, formative events and choices from Zarathustra's past, the tightrope walker, like God, has been toppled by the established elite of modern culture and, now dead, is a burden Zarathustra carries into uninhabited or deserted areas on his back. Just as modern culture has "murdered God," according to the madman of *The Gay Science* (125), so the jester, who represents "the good and the just" of modern culture causes the tightrope walker's downfall. Placed within the context of the first speech following the Prologue, "On The Three Metamorphoses," the image of Zarathustra carrying his burden into the wilderness would, surprisingly, locate him again at the camel

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<sup>147</sup>The epistemic privilege applies only to the experiential component of his understanding, given that theoretically anyone has access to the same set of "facts."

stage.<sup>148</sup> Given that the saint Zarathustra encounters after his initial descent from the mountain claims that “Zarathustra has become a child,” (Z, Prologue, 2) completing the final metamorphosis after having traversed the camel and lion stage, this invocation of a previous cycle of metamorphoses might suggest that Zarathustra has just accepted a new burden, a new task.

Nonetheless, the reiteration of Zarathustra’s self-chosen tendency to alienate himself from the presumably invalid belief structure necessary to maintain organized society, which allows him to behave indifferently toward the kinds of distinctions God’s death invalidates, points toward a blind spot that has caused his communicative efforts to fail. Even though Zarathustra’s basic orientation toward the world without God may be correct theoretically, he neglects to realize that the conditions under which most individuals actually live, that is, within the confines of a social order, necessitate the assumption that the set of cognitive categories they use in order to think, communicate, and interact with one another is valid on some level. And to the extent that this presumption of validity goes unquestioned by the majority of individuals, one might say that modern culture and society continue to live in the shadow of a dead God, who can no longer provide positive ideals and values, but

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<sup>148</sup>According to “On The Three Metamorphoses,” the spirit must first accept the burden of all created values and carry them into the desert, “like a camel wanting to be well loaded.” Then, “in the loneliest desert . . . the second metamorphosis occurs: here the spirit becomes a lion who would conquer his freedom and be master in his own desert.” Lastly, the spirit must become a child again. “The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes’” (Z, I, 1).

who, at the same time, prevents the creation of new, life-affirming values.<sup>149</sup>

Although much of *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra's attempt to communicate the problem can be read as an attempt to raise questions, to challenge uncritical faith in the set of categories that reflect God's shadows and hence, lead to nihilism, the success of this strategy depends heavily, if not entirely, on the receptiveness of the individual audience member. As such, it seems to have been a mistake fatal to his mission to take a mad leap into the midst of the assembled crowd at the marketplace, which collectively and subterraneously harbors the shadows of the dead God.

The encounter following Zarathustra's departure from the town reinforces this point concerning the nature of his misjudgment, though in a humorous fashion that seems inappropriate in light of the gravity of the problem he seeks to address: impending nihilism. As Zarathustra continues his journey, still carrying the corpse, he comes upon "a lonely house in which a light was burning" (Z, Prologue, 8). After knocking at the door, he answers the old man's query as to who has come by announcing that it is "a living and a dead man," and requests some food and drink. The old man offers him some bread and wine, and tells him, "This is an evil region for the hungry . . . that is why I live here. Beast and man come to me, the hermit. But bid your companion, too, eat and drink; he is wearier than you are." Zarathustra,

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<sup>149</sup>Nietzsche mentions this problem at the beginning of Book III of *The Gay Science*: "After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the ways of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. —And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too" (GS, 108).

attempting to correct the hermits mistake—though he had already announced that his companion is dead—informs him: “My companion is dead; I should hardly be able to persuade him.” The old man, however, refuses to accept this explanation. “I don’t care,” he answers. “Whoever knocks at my door must also take what I offer. Eat and be off!” (Z, Prologue, 8).

This encounter, by turning the spotlight on a hermit’s refusal to take into account *real* distinctions—as opposed to mere conceptual ones—that affect individuals’ receptive capacities lends itself very nicely to a reading that considers it a commentary on Zarathustra’s attempt to deliver his gift. But there are additional readings of the images and symbols involved here that, I think, enhance their significance, producing what may be characterized as a layering effect without reducing to one dominant line of interpretation. As commentary on Zarathustra’s failed attempt at message delivery, the parallels seem fairly clear. Having become a hermit during the ten years spent in solitude on the mountain, Zarathustra tries to force his gift on the townspeople who are unreceptive to his message. His word, metaphorically speaking, fall on dead ears. Like the dead tightrope walker who did not of his own accord or ability arrive at the hermit’s house, the townspeople did not come to Zarathustra asking for “nourishment.” Still living in conformity with the shadows the dead God continues to cast in their caves, which determines their unconscious cognitive habits, the people’s *actual* situation is such that Zarathustra has as much chance of delivering his message as the hermit has of feeding a

corpse.<sup>150</sup> As a diagnosis of Zarathustra's communicative failure, then, this line of interpretation points to his refusal to recognize existing conditions as the main cause of his problems.

A second, and I think equally viable, reading focuses on the pattern of Zarathustra's acceptance of certain burdens for which society refuses responsibility. Every time so far the narrative has shown him traversing the boundary separating organized society from the "desert," and only in this direction, he has carried with him the dead victims of the established order. The fact that he carried the burden of God's death with him into his mountain solitude can be inferred from his first speech to the crowd, since it consists largely of a set of solutions to the impending nihilism triggered by the demise of the source of all values. Given that God's status cannot be ascertained on the basis of empirical evidence apart from the cultural context in which belief in God is manifested, Zarathustra would have had to recognize God's death prior to his solitude. The "madman" from *The Gay Science*, too, suggests that God's death is to be understood as a cultural event: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?" (GS, 125). Zarathustra thus carries with himself both times a corpse whose death is attributable to society's established order. Unlike society, however, whose sense of justice, determined by the moral establishment, allows it to put aside

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<sup>150</sup>Nietzsche writes in GS, 108: "God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.—And we—we sill have to vanquish this shadow, too."

and forget the victims of “institutionalized” violence, Zarathustra cannot do so, given that the established order has become questionable for him. The violence, in other words, cannot be justified if the moral precepts and rules with reference to which it is justified are themselves in question.

The encounter with the hermit, who apparently cannot appreciate the difference between the living and the dead, could thus be construed as a mirror image of Zarathustra’s tendency to dwell on the tragic consequences of the ordinary functions of the established order. On this reading, it is he who appears to neglect the distinction insofar as he treats the dead as if they were still alive; it is he who takes offense to the seemingly unavoidable fact that any kind of moral and cognitive framework will negate and eliminate elements that do not conform to the established social order. Moreover, by refusing to acknowledge existing cultural conditions, he violates his own precept to “*remain faithful to the earth*“ (Z, Prologue, 3).

Zarathustra’s injunction to remain faithful to the earth is undermined by the fact that his adoption of a morally and epistemologically superior stance implies that the world has a certain character independently of the way human agents conceive of it. But that would require access to a non-perspectival, God’s eye point of view, a position Zarathustra cannot legitimately assume.

At this juncture, the text has essentially undermined Zarathustra’s doctrinal message. Only the first two sections of the Prologue that depict Zarathustra prior to his entry into organized society remain intact. Since Zarathustra’s attempt to deliver a gift to humankind was based on his mistaken assumption of a commonly shared

awareness of the nihilistic aftermath of God's death, an assumption that remains unrevised throughout his problematic encounter with the townspeople, his mission appears to have been a complete failure. More importantly, it is the text itself that shows him, quite clearly, as having failed to communicate his crucial insight *because* it is based on presuppositions that neglect to consider existing circumstances and as such, betray an implicit commitment to a type of metaphysics shared by Christians and Platonists alike. Zarathustra's assumption that actual social conditions must or should reflect the logical implications of God's death accords priority to cognitive structures at the expense of the empirical state of affairs. Insofar as he privileges logical relations, then, he implicitly adopts a stance emblematic of traditional Western world view, which values the integrity of abstract cognitive structures more highly than empirical experience. All the while, however, it remains unclear precisely what Zarathustra's message entails. Whatever propositional content may have emerged during his attempts to deliver his gift is rendered invalid due to its faulty founding assumptions.<sup>151</sup> Since the conditions under which Zarathustra envisioned the transformation from man to the overman ideal do not obtain, that is, an explicit, working awareness on the part of Western culture/society of the nihilistic

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<sup>151</sup>The fact that Zarathustra undermines his own project in the course of the Prologue would explain the conspicuous absence of the overman ideal in subsequent sections of the book. Given that the devaluation of the highest values in the wake of God's death is not widely recognized, the people do not perceive a need for new values and ideals. Were Zarathustra to continue to endorse the overman ideal in light of his realization that his assumption of such a need does not reflect the actual state of affairs, his injunction to be faithful to the earth would be violated.

implications of God's death, the ideal is unattainable. The only substantive remainder is Zarathustra's initial resolve to bring humankind a gift.

Although *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra has so far violated a good number of expectations likely to follow from the reader's implicit commitment to the culturally dominant cognitive scheme, perhaps the most egregious transgression is the one Zarathustra has committed against himself and his own project. Insofar as this transgression renders both his efforts and risks pointless, one might well expect him to respond with resignation and retreat in the face of such wholesale failure. The fact that he does not react in this manner, I think, strongly suggests that his orientation toward the world is at bottom a tragic one. Like Prometheus, who affirms his act of sacrilege by accepting the suffering brought upon himself by his actions, Zarathustra accepts the untoward consequences of his actions.

Of course, if the parallel between Zarathustra's acts of transgression and Nietzsche's celebration of Promethean virtue in *The Birth of Tragedy* is to hold, something of great value should be obtained by the commission of the most serious transgressions against the established order (BT, 9).<sup>152</sup> And indeed, as we will shortly see, it appears that from the ashes of Zarathustra's failure, there emerges a heightened sense of self-awareness, the result of having raised implicit presuppositions and prejudices to the surface by way of conflict with the established

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<sup>152</sup>Nietzsche, to recall, argues that "the best and highest possession mankind can acquire is obtained by sacrilege, and must be paid for with consequences that involve the whole flood of sufferings and sorrows . . ." (BT, 9).

order. Much like the Promethean myth, where a great benefit arises directly from violation of the divine order, Zarathustra's increased self-knowledge (due to fire's illuminating quality perhaps?) is an immediate consequence of his acts of transgression characterized as arson by the saint in section 2.

Returning now to the narrative, we find Zarathustra, having finally managed to dispose of the tightrope walker's corpse in a hollow tree after walking another two hours upon leaving the hermit's house. Understandably tired, he lays down under the tree and goes to sleep, "his body weary but his soul unmoved" (Z, Prologue, 8). The end of this section, which shows Zarathustra discarding his burden, completes one of the larger cycles of temptation, disillusionment following frustrated expectations, and confusion or indeterminacy in respect to *Zarathustra's* cognitive content. The imagery, I think, suggests that in relieving himself of the burden created by society's value structure, Zarathustra undergoes the spiritual transformation characterized as the lion stage. Having rejected established values, but not yet in a position to create new, life-affirming values for himself, the sense of indeterminacy that characterizes Zarathustra's spiritual state matches the situation that completes the cycle as seen from the reader's perspective. The reader's and the protagonist's experience and mood are synchronized in that the indeterminacy with regard to the meaning and significance of the text match the indeterminacy of humankind's situation following God's death.

This harmonization process, as one might expect based on previous patterns, ushers in another cycle of temptation insofar as the reader's sympathies are aligned

with the interests of the protagonist just as another monologue providing feedback regarding preceding events promises to make sense of the text's cognitive content. When Zarathustra wakes up close to noon the next day, at the beginning of the penultimate section of the Prologue, he is in a jubilant mood, "for he saw a new truth" (Z, Prologue, 9). This choice of terminology, I think, is interesting in that the possibility of new truths suggests an ontological shift in terms of his orientation toward the world. Given that Zarathustra's previous failure was at least partly due to his preconceived notions concerning the "real" character of the world, which were inconsistent with his audience's conception, the idea that *new* truths can arise points toward a less rigid, more fluid and flexible world view. The novelty of this truth indicates that its conception is not a matter of recognizing a pre-existing pattern or state (otherwise that truth would not be new), but points toward the possibility that at least some truths are a matter of orientation or perspective. As before, Zarathustra speaks to his heart—a literary device, as I have argued, designed to address the reader on a personal, intimate level: "An insight has come to me: companions I need, living ones—not dead companions and corpses whom I carry with myself wherever I want to. Living companions I need, who follow me because they want to follow themselves—wherever I want" (Z, Prologue, 9).

Here, both interpretations I have offered of Zarathustra's encounter with the hermit are revisited. The distinction between dead companions and corpses suggests that these labels refer to separate groups or entities. The dead companions, I think, are the townspeople, whose continued submission to values and categories rendered

invalid by God's death has rendered them incapable of receiving Zarathustra's gift, whereas the term "corpses" obviously refers to the dead tightrope walker, and possibly to God as well. The following paragraph seems to confirm this reading as well: "let Zarathustra speak not to the people but to companions." The people as a whole, for reasons discussed above, are the dead companions, as distinct from living companions whose recognition of the problem of nihilism following God's death puts them in a position to question the validity of the established order. Given that such questioning is a precondition for the creation of new, life-affirming, earthly values, the latter constitute the appropriate audience for Zarathustra, whose "gift" presupposes recipients sufficiently liberated from, or at least critical of, the traditional Western cognitive and moral framework to provide a space, or an opening, for new possibilities.

Moreover, since such liberation cannot be forced upon an individual, as I have argued in my analysis of Zarathustra's "last man" speech, any potential (living) companions must want to follow *because* in doing so they are following their own impetus to question the established order. This statement, which can of course be read as a resolution made by Zarathustra within the context of the narrative, seems to be specifically addressed to the reader. Given that readers, unlike Zarathustra's potential companions on a narrative level, cannot exert any influence whatsoever on the direction in which the text takes them, they must in one sense necessarily follow wherever it leads. But that does not mean that the text will carry them by "spoon feeding" readers a given set of predetermined, fixed propositions with clear,

unequivocal cognitive content, since doing so would constitute an implicit commitment to a view of the world as ordered antecedent to, and apart from, human conception and creation. Indeed, as Zarathustra's speeches have illustrated, there cannot be any fixed meaning if God's death is accepted as a basic premise because it draws in its wake the elimination of distinctions and boundaries whose validity depends on a transcendent ordering principle.

Zarathustra's reflections, therefore, are as much an expression of his revisions and resolutions on a narrative level as they are a layout of the conditions or ground rules under which the reader may continue to follow his journey. Of course, to expect a first time reader to pick up on these clues, I think, is to be either overly optimistic or malicious. Considering that readers, in virtue of their "God's eye perspective" in relation to the whole of the narrative, as well as Zarathustra's thoughts, are already privy to a great deal of information and insights to which the townspeople, or dead companions, do not have access, it would be easy for them to conclude that they belong to the select group of living companions. But since this epistemic privilege in regard to the narrative and Zarathustra's conversations with his heart is a function of textual arrangement or authorship, and not necessarily an indicator of a reader's independent insight into the problem of nihilism, it seems that many readers are, once again, set up to fail insofar as their expectations may not be consistent with the actual state of affairs. Because the text, on the whole, does not offer specific prescriptions or solutions to the problem(s) it raises, the reader who considers him- or herself clued in will ultimately be disappointed.

Ironically, it appears that the reader who is successfully set up is lured into the very trap largely responsible for Zarathustra's communicative failure: lack of sensitivity toward the actual environing circumstances in favor of expectations that embrace an ideal considered more valuable than remaining faithful to the earth. That means that the reader who follows Zarathustra's journey further will most likely follow in the footsteps of his failure unless she disavows his authority. Although exposing the reader to the same risks and failures experienced by the protagonist may appear unnecessarily cruel, it may well be intended to serve an important pedagogical purpose insofar as it *shows* the world from a tragic perspective. Since risk, failure, uncertainty, and suffering are an integral part of human experience, facing and acknowledging those aspects of earthly existence is indispensable if the idea is, at some point, to affirm life on its own terms.

Because modern culture, as a whole, continues implicitly to embrace Christian-Platonic ideals and values, however, *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* intends to "lure many away from the herd" (Z, Prologue, 9). The reason for separating certain individuals from the group is that "the good and the just" or "believers in the true faith" perceive those who have begun to question established values as a threat. As Zarathustra tells us, "Behold the good and the just! Whom do they hate most? The man who breaks their tables of values, the breaker, the lawbreaker; yet he is the creator" (Z, Prologue, 9). If it is true that it is not only dangerous, but ultimately pointless, for Zarathustra to address his revolutionary message to organized society as a whole, it makes sense to plant the seeds of change in more fertile soil.

He thus resolves to seek “fellow creators . . . fellow harvesters and fellow celebrants” (Z, Prologue, 9). “Never again,” Zarathustra claims, “shall I speak to the people: for the last time have I spoken to the dead.” In fact, in the following paragraph, he seems to acknowledge explicitly what I have argued above, namely that a low level of receptivity toward, or tolerance of, novel ideas and classification schemes is a function of group dynamics. Specifically, openness toward alternative conceptions tends to be severely limited in a communal context, since social interaction demands casual acceptance of a relatively stable cognitive framework. As a result, actions that call into doubt the validity of this framework are an immediate threat to the community itself, given that its principles of order, to include its individual members’ self-understanding in relation to others, are thereby attacked. Instead of attempting to address organized groups, therefore, Zarathustra plans to deliver his message on an individual level: “To the hermits I shall sing my song, to the lonesome and the twosome; and whoever still has ears for the unheard-of—his heart shall become heavy with my happiness” (Z, Prologue, 9).

So who are the hermits, lonesome and twosomes? As individuals, relatively unencumbered by social constraints at least while immediately engaged with this text, it is the readers who are potentially in a position to satisfy the criteria of the kind of recipients Zarathustra envisions. Alone or lonesome insofar as he or she follows her own directive by coming along on the journey, though still in *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra’s company and hence, comprising a twosome whenever the text seems to speak to her on a personal level, the reader, I think, is the hermit.

Although Zarathustra cannot literally sing to the reader, the text, which is largely comprised of his speeches whose audience in the narrative context is often indeterminable, may be said to aim at striking a chord with individual readers, charming and lulling them into its flowing current much as a melody would.

If the general thrust of this reading is in line with Nietzsche's authorial intent, it would confirm that the text's structural features include a "temptation phase" designed to enthrall its audience. But we also know that *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* will, from this point on, no longer carry "dead companions and corpses," assuming he sticks to his resolution. This means that disillusionment and failure is imminent, triggering, in turn, a period of reflection during which the reader steps back or extricates herself from the textual flow, previously the source of enchantment, in order to recover. In this respect, the text's intended effect on the reader is structurally equivalent to the effect of Greek tragedy considered from the point of view of the tragic spectator. According to Nietzsche's analysis in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the sequence of events is initiated by the chanting of the chorus, which infects the spectators, transforming their ordinary state of awareness into one of intoxicated revelry that breaks down the *principium individuationis*.<sup>153</sup> Thus unified with their fellow human beings, as well as the whole of nature, the audience is acutely susceptible to suggestion when the God Dionysus appears on stage, wearing the mask of Apollo. Their inhibitions and individuality suspended, the throng of

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<sup>153</sup>The principle of individuation. BT, 1.

spectators experience the fate of Dionysus, his suffering and ultimate dismemberment, as their own. Ultimately, however, the healing power of Apollo, who bestows the appearance of individuality, allows the members of the audience to regain their composure, to recover from this experience that is at once terrifying and deeply pleasurable (BT, 4).

This in mind, the parallels between the effect of Greek tragedy and Zarathustra's expressed intent are quite evident. His "song," which aims to enchant the reader, is at the same time meant to strike a connection that breaks through the barriers separating her fate from that of the protagonist. Once identification occurs, however, *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra will betray the reader's trust if, as is likely, his or her expectations concerning the text are conditioned by the Christian-Platonic paradigm that promises redemption or salvation to those who passively submit to its authority, allowing themselves to be lead. *Zarathustra*, in contrast to the texts central to Western culture and tradition, sets its readers up for failure, thereby causing them to share the plight and suffering of its protagonist, whose failures and recoveries, moreover, comprise the subject matter of the work. Insofar as this kind of relationship between an author, the creator of a text, and his readers defies and violates the paradigm set by the relationship between God as author of the world and his creatures, it is "unheard-of," that is, scandalous and shocking from the point of view of the moral establishment, which operates within the parameters of what may

be called the “shepherd” model.<sup>154</sup>

The cyclical temptation-betrayal-disillusionment pattern of *Zarathustra*, structurally similar to tragedy, may well be intended to teach the practical skills relevant to facing a world that includes failure and suffering without the possibility of after-worldly redemption. Zarathustra’s task, therefore, is to *show* what it is like to adopt a tragic orientation toward life, both by example and by enticing readers personally to take part in the experience. This, moreover, would explain Nietzsche’s subsequent comment that in order to understand this work the reader must suffer: “I do not allow that anyone knows that book who has not at some time been profoundly wounded and at some time profoundly delighted by every word in it” (GM, Preface, 8). Presumably, the reader, though hurt by the betrayal of the authority figure trusted to lead the way (the author), is by that very means set free—jolted, one might say—not only from the dominant, culturally specific cognitive framework, but perhaps more importantly, from the shepherd paradigm in general.

If successful, this strategy would eventually enable a selected set of *Zarathustra*’s readers (those who follow because they want to follow themselves) to take an active, creative stance toward the text in that they inscribe it with meaning relevant to their own experience. And given the subject matter of this book, that is, the problem of nihilism, the activity of shaping and imposing meaning in a textual

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<sup>154</sup>Zarathustra calls “the good and the just” and “believers in the true faith” shepherds while refusing that role for himself: “Zarathustra wants to be called a robber by the shepherds” (Z, Prologue, 9).

context may ultimately provide some individuals with the experience and practice to take a similar stance toward real life situations. Indeed, one might speculate whether the text as a whole is as lengthy and unwieldy as it is to allow opportunity for the development of a new set of habits. If it is true, as I have argued, that our commitment to harmful ideals and values is largely due to unconscious habit, then breaking free of the compulsion is a process during which reorientation must occur and be reinforced in a variety of settings and circumstances.<sup>155</sup> But this means that old habits must first be raised to the surface, that is, to become objects of explicit awareness, in order to be replaced by healthier behavioral patterns. For that reason, it seems necessary that the reader's expectations, to the extent that they are conditioned by habits that perpetuate subjection to harmful values, are violated again and again until a new set of healthy habits becomes established.

With his task now redefined and for the first time explicitly articulated, Zarathustra resolves to go "on [his] own way; over those who hesitate and lag behind" he tells us, "I shall leap. Thus let my going be their going under" (*Z*, Prologue, 9). Apparently, he intends to occupy a different role—one that involves trading places with the jester representing the moral establishment, whose leap over the tightrope walker had literally caused the latter to go under. This reversal, I think, is yet another indication that the established order is the perpetual enemy of creative freedom in that it saturates the field of possibilities while claiming absolute

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<sup>155</sup>Part I in fact consists of a series of speeches on various topics with which most readers familiar with Nietzsche's thought are likely already acquainted.

authority.<sup>156</sup> *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra therefore has no choice but to destroy the dominant cultural cognitive framework that negates all alternative possibilities if it/he is to make its/his own way.

This strategic modification, motivated by his reflections concerning his initial encounter with the members of organized society, concludes Zarathustra's conversation with his heart. Having subjected the series of questionable events that make up the Prologue to analysis and drawn the relevant lessons from his mistakes, Zarathustra is prepared to move on. This attitude, which refuses to allow past failures and mistakes to dominate present and future, is an applied demonstration of the tragic spirit in that it accepts the fact that suffering and failure is a natural component of life. Indeed, and I think this is highly significant, the setting of the final section of the Prologue reinforces the tragic structure of the plot insofar as it suggests that the Dionysian aspects of Zarathustra's experience are balanced in the end by Apollonian insight. The sun, symbolic of Apollonian measure and clarity, "stood at high noon," we are told (Z, Prologue, 10). Moreover, as Zarathustra looks at the sky, he finds his eagle, "the proudest animal under the sun," with a serpent, "the wisest animal under the sun" wrapped around his neck, circling above. This indicates that Zarathustra's wisdom and pride have returned to him just as his reflections, occasioned by failure, have culminated in some fresh insights to be

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<sup>156</sup>"On the Three Metamorphoses" makes essentially the same point when the dragon, the representative of the established order, claims: "All value has long been created, and I am all created value. Verily, there shall be no more 'I will'" (Z, I, 1).

applied and tested in the course of his continued journey.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Zarathustra's Journey and/or Speeches**

The remainder of *Zarathustra* follows the structural pattern introduced in the Prologue. The text continues to provide the reader with cues that have a tendency to generate expectations consistent with the values and ideals espoused by the Christian-Platonic tradition only to violate them. Chief among those expectations relevant to this analysis is the idea that a text—especially a philosophical work—ought to guide the reader toward a specific conclusion or insight. Along the way, it is to provide arguments and demonstrations intended to convince readers to adopt the view endorsed by the author. These expectations, justified with reference to the Christian-Platonic view that the world has a specific order and structure independent of human experience, imply that truth and knowledge, values and ideals, are subject to discovery rather than human creation. Within this traditional framework, authors of philosophical, religious, and scientific treatises have typically laid claim to the discovery of some pattern or rule, some “truth,” which it is the purpose of their written works to make available to their readership. Moreover, as *the* authorities on their discoveries and the creators of their respective texts, as I have noted in Chapter 5, authors’ relationships to their writings is similar to God’s relationship to the world he has created. As such, authors of philosophical or religious texts in particular are implicitly expected to conform to the shepherd model, that is, to lead their readers to recognize some “truth” or fact they have discovered.

By assigning to the author an instructive, fatherly role, the shepherd paradigm positions the reader in a complementary follower role that demands submission to the authority of the text's creator. Cultivated and deeply entrenched in Western culture during two millennia of hegemony by the Christian-Platonic world view, habitual assumption of a follower or student posture is likely to remain the prevailing reading mode. This conditioning allows *Zarathustra* to take advantage of its readers' propensity to bow to authority and assume a passive, submissive pose—providing fertile grounds for nihilism to flourish—to counteract this tendency. *Zarathustra*, accordingly, explicitly repudiates the shepherd model in section 9 of the Prologue;<sup>157</sup> but his expressed intent in the same section to lead those who “want to follow themselves—wherever [Zarathustra] want[s]” portrays him in a potentially conflicting role. He claims, on the one hand, that he does not want to be seen as the shepherd of a herd (an allusion to Christ's characterization of himself), yet at the same time, he plans to lead certain followers—namely those who want to follow themselves. While this qualification may resolve the apparent incompatibility between these roles, it is not clear exactly in what respect(s) *Zarathustra*'s followers are supposed follow him, and in what respect(s) they are to follow themselves.

I have suggested in the previous chapter that the followers *Zarathustra* envisions may be said to follow themselves in the sense that their questioning of the established order is self-motivated. That is, their initial decision to join *Zarathustra*'s

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<sup>157</sup>“Fellow Creators, *Zarathustra* seeks, fellow harvester and fellow celebrants: what are herds and shepherds and corpses to him?” (*Z*, Prologue, 9).

cause should be motivated by their own recognition that God's death undermines the values and ideals perpetuated by the predominant Western cognitive scheme, a situation that calls for an active-creative response lest nihilism and despair should take hold. But this does not solve the problem entirely. Although awareness of the theoretical implications of God's death by Zarathustra's followers is probably a necessary condition for their emancipation from the shepherd paradigm, it may not be sufficient. Because theoretical awareness of this state of affairs is not automatically incorporated into the realm of practical, everyday affairs ruled largely by unconscious habit, including activities such as reading and thinking, it is to be expected that most readers' rejection of the shepherd model is incomplete in at least this sense. Moreover, since unconscious habits are just that—unconscious—it would be contradictory to assume that readers are aware of them.

The conflicting signals sent by the text thus encourage the reader to construct a self-image that corresponds to Zarathustra's description of the appropriate companion without, however, being in a position to evaluate whether the relevant criteria are satisfied. Though Zarathustra is clearly portrayed as a teacher—he tells the people in the marketplace, "*I teach you the overman*"—he nevertheless refuses to assume a position of authority (*Z*, Prologue, 3). He then reiterates this resolve to teach in Section 9, "I shall show them the rainbow and all the steps to the overman," yet declines to "carry" his future companions. In light of this ambiguity, it is to be expected that a good number of readers will, as a default, assume the habitual passive, submissive posture that tacitly relies upon the shepherd paradigm. Even

though Zarathustra has previously announced his refusal to follow the model of Christian charity by informing the saint in Section 2 of the Prologue, “I give no alms. For that I am not poor enough,” the reader’s lack of direct access to her unconscious beliefs and habits nevertheless leaves her vulnerable.

The uncertainty concerning the appropriate stance toward the text (which forces an encounter with the problem of nihilism), brought to the forefront by the foregoing analysis of the Prologue in Chapters 2-5, provides important clues in regard to *Zarathustra*’s structure and hence, to Nietzsche’s authorial strategy and intent. *Zarathustra/Zarathustra*, as we will see, continues to tempt the reader to entrap herself by bringing to bear habituated assumptions and beliefs that inadvertently affirm the values entailed by the predominant Western cognitive and moral framework in an effort to elicit the text’s meaning. The purpose of this, again, is to raise potential conflicts between the reader’s explicit, conscious beliefs, which presumably reject the Christian-Socratic world view, and the set of unconscious habits and assumptions that continue to affirm it, to awareness by violating the reader’s implicit expectations. We have already observed a number of transgressions of the symbolic boundaries that underlie and structure (internally as well as marginally) established Western cognitive categories. Each of these transgressions, inasmuch as it coincides with violations of the reader’s expectations and composure, may be said to provide an indication of the reader’s nihilistic tendencies by rendering the habit of passive submission to the established order painful. The ultimate aim is to create an opportunity for the appropriate set of readers to change their habitual

orientation and adopt an active, creative stance toward this text and its subject matter, the problem of nihilism.

Zarathustra's first speech, following the Prologue, seems to provide a template for those among his followers aspiring to become full-fledged creators, as well as a check for those who think they might already meet the criteria. "On the Three Metamorphoses" (of the spirit) describes the process of transformation from the passive-submissive camel stage to the defiant, freedom-creating lion phase and finally, to the child stage. Only at this last stage is the spirit in a position to create new values, and able to take an active-creative stance toward the world that is not conditioned by, or dependent on, anything prior to it. The child, according to Zarathustra, "is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes'" (Z, I, 1). The child-like spirit must create new values out of itself—otherwise the values created would not be fully active, but be conditioned at least in part on the individual's prior (leonine) rejection of the precedent set by the Christian-Platonic world view, thereby rendering it reactive. The problem of new value creation on this conception is the central issue of Robert Gooding-Williams' recent book, *Zarathustra's Dionysian Modernism*, which concludes that the tensions it entails can only be reconciled by the lion spirit's abandonment of modernity's conception of the substantive self.<sup>158</sup> The lion,

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<sup>158</sup>*Dionysian Modernism*, 301-2. The belief that the ego is a substance unaffected by temporal change and alteration of its properties makes a new beginning impossible, since the child's self-conception would remain subject to the indirect influence of past values.

according to Gooding-Williams, must forget even his rejection of old values by alienating himself from his former ego view in order to complete the final metamorphosis. The child is thus born of the lion's forgetting; it *is* the lion's forgetting in the sense that its existence, its ability to create new values, is dependent on the lion's abandonment of his own ego substance, the belief that his self is a substance that persists over time.

Zarathustra himself, according to Gooding-Williams, does not complete the last metamorphosis until the final chapter of *Zarathustra*. If this is true, then it seems highly unlikely that any of *Zarathustra*'s readers have already progressed to the child stage. The belief by some readers that they have reached the lion stage by rejecting the Christian-Platonic world view and the values and ideals it entails, on the other hand, does not seem unreasonable. In fact, given the conditions Zarathustra sets out at the end of the Prologue, namely that those who wish to follow him further must want to follow themselves and will not be "carried," it is quite probable that many readers would consider themselves to be at the lion stage. This belief would be based on the tacit assumption that wholesale rejection of traditional values on a theoretical level is sufficient to erase their influence on one's practical habits, which, I have argued, is mistaken.

The text, however, actively fosters the reader's confidence in his having successfully rejected traditional, life-denying values and ideals. Instead of cautioning his followers against this potential error, as a good shepherd would, Zarathustra encourages them to see themselves as his proper companions.

Zarathustra's description of the "living companions" to whom he resolves to speak exclusively after failing to deliver his gift to the marketplace crowd, as I argue in Chapter 5, matches the profile of the solitary reader. Moreover, he continues throughout the remainder of Part I (and much of the rest of the book), to address his "brothers." The narrative, however, with the exception of a youth in "On the Tree on the Mountainside," does not identify the members of Zarathustra's audience. All we learn in the final chapter of Part I is that the group to whom he refers as his "brothers" have come to call themselves his disciples. Beyond that, it is unclear to whom Zarathustra speaks or how he managed to gather a group of followers in the first place.<sup>159</sup>

These terms—'brothers' and 'disciples'—once again invite comparison with the biblical narrative of the life of Jesus Christ suggests. Accompanied by disciples while delivering his sermons, Jesus preaches the brotherhood of all of humankind in that all are considered God's children and hence, equal in that regard. Jesus' sermons, too, are addressed to largely unidentified audiences, although Jesus continues to deliver his message indiscriminately—an approach that has proven unsuccessful in Zarathustra's case.<sup>160</sup> This rather obvious reference to scripture invoked by the terminology, in conjunction with *Zarathustra's* neglect or refusal to

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<sup>159</sup>Kathleen Higgins notes that the "very frame of Zarathustra's speeches should suggest something peculiar about Zarathustra's role as a speaker. We observe that he speaks whether or not he has a human audience." *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 71.

<sup>160</sup>Zarathustra has resolved at the end of the Prologue (section 9), we might recall, "never again " to "speak to the people."

identify Zarathustra's audience and the fact that his description of "living companions" is applicable to the reader practically beckons the reader to count herself (ignoring the sexism)<sup>161</sup> among his proper companions and equals.

The reader is further encouraged to consider himself capable of confronting the problem of nihilism by the text's intensified focus on the content of Zarathustra's message. Appropriately entitled "Zarathustra's Speeches," the remainder of Part I noticeably shuns narrative and plot development, and has Zarathustra speaking directly to his audience. We only learn, in a rather casual aside, that Zarathustra happens to be traveling while he delivers the series of speeches that comprise most of this chapter after the conclusion of "On the Three Metamorphoses" (Z, I, 1). It would not be difficult to overlook the narrative point that "at that time [Zarathustra] sojourned in the town that is called The Motley Cow," tacked onto the very end of that section. This obvious lack of attention to plot and narrative suggests that the crucial journey on which Zarathustra embarks is not the one that traverses physical space, but the one forging a path through the nihilistic aftermath of God's death. Given that the reader has been encouraged to see herself in the role of Zarathustra's proper companion and equal, the special bond between reader and protagonist implies a shared task and goal: confronting and overcoming nihilism. Readers who consider themselves companions are thus seduced into placing demands upon themselves that exceed their capacities because their fulfillment presupposes the

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<sup>161</sup>Many female readers find it difficult to ignore Nietzsche's apparent sexism, as attested to by the amount of literature on the subject.

readers' having undergone the second metamorphosis of the spirit to the lion stage.

As things stand, however, it is highly unlikely that readers inveigled by this scheme have managed to throw off the life-denying, paternalistic Christian-Socratic value structure that justifies the shepherd paradigm of readership. If they had, they would not have succumbed to the flattery and been seduced to consider themselves companions and fellow creators in virtue of thinking themselves capable of following in Zarathustra's footsteps. Instead, they would question on what authority the text and its author presume to impose conditions for continuing to read this book, since acceptance of those conditions is equivalent to bowing to the judgment of an authority figure. Furthermore, the suggestion that they are not just permitted, but privileged, to be allowed to follow along on Zarathustra's continued journey should give rise to outrage, not pride, since the text thereby relegates readers to precisely the passive-submissive position it demands they reject while in a perversely ironic twist, leading them to feel honored to be Zarathustra's sheep. By accepting the authority of the text, however, and submitting to its judgments concerning the appropriate readership, the reader "kneels down like a camel wanting to be well loaded" (Z, I, 1) in that she willingly assumes a burden whose weight she is in no position to estimate or comprehend.

The text, in short, sets its readers up to fail by encouraging them to construct an overly optimistic view of their capacity to confront the problem of nihilism.

*Zarathustra's* propensity to entrap the reader, to cause him to overestimate his abilities only to undermine his positive self-image, is consistent with Nietzsche's

comments in the Preface of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where he writes: “I do not allow that anyone knows that book (*Zarathustra*) who has not at some time been profoundly wounded . . . by every word of it” (GM, Preface, 8). Violating the reader’s self-esteem would have precisely that effect. A fall from grace, from companion and fellow creator to potential sheep and herd animal cannot but be perceived as personal humiliation, especially since Zarathustra rarely neglects an opportunity to hurl derisive comments at the latter, although he is said to love the Motley Cow (Z, I, 22, 1).

Zarathustra continues his speeches/journey by first addressing a few themes likely to strike a chord with readers somewhat familiar with Nietzsche’s critique of the Western tradition. By denouncing specific sets of life-denying values and ideals also discussed in his other works, the text fosters the impression that Zarathustra is speaking to like-minded individuals who share his concerns: companions on an equal footing. “On the Teachers of Virtue” (Z, I, 2), for instance, offers a parody of the Christian-Platonic orientation toward the empirical world. A virtuous waking life, according to the teacher of virtue, is but a means to good sleep: “Ten times a day you must overcome yourself: that makes you good and tired and is opium for the soul. Ten times you must reconcile yourself again with yourself; . . . Ten truths a day you must find; else you will be seeking truth by night, and your soul will remain hungry” (Z, I, 2). The number ‘ten’ is probably intended to remind the reader of the biblical Ten Commandments. The specific virtues conducive to good sleep, moreover, are the traditional Christian virtues: love of neighbor, patience, obedience,

etc. It is fairly clear that reader is supposed to draw the inference that ‘good sleep’ is analogous to a blissful afterlife in heaven, that life is a mere means to a good death. This is evident even before Zarathustra comments on the sage’s advice: “His wisdom is: to wake in order to sleep well. And verily, if life had no sense and I had to choose nonsense, then I too should consider this the most sensible nonsense.” The chapter concludes: “‘Blessed are the sleepy ones: for they shall soon drop off.’ Thus spoke Zarathustra.”

The following two chapters, “On the Afterworldly” (Z, I, 3) and “On the Despisers of the Body” (Z, I, 4) are also fairly accessible. In the former, Zarathustra claims that “it was suffering and incapacity that created all afterworlds” whereas “it was the body that despaired of the earth,” and in the latter he rejects the traditional view that the body is but a temporary vessel for, and subordinate to, the soul. Instead, he proposes that the body be considered the ruling entity: “But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body” (Z, I, 4). The general thrust of the next pair of chapters, however, is difficult to discern. “On the Pale Criminal” (Z, I, 5) and “On Reading and Writing” (Z, I, 6) cover a number of seemingly disconnected themes: passing judgment on others, the relation of thought to deed and reflection on the deed, madness, sickness, and evil in Chapter 5, and writing “in blood,” aphorisms, courage, wisdom,<sup>162</sup> madness (again), and “the spirit of gravity” in Chapter 6.

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<sup>162</sup>Zarathustra claims: “Brave, unconcerned, mocking, violent—thus wisdom wants us: she is a woman and always loves only a warrior.”

The opaqueness of these two chapters stands out in contrast to the relative clarity of the previous chapters and as such, might raise doubt concerning the nature of the reader's "companionship." The accessibility of the first four chapters, which is probably due in part to the familiarity of their themes, already raised in the Prologue, is conducive to enhancing readers' confidence in their ability to "carry themselves" because Zarathustra's position and by implication, the readers' own, is clear. The underlying assumption here is that being a proper companion and fellow creator involves sharing Zarathustra's views, and since those are readily apparent during the first four chapters, readers would have little reason to question whether those views are truly their own. The issue of the reader's emancipation from the shepherd paradigm, in other words, is not raised as long as she believes that she understands and shares Zarathustra's criticisms of the established order and is thus capable of confronting nihilism. This belief is called into question, however, when the opacity of the following passages makes it virtually impossible to determine what the reader's views should entail (so that they will match Zarathustra's). Given that the reasoning leading the reader to consider himself a proper companion and equal depends on his agreement with Zarathustra's reasoning, inability to make sense of

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This echoes a sentiment expressed by Macchiavelli with respect to fortune: "it is better to be rash than timid, for Fortune is a woman, and the man who wants to hold her down must beat and bully her. We see that she yields more often to men of this stripe than to those who come cowardly to her. Like a woman, too, she is always a friend of the young, because they are less timid, more brutal, and take charge of her more recklessly." Niccolò Macchiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1977) 69.

these passages calls his capacity to “stand on his own two legs” into question.<sup>163</sup>

Another way the reader is led to (mis-)identify her readiness to confront nihilism with her assent to Zarathustra’s position is by way of Zarathustra’s explicit renunciation of a leadership role in Section 9 of the Prologue. We can recall his claim that he would no longer “carry” any companions after finally having managed to dispose of the tightrope walker’s body. Since there appears to be no obvious reason to question Zarathustra’s resolve, or to suspect that he intends to mislead his audience, it is fair to assume that he will make good on his word. After building up the reader’s confidence in her ability to walk on her own in “On the Three Metamorphoses,” however, Zarathustra betrays the reader’s trust by presenting his critique of the Christian-Platonic tradition in an easily accessible manner, thus “carrying” her. The unsuspecting reader, unaware that she is being carried, is subsequently dropped, let down—metaphorically speaking, when the content of Zarathustra’s speeches suddenly turns opaque. At that point, the reader might realize that she had been carried without her knowledge, which would call her ability to be a proper companion and fellow creator into doubt.

Although it is readily apparent, within the context of this analysis, that *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra betrays the reader’s faith by failing to keep his/its word, the reader is in no position to diagnose the problem unless and until he implements his

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<sup>163</sup>Given the difficulty of these passages, it seems impossible to provide an adequate characterization without engaging in a lengthy discussion. I shall therefore leave it to my readers to form their own impressions of “On the Pale Criminal” and “On Reading and Writing.”

rejection of the shepherd paradigm on a practical level.<sup>164</sup> This is precisely the point Zarathustra makes at the end of Part I, but not before warning aspiring fellow creators of the dangers of their potential undertaking. Following a number of relatively accessible speeches, “On the Way of the Creator” (Z, I, 17) describes the emotional pitfalls of their endeavor in terms that may well resonate with readers’ own encounters with societal values and thus, once again provide feedback and encouragement. Generated by tensions between the established “herd” mentality and the desire to create new values, “there are feelings which want to kill the lonely,” Zarathustra explains (Z, I, 17). “But the worst enemy you can encounter will always be you, yourself; you lie in wait for yourself in caves and woods . . . You will be a heretic to yourself and a witch and soothsayer and fool and doubter and unholy one and a villain.” This explanation allows the reader to interpret her doubt concerning her ability to confront nihilism as a natural and perhaps unavoidable part of the process of emancipation from the culturally established cognitive and moral framework—the herd.

Because this conciliatory gesture, which offers the reader an opportunity to see his self-doubt in a positive light, is also embedded within a series of comparatively lucid speeches, one would expect his self-esteem to be restored.

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<sup>164</sup>Nietzsche comments on our tendency to misinterpret our experiences in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: “We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge . . . Present experience has, I am afraid, always found us ‘absent-minded’; we cannot give our hearts to it—not even our ears! . . . So we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves . . .” (GM, Preface, 1).

Encouraging a renewed sense of kinship with Zarathustra, whose insight in “On the Way to the Creator” interprets the reader’s vulnerability as a mark of distinction he shares with the protagonist (how else would Zarathustra know of his experience?), the text provides yet another temptation for the reader to offer up his trust and confidence. Indeed, the reader who treats Zarathustra’s account of the process of emancipation as commentary applicable to his own personal experience has probably already surrendered to the latter’s authority. By seizing the opportunity to restore or enhance his confidence in his capability of confronting nihilism in an active-creative manner, he has implicitly submitted to Zarathustra’s evaluation of his self-doubt, thereby undermining his own intent and aspirations. The problem with this response, in other words, is that it betrays the reader’s tendency to assume a passive-submissive stance in the face of questionable experiences in that it allows *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* to interpret his own experience *for* him. Rather than confronting the problem actively by creating his own explanation and meaning, the reader reacts to the indeterminacy of meaning on a textual level by adopting a characteristically Christian-Platonic posture, which considers doubt and uncertainty a sign of sin and personal failure.<sup>165</sup> Ironically, Zarathustra suggests in the very chapter that tempts the reader into reconciliation that this inference is indicative of his commitment to the established order: “‘All loneliness is guilt’—thus speaks the herd” (Z, I, 17).

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<sup>165</sup>Recall Zarathustra’s description of the last men: “Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully” (Z, Prologue, 5).

Having been consoled and reassured in the wake of a crisis, however, the reader's commitment and loyalty to the task that motivates Zarathustra's journey is probably strengthened by this experience of "twosomeness." Zarathustra even acknowledges the presence of such a special bond between himself and his followers in the penultimate chapter of Part I, "On Free Death" (Z, I, 21). Switching from the designation "brothers" to "friends," he tells his companions: "Verily, Zarathustra had a goal; he threw his ball: now you, my friends, are the heirs of my goal; to you I throw my golden ball." But there is reason to be wary of Zarathustra's friendship, given that his understanding of this relationship does not exactly correspond to our ordinary notions. In a paean to friendship that precedes "On the Way to the Creator," Zarathustra requires that the true friend be "*capable* of being an enemy" (Z, I, 14). "In a friend," he claims, "one should have one's best enemy. You should be closest to him with your heart when you resist him."

Of course, in order for the term 'friend' to alert the reader seven chapters later, she would have to remember Zarathustra's redefinition of friendship—an unlikely prospect for all but those who have acquired a considerable degree of familiarity with the text.<sup>166</sup> Failing that, the conclusion of Part I is bound to deliver

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<sup>166</sup>Interestingly, "On Reading and Writing," the second of the rather obscure chapters mentioned above, might serve as commentary here: "Whoever writes in blood and aphorisms"—presumably Nietzsche—"does not want to be read but to be learned by heart." This suggests that the ideal reader is one who has memorized the text. Though this demand seems rather excessive, given the length and general unwieldiness of *Zarathustra*, it tends to support my claim that the text provides self-commentary and feedback to the reader, often retroactively.

yet another unexpected blow to the reader's confidence, both in herself and Zarathustra. The events leading up to the anti-climactic finale of the first part begin to unfold when Zarathustra takes his leave from the town named "The Motley Cow" in a chapter entitled "On the Gift-Giving Virtue" (Z, I, 22, 1). A number of his followers, who, we are told, have come to call themselves his disciples, accompany him out of town. When they come to a crossroads, Zarathustra tells them that he now wants to walk alone. His disciples present him with a farewell gift: "a staff with golden handle on which a serpent coiled around the sun." The sun, symbolic of Apollonian insight, as well as Plato's Form of the Good, is encircled by a serpent, interpreted by Zarathustra as a symbol of wisdom at the end of the Prologue, but also representative of evil in the Christian tradition. This image suggests that good and evil are closely related—perhaps that Apollonian insight must be counterbalanced by the kind of earthly wisdom represented by the snake.<sup>167</sup>

Zarathustra accepts their gift, and begins his final speech of Part I: "Tell me: how did gold attain the highest value? Because it is uncommon and useless and gleaming and gentle in its splendor; it always gives itself" (Z, I, 22, 1). Gold, he

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<sup>167</sup>Robert Gooding-Williams points out that within "the Hermetic tradition, with which Nietzsche seems to have been familiar, the image of a coiled serpent, or ouroboros, indicates a 'departure from' and 'return to' the original source of all things." *Dionysian Modernism*, 97.

Zarathustra interprets this image at the end of this section as follows: "Power is she, this new virtue; a dominant though is she, and around her a wise soul: a golden sun, and around it the serpent of knowledge" (Z, I, 22, 1).

In Part III, as we will see, the serpent also represents the thought of eternal recurrence.

claims, is like a gift-giving virtue, “the highest virtue.” Then he tells his followers, “Verily, I have found you out, my disciples: you strive, as I do, for the gift-giving virtue.” Although Zarathustra seems merely to acknowledge his companions’ good intentions and generosity in offering him a present of considerable value, the more significant discovery he announces is *that* they are his disciples, that is, only followers. Since discipleship in the Christian sense implies unconditional faith in the divine authority of the father and creator of the world, the fact that Zarathustra refers to his followers as disciples reveals his realization that they have simply exchanged one authority figure for another. Their lack of independence, moreover, is betrayed by the gift itself, a staff topped by a golden sun. This image suggests that in addition to returning the golden ball (his goal) he threw to them in the previous chapter, they want Zarathustra to assume the stereotypical shepherd role—leading his flock, staff in hand. This signifies their refusal or inability to take an active, creative stance themselves. Zarathustra does not immediately present his conclusion that his followers have not yet rejected the shepherd paradigm, but this inference does in fact conclude Part I of *Zarathustra*.<sup>168</sup>

Before Zarathustra delivers this potentially devastating message, however,

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<sup>168</sup>It is worth noting here that, once again, the text’s formal properties reflect its content, a sign that Nietzsche’s strategically arranged textual elements in order to elicit a particular reaction from his readers—that he was not satisfied with one-way communication.

Nietzsche was a sufficiently accomplished writer that, had he sought merely to convey a particular message or doctrine, he could have managed to present *Zarathustra*’s propositional content without the aid of structural and formal devices.

his voice is said to undergo a two-fold change, signaling a shift in attitude. The first time the tone of his voice changes is at the beginning of Section 2 of “On the Gift-Giving Virtue,” after Zarathustra has “looked at his disciples lovingly.” One would imagine that is choked up and feeling a bit sentimental. The second change occurs at the outset of Section 3. Zarathustra seems to have collected himself and, having “weighed his staff in his hand, doubtfully” for a long time, he not only speaks in a different tone, but “sings a very different tune,” indeed. He has evidently changed roles from friend to “enemy,” as we will see shortly. Moreover, his parting comments also violate the expectation raised by the resolution he made at the end of the Prologue from then on to “sing [his] song” to the hermits, “the lonesome and the twosome” (Z, Prologue, 9):

Now I go alone, my disciples. You too go now, alone. Thus I want it. Verily, I counsel you: go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And better yet, be ashamed of him! Perhaps he deceived you.

The man of knowledge must not only love his enemies, he must also be able to hate his friends.

One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil. And why do you not want to pluck at my wreath?

You revere me, but what if your reverence tumbles one day? Beware lest a statue slay you.

You say you believe in Zarathustra? But what matters Zarathustra? You are my believers—but what matter all believers? You had not yet sought yourselves: and you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all faith amounts to so little.

Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when you have all denied me will I return to you.

Verily, my brothers, with different eyes shall I then seek my lost ones; with a different love shall I then love you.

And once again you shall become my friends and the children of a single hope—and then shall I be with you the third time, that I may celebrate the great noon.

Zarathustra's message seems to be aimed directly at the readers, that is, the hermits to whom he had intended to "sing his song." His exhortation to his audience to now go alone, to find their own way and *become* hermits, implies that he sees them not as emancipated, independent individuals after all, but as "herd animals." The inference that Zarathustra is speaking to the readers, rather than his narrative audience, also follows from his promise that, once they find their own way, he will be with them "the third time." Zarathustra's narrative audience, as far as we can tell, has been with him only once: during the journey following the Prologue. His readers, however, have been with him twice—once during the Prologue, and then on his continued journey during remainder of Part I. Even if the details concerning the history of Zarathustra's narrative audience remain somewhat ambiguous, and the possibility that they, too, have been with Zarathustra twice cannot be ruled out, it seems relatively clear that the reader has been on both journeys. What remains uncertain, therefore, is whether the narrative audience is *also* addressed here, or whether it serves merely as a placeholder to illustrate the likely attitude and response of the reader as envisioned by Nietzsche.

I have argued throughout this chapter that the text repeatedly provides opportunity for the reader to identify herself as one of Zarathustra's companions. The passage concluding Part I is, at minimum, congruent with the pattern of temptation and rejection we have observed previously. If it is again successful, it can be expected that the reader who feels directly addressed will perceive Zarathustra's comments as a personal insult. Not only is her companionship

characterized as a sheepish faith, but Zarathustra also claims that her faith amounts to very little, and that she herself, as a believer, does not matter. Furthermore, by stating that after his followers go their own way and find themselves they will become his friends again, he implicitly disavows the bond of friendship he had just acknowledged at the end of “On Free Death,” the chapter preceding “On the Gift-Giving Virtue.” Zarathustra has obviously changed roles and adopted an antagonistic stance toward those he previously called friends. Without his earlier redefinition of friendship at hand, however, Zarathustra’s rejection of his disciples on the grounds that they remain committed to the Christian-Platonic world view would hardly be perceived as an expression of friendship.

Although the reader might feel “profoundly wounded” by Zarathustra’s comments, the derisiveness of his behavior goes beyond violating the reader’s expectations in regard to their bond of friendship. By scorning his disciples for their faith and betraying their trust, Zarathustra undermines what is perhaps *the* foundational assumption of the Christian faith, namely that one’s trust in Jesus/God is always absolutely secure. Zarathustra, however, turns Jesus into a Judas, the traitor whose actions, according to biblical narrative, led to Jesus’ crucifixion. Since Zarathustra’s disciples see him as a shepherd, that is, a Jesus-like figure, Zarathustra’s betrayal of his disciples’ faith constitutes almost as serious a violation of the predominant cultural cognitive and moral framework as Jesus’ betraying his followers would.

There are further indications that the reader is supposed to draw an analogy

between “The Last Supper” and Zarathustra’s impending departure. In addition to using the term ‘disciples,’ Zarathustra’s remark, “Verily, I have found you out, my disciples . . .,” prefigures his violation of his followers’ trust just as Jesus had foretold that one of his disciples would betray him before morning. Zarathustra also promises that he will be with his disciples again, again echoing Jesus’ assurances to his followers. Moreover, in Section 2 of “On the Gift-Giving Virtue,” Zarathustra promises “good tidings,” that a “chosen people” will grow out of them, and finally, “salvation” (Z, I, 22, 2). All of these terms clearly point to familiar themes, apparently promising redemption in a manner analogous to Christian doctrine. They are carefully qualified, to be sure: out of the chosen people the overman will grow, the salvation takes place within an earthly context, and good tidings are promised to the lonely, not the ‘poor of spirit.’ Yet Zarathustra’s statements, couched in the language of a familiar cognitive and moral framework, positively beg to be interpreted in a manner that takes foundational assumptions of the Christian-Platonic world view for granted.

Between the numerous temptations to approach the text from a perspective uncritical toward traditional cognitive and moral categories, and Zarathustra’s knowledge that “the voice of the herd will still be audible in [his followers]” (Z, I, 17), it seems plainly evident that the reader is deliberately entrapped. Of course, one would not be a typical and hence, predictable, Western thinker if one did not immediately suspect a purpose behind this frame-up. It simply does not seem “right” (or make sense) for an author intentionally to subject his readers to insult and

distress without having a good reason to do so. Setting aside for the moment the fact that searching for behind-the-scenes reasons and purposes constitutes yet another tacit affirmation of the Christian-Platonic world view in that it implicitly casts the author in the paternalistic shepherd role, we find that such a reason is not all that difficult to discover.

Zarathustra tells his followers in no uncertain terms what he intends to achieve in the very passage in which he disparages the value of faith and discipleship. He wants potential companions to translate their theoretical rejection of the Christian-Platonic world view into practice, to “pluck at [his] wreath,” to resist and even “be ashamed of him” (Z, I, 22, 3). These demands illustrate what Zarathustra takes to be the appropriate response to God’s death by inverting Christian doctrine at its source: biblical narrative. Without a perfect God, there is no one in whom disciples and mere followers can place their unconditional trust to lead them to salvation. To do so is not only to set oneself up for betrayal, but to adopt the type of passive, submissive stance toward one’s empirical existence that leads to nihilism and/or the last man. Zarathustra thus challenges his followers to apply their rejection of the shepherd paradigm to the actual situation at hand by rejecting him.

But he does not merely appeal to his disciples’ intellect by conveying that message verbally. Zarathustra’s reason for thinking that intellectual effort alone does not suffice to modify our practical stance toward life is quite similar to the reasons I have given above: Our “little reason,” as he explains in “On the Despisers of the Body” (Z, I, 4), is an “instrument” of “[our] great reason”—the body. The

intellect, in other words, does not rule the whole person. This means that in order to effect major changes in our habitual, practical orientation toward the world, one must appeal to the body in the sense that the passions and emotions, which tend to be symbolically associated with the body rather than the intellect, play a crucial role.<sup>169</sup> Zarathustra seems to do just that when he attacks his followers' pride. Feeling wounded is clearly an emotionally intense experience. And if a person is wounded repeatedly, she might eventually fight back and become an enemy to Zarathustra/Zarathustra. The point of eliciting this type of response is to kindle readers' aggressive tendencies where they still exist in order to get them to "pluck at [Zarathustra's] wreath," that is, to adopt a critical, leonine stance toward the book and its message. Such a response would in effect implement the reader's rejection of the shepherd model on a practical, applied level.

I have argued that the first part of *Zarathustra* repeatedly tempts the reader to form expectations that tacitly commit him to accepting the culturally predominant cognitive and moral framework, and thereby, to the values and ideals espoused by the Christian-Socratic tradition. *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* then violates those expectations, which tends to generate a negative emotional response that allows the reader to become aware of his own nihilistic tendencies. Moreover, by engendering confusion and a sense of indeterminacy that result from its violations of the established cognitive scheme, the text *shows* the existential consequences of God's

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<sup>169</sup>Robert Gooding-Williams argues that the "passional chaos" of Zarathustra's children allows them to create genuinely new values. *Dionysian Modernism*, 301.

death by moving the reader to experience its emotional dimensions first hand. Although recognition of our nihilistic tendencies is an essential first step, confrontation of the problem, I have argued, demands an exhaustive reorientation of our habitual *modus operandi*. This means that most individuals who have been brought up in the Western tradition will have to perform an exorcism, so to speak, to purge themselves of the habit of taking a passive, submissive stance toward their experiences. The danger of reverting to the habitual passive mode is particularly great when one is faced with problematic or questionable circumstances, as *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* acknowledges in “On the Way to the Creator” (Z, I, 17). It would make sense, therefore, from a strategic point of view, to expose the reader to questionable situations while showing him how to deal with them in a more active manner.

Zarathustra, we have observed, provides such an illustration in the concluding section of Part I. He translates his conclusion about his disciples’ submissive posture, betokened by the staff, into action, sending them away and encouraging them to adopt a similar stance toward him and his message.<sup>170</sup> It is worth noting that by confronting the problem directly and taking a “tough love” approach despite the anguish this may create on both sides, Zarathustra abolishes the correlation between sin and suffering assumed by the Christian-Platonic world view. He certainly seems to think that he is doing the right thing. The change of his voice

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<sup>170</sup>Recall that Zarathustra “weighed his staff in his hand, doubtfully” before rejecting his disciples.

prior to rejecting his disciples suggests, in retrospect, that the prospect of having to inflict pain upon his potential children is painful for Zarathustra as well, who has to steel himself before doing what he deems necessary. The fact that he does not shun distress and suffering as a matter of principle indicates that Zarathustra adopts a tragic perspective. This is reinforced by the thematic similarities between Zarathustra's betrayal of trust, which subverts the shepherd paradigm, and Prometheus' act of sacrilege. Both violate the divine order. Moreover, Zarathustra does, in a manner of speaking, "burn" his disciples. If we were to extend this analogy along the lines developed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, we should suspect that something of great value is obtained by Zarathustra's transgression.<sup>171</sup>

The most obvious potential gain is the emancipation of Zarathustra's followers from the shepherd paradigm. Because it entails the assumption of an active stance toward the world as a matter of habit, this rejection of the Christian-Platonic world view and its values on a practical level would enable *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra's audience to confront the problem of nihilism. This step is equivalent to completing the second metamorphosis of the spirit by becoming a lion. Aside from providing indication to the reader taken aback by the conclusion of Part I that, contrary to her expectations, she has not yet attained the lion stage, "On the Three Metamorphoses" provides a plot outlining the process of transformation that

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<sup>171</sup>We have noted previously Nietzsche's claim that "the best and highest possession mankind can acquire is obtained by sacrilege and must be paid for with consequences that involve the whole flood of sufferings and sorrows with which the offended divinities have to afflict the nobly aspiring race of men" (BT, 9).

seems to be a prerequisite for overcoming nihilism. Recognition of one's nihilistic tendencies, according to these guidelines, would place an individual at the camel stage; rejection of the established order and active confrontation of life-negating values and ideals at the lion stage; and the creation of new values that overcome nihilism at the child stage.

Having illustrated the existential implications of the lion stage by rejecting the shepherd paradigm in practice and encouraging the reader to follow suit,<sup>172</sup> one would expect *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* now to model the transition to the child stage in Part II. The second part does, indeed, commence with some promising signs in this regard. The first chapter is entitled "The Child with the Mirror" (Z, II, 1), which suggests that what is about to follow are reflections from a child's point of view. We then learn that Zarathustra had spent several more years alone in his mountain cave, and had again gathered too much wisdom—so much in fact that it "caused him pain with its fullness." The narrative background here is almost identical to that depicted in the opening passage. Zarathustra spends years in solitude where he gains important insights that compel him to go out to share his wisdom. There is, however, a crucial difference. In the Prologue, we are told that Zarathustra's relationship with his wisdom is like that of "a bee that has gathered too much honey" (Z, Prologue, 1). One would imagine that a bee, loaded down with too much nectar,

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<sup>172</sup>This provides some clarification concerning the sense in which Zarathustra's companions are supposed to follow: not in assenting to his doctrinal message, but in taking an actively critical stance toward claims to authority.

cannot fly very efficiently. It might buzz about rather clumsily, perhaps even bump into some obstacles. This analogy seems to capture Zarathustra's encounter with the townspeople in the Prologue quite accurately. But in "The Child with the Mirror," Zarathustra's wisdom is said to be painful due to its fullness. This metaphor likens Zarathustra's experience of his wisdom to that of a mother-to-be during the last stage of pregnancy, just prior to giving birth.<sup>173</sup>

In light of the chapter's title, the impressions left by the conclusion of Part I, and the pregnancy metaphor, Zarathustra's transition to the child stage appears imminent. Although it is suggested that Zarathustra, much as in the Prologue,<sup>174</sup> has undergone a change (Zarathustra, addressing his animals, asks, "have I not changed?"), it is unclear whether this change is progressive or regressive in terms of the metamorphoses of the spirit. The ambiguity concerning this rather crucial point is introduced by another of Zarathustra's monologues, where he relays and then interprets a strange dream for the reader. Speaking to his heart, he wonders, "Why was I so startled in my dream that I awoke? Did not a child step up to me, carrying a mirror? 'Oh Zarathustra,' the child said to me, 'look at yourself in the mirror.' But when I looked into the mirror I cried out, and my heart was shaken: for it was not myself I saw, but a devil's grimace and scornful laughter" (Z, II, 1).

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<sup>173</sup>The concluding passage confirms this reading: "My wild wisdom became pregnant on lonely mountains; on rough stones she gave birth to her young" (Z, II, 1).

<sup>174</sup>The saint in the forest remarks that "Zarathustra has changed, Zarathustra has become a child, Zarathustra is an awakened one . . ." (Z, Prologue, 2).

The imagery suggests that the child with the mirror, possibly one of Zarathustra's future children, allows Zarathustra to see himself from the perspective of the established order. Because he lives in a "desert" setting that symbolizes the devil's territory, as I argue in Chapter 2, he is being demonized by "the good and the just," who portray him as replete with evil intent as indicated by the "scornful laughter." The same applies to the insight he seeks to convey, which, in addition to arising from within this god-forsaken setting, aims to subvert established moral and rational categories. Zarathustra recognizes this, but then proceeds to draw an inference that appears to rescind his rejection of the shepherd paradigm: "Verily, all-too-well do I understand the sign and admonition of the dream: my *teaching* is in danger; weeds pose as wheat. My enemies have grown powerful and have distorted my teaching till those dearest to me must be ashamed of the gifts I gave them. I have lost my friends; the hour has come to seek my lost ones" (Z, II, 1).

Zarathustra's worries about his teaching, his enemies, and the status of his friends seem incompatible with his negation of the Christian-Platonic world view at the end of Part I, as well as his own advice. He had told his followers in no uncertain terms that they should resist and be ashamed of him, ordering them to lose him. Assuming that his dream as interpreted accurately reflects the existing state of affairs, as Zarathustra seems to believe, he should be pleased that his disciples have achieved independence. Instead, he is alarmed and highly concerned. Does this mean that Zarathustra has regressed and slipped into the shepherd role he had repudiated at the end of Part I? It is possible, though not entirely clear. Since this

attitude change appears so obviously to contradict his previous stance, a relatively charitable reader might attempt to modify this straightforward reading of Zarathustra's dream interpretation such that it does not violate his own precepts. Perhaps the teaching he is concerned about, one might suppose, is not so much the doctrinal content of his speeches, but the practical lesson of emancipation. And Zarathustra's enemies, "the good and the just," may have re-assimilated his disciples, which would make them mere enemies of Zarathustra's, not the liberated "friendly enemies" he had envisioned. Moreover, his disciples' shame, in this scenario, would be directed at the "gifts" he gave them, not at Zarathustra himself as he had proposed in "On the Gift-Giving Virtue."

This reinterpretation does seem to mitigate the degree of Zarathustra's attitudinal change to some extent, but it does not reconcile the differences in implication between his respective stances entirely. Even the worry that his practical lesson of emancipation is in jeopardy commits him to a fatherly, authoritative role, since his disciples' compliance with the judgment that the shepherd paradigm must be rejected in practice constitutes assent to an externally imposed ideal (though imposed by Zarathustra). Who is to say that consistency between one's theoretical beliefs and one's practical comportment is more desirable than the alternative? And for that matter, what constitutes emancipation from the shepherd paradigm, given that it seems impossible to speak or think without at least provisionally presupposing the validity of some cognitive framework, as I have argued in Chapter 2, which does not necessarily constitute adoption of a shepherd paradigm? Zarathustra thus faces a

problem of self-reference very similar in nature to the problem of communicating the implications of God's death we discussed in Chapter 4. He cannot advocate rejection of the shepherd paradigm without assuming an authoritative position, yet in doing so, he contradicts the stance he endorses on an existential level.

If this tension is deliberate, its likely purpose would be to *show* the highly problematic nature of *Zarathustra/Zarathustra's* task on an applied level. But the effectiveness of the demonstration depends to a large extent on the reader's adoption of a critical stance, which presupposes his or her having completed the transition to the lion stage. Given that the reader, unlike *Zarathustra*, has not had adequate time to "digest" the lessons learned during the previous "journey," but has merely turned a few pages in a book, this seems improbable. Modification of habit takes time. As a result, readers who have not taken the lessons to heart, in the sense that they have not yet recognized their existential implications, are unlikely to take note of the tension and may anticipate *Zarathustra's* demonstration of child-like creativity. The reader's disposition to expect an illustration of new value creation is further encouraged by *Zarathustra's* characterization of his upcoming speeches: "New ways I go, a new speech comes to me; weary I grow, like all creators, of the old tongues. My spirit no longer wants to walk on worn soles" (Z, II, 1). *Zarathustra* evidently plans to forge a novel path that leads beyond his rejection of the culturally predominant cognitive scheme. He intends to erase the tracks of his negation of the established order by changing the way he speaks, which suggests that his spirit is not free to create as long as he conforms to traditional speech and thought patterns.

Consistent with this projection, Zarathustra sets himself apart from the established cognitive and moral framework. He will sweep into the valleys like a storm, he tells us, and “between the laughter of lightning bolts [he] want[s] to throw showers of hail into the depth” while letting his “enemies believe that *the evil one* rages over their heads.”<sup>175</sup> In addition to recognizing and accepting society’s moral condemnation, Zarathustra also distances himself from the foundational assumptions of its cognitive precepts by claiming to have forgotten how to entice his former disciples to return to him. He apparently considers himself unable to relate to his “brothers,” who he fears have fallen victim to the comforts of social or “herd” existence. He laments: “Would that I knew how to lure you back with shepherds’ flutes!” This suggests that Zarathustra’s new linguistic framework does not provide the conceptual categories necessary to accommodate the shepherd model. His new speech will, therefore, require him to sing a new and “unheard-of”<sup>176</sup> tune.

Part II, accordingly, presents a different style. Zarathustra’s speeches are more poetic and passionate, laden with images and metaphors. They also involve a focus on truth and wisdom, which renders them even more sermonizing than his

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<sup>175</sup>In violating the culturally established cognitive scheme, which maintains the order of creation, Zarathustra symbolically aligns himself with demonic powers. We will see in Part III that Zarathustra’s eventual reconciliation with the thought of eternal recurrence depends on his accepting the third temptation the devil proposes to Jesus in the desert: dominance over the empirical realm. By accepting what Jesus refuses, Zarathustra takes charge of the visible world from a standpoint above and beyond the predominant categorical framework.

<sup>176</sup>Zarathustra, we might recall, had resolved at the end of the Prologue from then on only to sing his tune to those who still have “ears for the unheard-of” (Z, Prologue, 9).

previous lectures because they imply an authoritative position. Back among his friends in “Upon the Blessed Isles,” Zarathustra is finally able to release the pressure of his accumulated wisdom in the form of a doctrinal message. But first he practically orders his companions to accept it: “like [ripe] figs, these teachings fall to you, my friends; now consume their juice and their sweet meat” (Z, II, 2). In demanding takers, he displays the sort of unsophisticated, exuberant, and in some sense self-centered, generosity typically encountered in young children. Children, when they give, tend to do so whole-heartedly and without any reservations because they take for granted the universal validity of their judgments, whether they be about the value of their gift or about their view of the world in general. For that reason, one cannot refuse a child’s present without risking injury to her sense of self-worth.

Zarathustra presents his teachings in a similar spirit by demanding acceptance and appreciation. With an air of conviction befitting someone who has never entertained any doubt concerning their great value, he sets the stage for a demonstration of child-like creativity that implies his having completed the final metamorphosis. Consistent with this outlook on life, Zarathustra does not hesitate to tell his companions the “truth,” that is, what and how they should think. “God is a conjecture,” he informs them bluntly, “but I desire that your conjectures should not reach beyond your creative will” (Z, II, 2). He further encourages his friends, too, to consider themselves the centers of the universe, appropriate to adopting a child-like perspective: “what you have called world, that shall be created only by you: your reason, your image, your will, your love shall thus be realized.” Then, in an

obviously fallacious argument<sup>177</sup> with a touch of megalomania, he reveals his heart to his friends completely: “*if* there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! Hence, there are no gods. Though I drew this conclusion, now it draws me.” The world would have to revolve entirely around Zarathustra’s will and desires for this argument to be valid. But in order for the world to reflect his will and desires, he would have to be god-like, which seems to contradict his conclusion.

Though illustrative of a child’s stance toward his environment, it is questionable whether the view expressed here constitutes progression to the child from the lion stage, or whether it is a (partial) step back to the camel stage. The reference to the history of Nietzsche’s philosophical development would suggest the latter. Reminiscent of Schopenhauer’s idealism, Zarathustra’s argument draws a rough caricature of the epistemological implications of Nietzsche’s early mentor’s view. If it were true that the world we perceive is but a manifestation or representation of our will, then what we will would, in some sense, determine what is. That means we could construct valid proofs for, or against, the existence of God because knowable reality and our will coincide. The only limitation of our power to construct reality is its conceivability. Zarathustra demands that his disciples’ creative will be restrained by “what is thinkable . . . for man, visible for man, feelable by man.” And since we cannot “*think* a god,” we cannot plausibly will a

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<sup>177</sup>Gooding-Williams points out that this argument shares some central features of Kant’s practical postulate for the existence of God. Whereas for Kant “postulating the existence of God is essential to avoiding moral despair,” for Zarathustra, postulating the non-existence of God “is necessary to avoid the creator’s despair,” 195.

god. Hence, gods cannot exist. Zarathustra's advocacy of a view resembling Schopenhauer's would suggest that he is following in Nietzsche's footsteps. The conclusion that draws Zarathustra thus could be Schopenhauer's in the sense that he is attracted to it because it allows for the kind of creative freedom his task demands.<sup>178</sup>

In contrast to Schopenhauer, however, Zarathustra holds that willing and creating leads to "redemption from suffering," that "willing liberates" (Z, II, 2). Whereas Schopenhauer had taught that renunciation of the will alone can end human suffering, Zarathustra asserts quite the opposite. But this selective stance, too, is illustrative of Nietzsche's earlier posture in that it accepts some of Schopenhauer's ideas while resisting other aspects of his philosophy. Nietzsche tells us in *The Birth of Tragedy*, "every true tragedy leaves us" with "the metaphysical comfort . . . that life is at the bottom of things . . . indestructibly powerful and pleasurable" (BT, 7). Although still under Schopenhauer's influence at the time, Nietzsche disagrees with his mentor's pessimistic assessment of life's ultimate character. Moreover, Nietzsche seems to have considered a "Buddhistic negation of the will" undesirable even then, calling it a "danger" from which "art saves him (the profound Hellene), and through art-life" (BT, 7).

The similarities with Nietzsche's early philosophical view, therefore, give

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<sup>178</sup>Zarathustra, later in Part II, falls victim to Schopenhauerian pessimism in "The Soothsayer," which is consistent with the hypothesis that he has not yet emancipated himself from this influence (Z, II, 19).

reason to think that Zarathustra's demeanor is a sign of youthful immaturity rather than indicative of his having completed the transition to the child stage. Indeed, in "The Tomb Song" (Z, II, 11), exactly midway through Part II, we find Zarathustra lamenting the loss of his youthful hopes and aspirations. This suggests that he has at that point reached an intermediate position, where he begins to break free of his youthful idealism (in both senses of idealism), which insisted on the power of his will to determine (or create) life's character. Now Zarathustra claims: "in me there is something invulnerable and unburiable, something that explodes rock: that is *my will*. Silent and unchanged it strides through the years. It would walk its way on my feet, my old will, and its mind is hard of heart and invulnerable." By asserting the power of his will to confront his idealistic conception of the world, Zarathustra indicates that he is prepared to break free of this youthful notion. Nonetheless, in doing so he continues to insist that his will has the power to determine his attitude toward life.

This chapter follows "The Dancing Song" (Z, II, 10), where Zarathustra has a dream- or vision-like conversation with life that provides a possible motive for changing his metaphysical as well as his epistemological view. Walking through a forest in search of a well, Zarathustra finds a group of girls dancing in a meadow. He encourages them to keep dancing, comparing himself to a forest "and a night of dark trees" in which Cupid has fallen asleep in broad daylight near a well. The imagery suggests that Zarathustra's capacity for love has lain dormant among his dark and perhaps gloomy passions. Teasing "the little god a bit" to make him weep,

he has Cupid ask the girls for a dance. While Cupid and the girls dance around the well, Zarathustra sings a song that is supposed to mock the “spirit of gravity,” his “supreme and most powerful devil,” though it is life who ends up mocking Zarathustra.

“Into your eyes I looked recently, O life!,” sings Zarathustra, “And into the unfathomable I then seemed to be sinking. But you pulled me out with a golden fishing rod” (Z, II, 10). In the German, only one eye is mentioned: “*In Dein Auge* (singular) *schaute ich jüngst, oh Leben!*”<sup>179</sup> This could mean that Zarathustra, in his dream or vision, has literally fallen into the well, which represents life’s eye, but is fished out before the devil of gravity pulls him to the bottom, causing him to drown (in sorrow?). That reading would explain Zarathustra’s surprise that he is still alive after the song ends. “What? Are you still alive, Zarathustra?” he asks himself. “Why? What for? By what? Whither? Where? How? Is it not folly still to be alive?” As such, the song may be taken to relay a near death or mystical experience, said frequently to lead those who have undergone them radically to change their orientation toward life.

It is life, not wisdom, who rescues Zarathustra and laughs at him mockingly. “Thus runs the speech of all fish,” she comments on his description of the experience, “what *they* do not fathom is unfathomable.” Instead, she claims to be “merely changeable and wild and a woman in every way, and not virtuous—even if

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<sup>179</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1994), 111.

you men call me profound, faithful, eternal, and mysterious. But you men always present us with your own virtues . . .” (Z, II, 10). Life’s description of her true nature seems to correspond with Schopenhauer’s characterization of Will, that is, noumenal reality, as chaotic, unpredictable, and filled with passion, which Nietzsche accepts in *The Birth of Tragedy*. But she denies that her basic character justifies the assignment of any moral attributes, whether they reflect Schopenhauer’s judgment that life is ultimately woeful or Nietzsche’s claim that life is at bottom “indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (BT, 7). Both present her with their own virtues. Life’s insistence on her amorality points toward a potential inconsistency in Nietzsche’s earlier view, which claims that existence is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon, but at the same time seems to endow it with positive normative value by contradicting Schopenhauer’s pessimistic conclusion (BT, 5).

Zarathustra’s recognition of this internal inconsistency should provide occasion to revise his position, assuming that his speech at the outset of Part II is an illustration of Nietzsche’s early view. But in addition to denying that her value is related to, or determined by, her nature, life explicitly rejects the inference that she is unfathomable simply because she is unfathomed. This, too, would amount to ascribing attributes on the basis of human capacities or presenting life with human virtues. Although life does not claim that she is in principle knowable, her critique of Zarathustra’s identification of the knowable with the known calls his youthful idealism into question. The reason for this is that an idealist metaphysics limits individuals’ epistemic access to the world to their own ideas. In this sense, the

fathomable cannot exceed, or is identical with, the fathomed. By denying the validity of that inference, therefore, life suggests that Zarathustra's idealistic conception of the world is mistaken.

As it turns out, Zarathustra does in fact have trouble distinguishing between life and wisdom, or knowledge and reality. When he describes his wisdom to life, she again laughs sarcastically and asks: "Of whom are you speaking? . . . no doubt of me." Zarathustra, it seems, has been "hooked" by life all along: "You will, you want, you love—that is the only reason why you *praise* life." This accusation by his "wild wisdom" suggests that Zarathustra's earlier admonition to his disciples to restrain their "will to truth" to what is "thinkable for man, visible for man, feelable by man" (Z, II, 2) is in fact motivated by his love of life—not wisdom. But if Zarathustra's followers were to limit their creative wills to what they actually "fathom," they would fail to create life-affirming values in the event that life, as she suggests, transcends the domain of the "fathomable" as defined by idealism. The same would hold with respect to wisdom. If the fathomable exceeds the fathomed, then limiting the will to the fathomed would restrict its range to an area that fails to encompass its potential reach.<sup>180</sup>

Assuming that the "truths" Zarathustra has been expounding prior to this are ultimately a testament to his love of life, part of which may be unknown to him, this

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<sup>180</sup>Gooding-Williams also comes to this conclusion: "Zarathustra's idealism comes as no surprise, for his will to truth reduces reality to what can be known and limits knowledge to what the knowing (human) subject creates." See *Dionysian Modernism*, 163.

imposes significant constraints on his creative will. His will does not, as he claims in “Upon the Blessed Isles,” have the power to create the knowable world, and hence, cannot exercise complete control over his disposition toward life. Although Zarathustra resists the implication that he cannot freely choose his attitude toward life in “The Tomb Song,” and continues to insist upon the liberating power of his will, the seeds of doubt have been planted. While he begins to relinquish the idealist notion that the world is an expression of his will, he retains the belief that he can control his stance toward it because he is in charge of his will. This leaves Zarathustra vulnerable to Schopenhauerian pessimism insofar as the state of the world poses a challenge to the power of Zarathustra’s will, as we will come to see in “The Soothsayer” (Z, II, 19). As a result, Zarathustra comes to realize that in order to break Schopenhauer’s spell, he must deal with the full implications of his rejection of idealism by assuming responsibility for the past and confronting it in a constructive manner.<sup>181</sup>

Toward the end of Part II, we find Zarathustra taken aback by the soothsayer’s prophecy that he saw “a great sadness descend upon mankind. The best grew weary of their works. A doctrine appeared, accompanied by a faith: ‘All is empty, all is the same, all has been!’” (Z, II, 19). Moreover, “we have all become dry; and if fire should descend on us, we should turn to ashes; indeed, we have wearied the fire itself. . . . All our wells have dried up; even the sea has withdrawn. .

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<sup>181</sup>This is suggested in the following chapter, “On Redemption” (Z, II, 20).

. . . we have become too weary even to die. We are still waking and living on—in tombs.” Although this recalls “The Tomb Song,” to which Zarathustra had responded by reaffirming the power of his will to shatter “all tombs” (Z, II, 11), the soothsayer’s pessimistic prediction now “[touches] Zarathustra’s heart and [changes] him.” This presumably unexpected reaction leads Zarathustra to question his ability to control his stance toward life and to avert or overcome nihilism, so much so that he refuses to eat, drink, speak, or rest for three days. And when he finally falls asleep, his apparent powerlessness in the face of nihilism and despair follows him even into his dreams.<sup>182</sup> Eventually, he is awakened by his own horrified cries, unable to recognize his disciples, the followers of his teachings,<sup>183</sup> until they lift him up and his eyes suddenly change as he comprehends “all that had happened.”

We are not told what insight Zarathustra draws from his dream, but upon regaining his composure, he orders a good meal and invites the soothsayer to stay so that he might “show him a sea in which he can drown” (Z, II, 19). Zarathustra has apparently found a way to confront the soothsayer’s pessimism. The following chapter, “On Redemption,” suggests that the response to the prospect of nihilism

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<sup>182</sup>Zarathustra finds himself “a guardian of tombs upon the lonely mountain castle of death” in his dream. “Life had been overcome,” and Zarathustra, though he exerts himself, cannot open the gate leading out of the castle with the set of rusty keys he has in his possession. When a “roaring wind” tears open the gate, he is confronted by a black coffin out of which “thousandfold laughter . . . a thousand grimaces of children, angels, owls, fools, and butterflies as big as children” burst forth, mocking and roaring at him.

<sup>183</sup>This suggests that Zarathustra has lost sight of his own teachings, since his disciples are presumably the “children” of his teachings.

involves learning to will backwards (Z, II, 20). “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into a ‘thus I willed it’—that alone should I call redemption,” Zarathustra claims. He then repeats his earlier contention that “willing liberates” and brings joy. Again he advocates assertion of will, not its negation, and thereby reaffirms his original point of contention with Schopenhauer, expressed at the beginning of Part II in “Upon the Blessed Isles.” But Zarathustra’s position nevertheless has undergone significant modification in that redemption now requires the creative will’s transformation of the past, a rather daunting task, given that, as he himself acknowledges,<sup>184</sup> this demands something literally impossible.

It turns out that willing backwards means to unlearn the “spirit of revenge” against the nature of time, that is, against the fact that the future ceaselessly flows into the past where it cannot be changed. Every mistake and error is thus frozen in time and constitutes a permanent affront to those who aspire to live without sin. To counteract this Christian tendency to dwell on past mistakes whose occurrence is inevitable in the course of human existence, Zarathustra advocates the affirmation of failures and accidents: “All ‘it was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a dreadful accident—until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I willed it.’ Until the creative will says to it, ‘But thus I will it; thus shall I will it’” (Z, II, 20). Although Zarathustra does not say so, this probably means that in order to affirm our lives at any given moment, we must affirm that moment’s antecedents because without those prior moments and the

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<sup>184</sup>“The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time’s covetousness, that is the will’s loneliest melancholy” (Z, II, 20).

events and experiences they entail, the current moment would not be what it is. It is not sufficient, however, merely to accept the past as necessary. According to Zarathustra, the will must strive for “something higher than any reconciliation” with time. The will, in other words, must learn to will backwards—to *want* the past to be exactly what it is, without modification or revision.

Since “willing backwards” appears to be presented as a solution to the soothsayer’s pessimistic forecast, it raises some questions about its connection to the creation of new values. Why does the possibility of new value creation make it necessary to affirm the past? One would think, to the contrary, that it is the rejection of old values that provides the basis for new values—especially if one is guided by the sequence of spiritual transformations in “On the Three Metamorphoses” (Z, I, 1). More specifically, what role does affirmation of the past play in staving off the depletion of human potential such that nihilism can be confronted? What exactly is it that we are supposed to affirm? Surely not the old life-denying values, though they are a part of the past just as much as the events and actions those values lead us to judge failures, mistakes, and sins. But if these values are edited out, then affirmation of the past, rather than integrating fragments and accidents, would be selective, contrary to the apparent purpose of “willing backwards.” It also remains unclear how one would go about implementing Zarathustra’s solution to the problem of nihilism as a practical matter. Can we control our desires and emotions and get ourselves to learn to *want* what happened to have occurred? This, too, may amount to demanding the impossible for all we know.

Whether or not Zarathustra's response to the soothsayer's prophecy constitutes a viable solution to the problem of nihilism, he does not, at any rate, provide clear directions for attaining redemption. Probably due to the tensions between affirmation of the past and rejection of the life-negating values "willing backwards" entails, Zarathustra's fails, or refuses, to guide his readers and disciples toward resolution.<sup>185</sup> While this rejection of the shepherd role is consistent with his renunciation of Christian-Platonic values, it nevertheless defies the expectation that Part II is an illustration of child-like creation. Instead of showing us what sorts of values an individual who has undergone the last metamorphosis would create, Zarathustra seems to be acting rather childish and immaturely. One might well get the impression that his "solution" to the threat of nihilism is similar in spirit to a child's stomping his foot and insisting on getting his way no matter what. Zarathustra, in this case, contends that willing is the answer, period. "If projecting the will into the future will not do," he seems to be saying, "then let us will backwards!"

Since we are not told how this is to be accomplished or even what it entails, there is a distinct sense that a crucial piece of information is being withheld. For that reason, readers who followed Zarathustra's present journey may justifiably feel let down. This sense of betrayal is compounded by the fact that promising redemption

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<sup>185</sup>See *Dionysian Modernism*, 183-268 for an extensive discussion of the tensions between new value creation and overcoming Christian-Platonic values.

only to deny one's followers the means to it is "unheard-of"<sup>186</sup> in the context of the Christian-Platonic tradition. That is not to claim that salvation in the spirit of Christianity is not in fact similarly unattainable, but it is certainly not part of the official dogma. Even sects who believe in predestination hold that faith is the key to salvation. And since one cannot know beforehand whether one's salvation is preordained, choosing to believe in God is the only path to its (possible) attainment.

Of course, whether one can choose one's beliefs is as questionable as whether one can choose one's desires. Moreover, believing in God presents difficulties analogous to those involved in "willing backwards" in that the concept of an omniscient, omnipotent and omni-benevolent God exhibits similar tensions once certain empirical states of affairs cannot be affirmed. For Zarathustra, such states would include acceptance of life-negating values; for Christianity, the problem of evil. In light of these parallels, Zarathustra's suppression of information apparently crucial to redemption may again direct the reader's attention toward implicit presuppositions consistent with the Christian-Platonic moral and cognitive framework by thwarting her expectation. While the church has traditionally glossed over these tensions and left it to faith to reconcile them, however, Zarathustra openly acknowledges that he is withholding something from his disciples in the final chapter of Part II, "The stillest hour:" "Alas, my friends, I still could tell you something, I still could give you something. Why do I not give it? Am I stingy?" (Z, II, 22).

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<sup>186</sup>Recall Zarathustra's comment in Section 9 of the Prologue that his proper companions must have ears for the "unheard-of."

These questions receive no immediate answer. They are followed by Zarathustra's being "overcome by the force of his pain and the nearness of his parting from his friends," which causes him to weep loudly. He goes away alone at night. This concludes Part II, leaving a number of issues unresolved. Indeed, the story Zarathustra relates "as a parable" tends to confirm this lack of resolution, as well as our suspicions concerning Zarathustra's possible regression to a stage preceding the leonine, rather than offer any satisfactory explanations prior to this unhappy ending. "Yesterday, toward evening, there spoke to me *my stillest hour*: that is the name of my awesome mistress," Zarathustra tells his disciples. His stillest hour speaks to him "without a voice," ordering him to "say it," to "speak [his] word and break!" (Z, II, 22). We are not told what Zarathustra's word entails. Zarathustra, however, refuses to speak it, claiming first that he does not want to, then that it exceeds his strength, that he "lacks the lion's voice for commanding," and lastly, that he is ashamed.

The stillest hour foils each of Zarathustra's attempts to dodge what appears to be his duty, except for the last. In addition to Zarathustra's claim that he lacks the lion's voice, the stillest hour's response to his first refusal is significant for purposes of determining his progress, or lack thereof, in terms of the three metamorphoses: "You do not *want* to, Zarathustra? Is this really true? Do not hide in your defiance." This suggests that Zarathustra's insistence on the power of his will is a sign of immaturity rather than progress toward the child stage, as does his description of his reaction to these words: "I cried and trembled like a child . . . ." This conversation

continues until the stillest hour, at last, relents. “You must yet become as a child and without shame,” she replies to Zarathustra’s claim that he is ashamed. “The pride of youth is still upon you; you have become young late; but whoever would become as a child must overcome his youth, too.”

If this heart to heart encounter with his stillest hour offers any indication, then Zarathustra has not yet made the transition to the child stage, as we suspected. Moreover, assuming that his claim that he lacks the lion’s voice can be believed, he has not even reached this prior stage. This would mean that he has not fully embraced the implications of his conversation with life and continues to cling to the idea that his will should be capable of determining his disposition toward life, but cannot manage. Zarathustra, in other words, must still overcome the view he expresses at the outset of Part II, which I have argued parallels Nietzsche’s youthful position to some extent.

As we have seen, the text violates not only the expectation that the second part will illustrate new value creation from the “mature” child’s perspective, but it undermines the conclusion of Part I, which gives every indication that Zarathustra has completed the second metamorphosis of the spirit. In addition to transgressing against expectations raised by the text itself, the lack of resolution, the unhappy ending, and the regression with respect to the clarity of Zarathustra’s doctrine all defy accepted Western cognitive and moral schemes. We tend to expect happy endings, progress toward clarity and resolution as compensation for our work and efforts—whether Zarathustra’s or our own—based on the notion, as Zarathustra tells us

in “On Redemption,” that “things are ordered morally according to justice and punishment” (Z, II, 20). Though he makes it clear that this is madness, it is, as I have argued throughout, one thing to comprehend on an intellectual level, and quite another to integrate a new insight on a practical, applied level.

Of course, the frustrating conclusion of Part II does not constitute the end of the book as a whole. By withholding apparently essential information, however, and making it known that something is withheld, curious readers with a desire for resolution may feel compelled to continue reading rather than let their frustration lead them to put down the book. Also, considering the amount of thought and effort readers are bound to have invested thus far toward making sense of the book, they are likely to anticipate their compensation for their troubles, as mentioned above. Both of these devices raise the stakes for the expectation that the remainder of the work will deliver satisfactory answers.

Specifically, we would expect resolution of the tensions between Zarathustra’s love of wisdom, which coincides with and limits his will, and his love of life, which exceeds the boundaries of the known and hence, cannot be subjected to domination by means of volition. We would also anticipate disclosure of the suppressed piece of information that promises to reconcile the antagonism between the rejection of life-negating values and the affirmative stance toward life that allows for redemption and the creation of new, life-affirming values. Lastly, the reader is likely to look forward to Zarathustra’s progress in terms of the metamorphoses of the spirit. Let us then turn to Part III to see whether *Zarathustra* meets these

expectations.

## Chapter 7

### Eternal Recurrence and Redemption

After leaving his disciples for the second time, Zarathustra makes his way across the island in order to find a ship to take him back to the mainland. He travels at night, as he did at the end of the Prologue while carrying the dead tightrope walker away from the first town he had visited following his initial descent from his mountain home. The mood is somber, but this time it is Zarathustra, not the reader, who is apprehensive. As he climbs a mountain ridge that divides the island, he speaks again to his heart: “I stand before my final peak now and before that which has been saved up for me the longest. Alas, now I must face my hardest path! Alas, I have begun my loneliest walk! But whoever is of my kind cannot escape such an hour—the hour which says to him: ‘Only now are you going your way to greatness! Peak and abyss—they are now joined together.’” (Z, III, 1). The terminology here recalls Zarathustra’s conversation with his stillest hour, whose words had caused him to react with fear and trepidation. Unlike the previous time, however, Zarathustra now tries to persuade himself to face his task. Although we do not know exactly what this task entails, it is reasonable to allow oneself to be guided by the questions left open at the end of Part II.

At the conclusion of the previous part, we were left wondering what the

word might be that Zarathustra's stillest hour commanded him to speak. There was a sense that this word might reconcile the tensions between the rejection of old values and affirmation of the past necessary for redemption and the creation of new, life-affirming values. In the end, however, Zarathustra's stillest hour had determined that he must yet become like a child in order to be able to speak his word. Since he is now prepared to meet his obligations, albeit with obvious dread, one would expect Part III to document his transition to the child stage. This expectation is reinforced by Zarathustra's account of what his hour demands of him: "You are going your way to greatness: now this must give you the greatest courage that there is no longer any path behind you." This suggests that Zarathustra is about to break new ground, that there is no turning back from this point on. In this respect he resembles the child in "On the Three Metamorphoses," who is "innocence and forgetting, a new beginning . . . a self-propelled wheel . . ." (Z, I, 1). Just as a child cannot return to the safety of the womb, so Zarathustra cannot turn back to take refuge under the authority of the familiar Christian-Platonic value structure.

The idea that Zarathustra is about to enter a new phase is also suggested by the setting. He travels by night planning to embark on a ship in the morning, and leaves behind the firm land of the blessed island in order to drift across the sea and

into an uncertain future.<sup>187</sup> We might recall that Zarathustra had resolved to make a new beginning the morning after he buried the dead tightrope walker he had been carrying through the night as well. At that time, he was hopeful, resolving never again to speak to the dead or to carry with him dead companions and corpses (*Z*, Prologue, 9). This time, he is apprehensive about his task, which indicates that he has learned that despite his conscious resolve not to carry dead baggage, he may nevertheless be haunted by a past he cannot control or change. This could be the reason his hour reassures him: ““on your way to greatness . . . nobody shall sneak after you. Your own foot has effaced the path behind you, and over it there is written: impossibility.””

What had crept up on Zarathustra previously was his unexpected vulnerability to the soothsayer’s pessimistic prophecy. We might recall that Zarathustra, though taken aback at first, had responded by demanding what is literally impossible, namely, that we must learn to will backwards. By effacing the path behind him, however, and making a new beginning in a child-like state, it is suggested that Zarathustra will be able to accomplish the impossible: to create new, life-affirming values while affirming the past and its predominantly life-negating values. This effacing process is key to reconciling the tensions between past and

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<sup>187</sup>Zarathustra also refers to the sea as “pregnant nocturnal dismay,” which reinforces the imagery of his floating in a dark womb to emerge as a newborn, whose destiny is undetermined, on the other shore.

future, as we will see in the course of discussing the main theme of Part III, the thought of eternal recurrence, one of Nietzsche's most well-known and controversial "doctrines." And since Zarathustra refers to eternal recurrence as his "most abysmal thought" (Z, III, 2, 2) soon after the conversation with his stillest hour, there is reason to think that his expression of this idea constitutes "speaking his word." Due to its centrality not only to resolving the issues raised in Part II, but to the book as a whole,<sup>188</sup> I devote the majority of my examination of Part III to the idea of eternal recurrence.

There is, not surprisingly, as little consensus among scholars about the status and significance of eternal recurrence as there is about *Zarathustra* itself.

Interpretations of the idea run the gamut from existential imperatives<sup>189</sup> to self-consuming concepts,<sup>190</sup> normative<sup>191</sup> and cosmological formulations<sup>192</sup>, spatial

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<sup>188</sup>Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra," 1: "My *gaya scienza* . . . contains a hundred signs of the proximity of something incomparable; in the end it offers the beginning of *Zarathustra*, and in the penultimate section of the fourth book the basic idea of *Zarathustra*."

<sup>189</sup>Bernd Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

<sup>190</sup>Bernd Magnus, Stanley Stewart, and Jean-Pierre Mileur, *Nietzsche's Case: Philosophy as/and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>191</sup>Tracy Strong, *Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

<sup>192</sup>Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher: An Original Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

representations,<sup>193</sup> musical readings,<sup>194</sup> wedding test analogies,<sup>195</sup> and literary analogies.<sup>196</sup> My own interpretation differs rather substantially from most of the above, but is at least partially compatible with others. I am guided in my approach by Nietzsche's commentary in *Ecce Homo*, quoted in footnote 2 above, where he hints that his first formulation of eternal recurrence in *The Gay Science* (GS 341) contains the key to *Zarathustra* in the form of signs. There are, indeed, several themes, metaphors, and images shared by GS 341 and certain passages of *Zarathustra* whose resonant elements offer important clues regarding the status of eternal recurrence. In contrast to the majority of the above mentioned readings, which tend to presuppose that eternal recurrence is a theoretical construct of one type or another, to be made sense of by classifying it in terms of predominant Western cognitive categories, exploration of the "signs" mentioned by Nietzsche indicates that eternal recurrence is, instead, a thought experiment intended to motivate personal engagement with the problem of nihilism. More specifically, I argue that eternal recurrence is a practical tool that enables us to recognize the impact of God's death on a concrete level by placing it within the context of our actual, empirical

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<sup>193</sup>*Dionysian Modernism.*

<sup>194</sup>*Nietzsche's Zarathustra.*

<sup>195</sup>*Nietzsche on Truth.*

<sup>196</sup>Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).

lives and as such, renders the problem of nihilism more tangible.

In light of Nietzsche's claim that eternal recurrence constitutes the basic idea of *Zarathustra*, it is odd that Zarathustra's first explicit mention of it does not occur until the second chapter of Part III, "On the Vision and the Riddle," more than halfway through the book. Anke Benholdt-Thomsen argues that the delay in presenting the book's central idea is due to the fact that Nietzsche sought to portray the development of the thought of eternal recurrence over time, in tandem with Zarathustra's own "ripening process."<sup>197</sup> I agree. But its late occurrence, in conjunction with the depiction of Zarathustra in the process of becoming (the teacher of eternal recurrence), also suggests that there are textual antecedents on the basis of which eternal recurrence eventually develops. This gives cause to favor a contextual approach that takes into account literary devices and textual characteristics that tend to be set aside in the course of purely philosophical enterprises aimed at eliciting the propositional content of a given idea. Gooding-Williams shares this view to some extent, arguing that eternal recurrence as the basic idea of *Zarathustra* cannot be divorced from its dramatic context.<sup>198</sup> I push this approach further by considering not only the drama, but also the setting, imagery, and metaphors that connect the

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<sup>197</sup>Anke Benholdt-Thomsen, *Nietzsche's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" als literarisches Phänomen* (Frankfurt/Main: Athenäum, 1974) 53-4.

<sup>198</sup>*Dionysian Modernism*, 185.

initial GS 341 formulation with *Zarathustra*.

As we return to the text now, we find Zarathustra now aboard a ship. After remaining silent for two days, out of sadness over the departure from his disciples, he begins to speak to the sailors. Encouraging them to guess his riddle, he tells them of a vision in which he is climbing a mountain while “the spirit of gravity, [his] devil and archenemy,” sits on him. The spirit of gravity, “half dwarf, half mole,” is attempting to paralyze Zarathustra by “dripping lead into [his] ear, leaden thoughts into [his] brain” (Z, III, 2, 1).<sup>199</sup> The dwarf’s ultimate aim is to weigh Zarathustra down to prevent his ascent of the mountain by convincing his victim that he cannot defy the law of gravity: ““O Zarathustra, ‘ he whispered mockingly, syllable by syllable; ‘you philosopher’s stone! You threw yourself up high, but every stone that is thrown must fall.’” Eventually, the dwarf falls silent; but Zarathustra perceives his silence as more oppressive than his taunts. “Such twosomeness,” Zarathustra remarks, “ is surely more lonesome than being alone.”

The reference to loneliness, the weight metaphors, and the demonic figure all mirror elements of Nietzsche’s first formulation of eternal recurrence in GS 341, the penultimate section of the book’s first edition. Entitled “The Greatest Weight,” the setting of GS 341 bears a striking resemblance to both “On the Vision and the

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<sup>199</sup>This may also be an allusion to the murder of the king in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Riddle” and the opening passage of *Zarathustra*, the latter of which also constitutes the final section of *The Gay Science* (GS 342) with only minor differences. The parallels between the spirit of gravity in “On the Vision” and the title of GS 341 are plainly obvious when we consider the terms originally used by Nietzsche. The spirit of gravity is “*Geist der Schwere*,” the title of GS 341, “*Das Grösste Schwergewicht*.” The common term, “*schwer*,” primarily means “heavy,” “weighty,” “difficult,” “oppressive,” “burdensome,” and “serious.” Before turning to an exposition of the connections between the three passages just mentioned, it is useful to consider Nietzsche’s first expression of the idea he thinks imposes, or better, *should* impose, the greatest weight:

What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more. And there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!”

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (GS 341).

There are obvious similarities between the setting in which the demon

proposes this weightiest of thoughts and that of *Zarathustra's* opening passage. The demon sneaks after the addressee in the latter's "loneliest loneliness" while *Zarathustra* begins with a description of the protagonist's prolonged solitude. The focal point in each case is a solitary individual, who is separated from a communal setting, either in an emotional or spatial sense. By setting the subject apart from organized society and hence, the authority of its moral and cognitive categories, both settings place the solitary individual into the "desert:" a context characterized by indistinctness and lack of structure insofar as it is located outside of the symbolic boundary separating the social order from the chaos that lies beyond its limits. As we have seen in Chapter 2, transgressions against those boundaries violate not only culturally established cognitive schemes, but also the divine order in that they fail to respect the precepts of holiness, which require us to keep "distinct the categories of creation . . ." by way of "correct definition, discrimination, and order."<sup>200</sup>

The consonance between the two settings is further reinforced by their mutual reference to demonic powers, which are associated with such deserted environments because the realm beyond the boundaries of the established order is the realm of the unholy. While GS 341 explicitly mentions the demon's stealthy pursuit of his potential victim, however, section 1 of *Zarathustra's* Prologue relies on allusion to the biblical account of the life of Jesus Christ. As we have noted in

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<sup>200</sup>*Purity and Danger*, 53.

Chapter 2, there are a number of “coincidental” similarities between the protagonist of the New Testament and the protagonist of *Zarathustra*. Among them is the fact that both leave behind the social order to go into solitude at age thirty. While Jesus goes into the desert for only forty days to test his faith, however, and suffers profoundly while being tempted by the devil, Zarathustra is said thoroughly to enjoy himself during his ten years of solitude.

Jesus, as we know, resists the devil’s three temptations and returns to society with the aim of reconciling the human and the divine order. Zarathustra, by contrast, returns to teach humankind the overman, who he claims, is “the meaning of the earth” (Z, Prologue, 3). As for God, Zarathustra tells the townspeople that “God died, and these sinners (who speak to the people of otherworldly hopes) died with him.” Given the radical opposition between Jesus’ and Zarathustra’s respective attitudes toward the “desert” and what it signifies, and their opposing messages upon leaving this “unholy” realm, one might justifiably infer that Zarathustra intends to accept the devil’s third temptation: dominion over the empirical realm. Unlike Jesus, whose rejection of the devil’s temptations affirms the priority of the transcendent order, Zarathustra, in addition to making his home in an environment that symbolizes lack of order and structure, explicitly advocates faith in the earth, thereby according

primacy to the empirical world.<sup>201</sup>

The similarities between the setting of GS 341 and Section 1 of *Zarathustra's* Prologue, as well as their mutual reference to demonic powers, suggest that the demon's proposal of the thought of eternal recurrence is to be considered from a point of view that sets aside or rejects the authority of any antecedently constituted ordering scheme. This excludes cultural cognitive and moral categories as well as divinely grounded principles of order insofar as both predetermine, and as such, transcend individuals' actual experience of the empirical world. Accordingly, GS 341 moves elements subject to perception in an immediate fashion into the foreground. What recurs, according to the demon's description, are "every pain and every joy and every thought<sup>202</sup> and sigh . . . even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself." The question concerning the desirability of recurrence thus focuses on the series of empirical experiences that constitute our "life as [we] now live it" (GS 341). We might also note that Zarathustra's mountain home affords him direct visual access to the sensible objects

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<sup>201</sup>As Kathleen Higgins has pointed out to me, Zarathustra's making his home in an unstructured environment contrasts with the original Zarathustra's advocacy of order, which on the latter's scheme signifies "goodness."

<sup>202</sup>One might argue that we do not perceive our thoughts in the same way in which we perceive sensible objects. But since thoughts are as much a part of our immediate empirical experience than are other types of sensations, which is what I am mainly interested in here, the possible difference in status is not directly relevant.

within his surroundings.

This background affords us a more comprehensive view of the imagery involved in Zarathustra's ascent of the mountain in "On the Vision." Climbing upward, even though he is weighed down by the spirit of gravity sitting on his shoulder, Zarathustra is, probably not coincidentally, striving toward the perspective occupied by Jesus Christ when the devil offered him dominion over the empirical realm. From the top of the mountain, Zarathustra would be in a position to accept the devil's offer, to impose his own order and meaning on the visible (or perceptible) world within his purview. The spirit of gravity is thus opposed to Zarathustra's efforts to assume dominion over the world as he perceives or experiences it empirically. Were the dwarf to succeed in preventing Zarathustra's ascent, he would in effect have deprived his victim of the choice between accepting an ordering scheme that transcends his empirical experience and imposing his own order. Given that gravity tends to "pull" inert objects toward the lowest point,<sup>203</sup> in this case toward the foot of a mountain, where visibility is comparatively limited, Zarathustra's understanding of the world would be determined by ideas that transcend his perspective. He would be forced to grasp for meaning, in other words, by means of devices and concepts, values and ideals, that are not generated by, and

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<sup>203</sup>We recall that the spirit of gravity characterizes Zarathustra as a philosopher's *stone*, who "threw [him]self up high, but every stone that is thrown must fall" (*Z*, III, 2,1).

hence, not responsive to, his actual experience.

The spirit of gravity, based on the imagery, emerges as the representative of transcendent cognitive and moral categories that tend to be imposed on individuals' experience "from above" in the sense that they subsume and classify or characterize it. In trying to convince Zarathustra that he, too, is subject to the force of gravity, therefore, the dwarf seeks to persuade him to submit to the authority of culturally predominant cognitive and moral categories as he would to a force of nature. To put this point somewhat differently, the spirit of gravity tries to persuade Zarathustra that the established order is the only natural way to classify and characterize our sense impressions. As such, Zarathustra's stance toward, and view of, the world would be predetermined, and thereby fail to capture the full range of possibilities open to him from a higher vantage point.

Although both the demon of GS 341 and the spirit of gravity in "On the Vision" relay "weighty" thoughts, the latter's singular objective is to drag his victim down, to limit Zarathustra to the single possibility of adopting a passive, submissive posture toward the established order. Described as half dwarf, half mole, the spirit's diminutive stature and lack of vision<sup>204</sup> are a reflection of his intent to diminish Zarathustra's aspirations. Zarathustra, moreover, refers to the dwarf by way of a

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<sup>204</sup>In German, "*blind wie ein Maulwurf*," "blind as a mole" is a commonly used adage.

mixed metaphor, spirit of gravity, which casts doubt on his legitimacy by calling into question his causal powers.<sup>205</sup> Gravity is ordinarily considered a physical force and as such, cannot affect non-physical or immaterial “objects” immediately, and vice versa. As a spiritual, non-material being, therefore, the *spirit* of gravity should be unable to exert any direct influence on Zarathustra’s physical task. The dwarf might be able to affect Zarathustra’s attitude toward the physical challenge he faces, thereby making it *appear* more difficult than it actually is, but he cannot bring to bear causally efficacious physical forces. For that reason, he has to resort to deception in order to exercise any power.

The demon in GS 341, by contrast, proposes a hypothetical scenario intended to make us rethink or revise our attitude toward the terms under which we lead our actual empirical lives. The speculative character of the thought of eternal recurrence is clearly marked: “What, if some day or night . . .” is a subjunctive conditional that is neutral with respect to the truth of the idea. Rather than attempt to force acceptance of limits and restrictions that determine the outcome of the thought experiment, the demon of GS 341 puts at our disposal the means to envision new possibilities for interpreting the meaning of our existence. The passage even describes two diametrically opposed potential responses to eternal recurrence. One might be crushed or elated, depending on one’s disposition toward life. But even if

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<sup>205</sup>The imagery of the dwarf’s pressing Zarathustra from above while being associated with the vision from below also indicates the oppressiveness of transcendent structures.

one happens to be devastated by the idea initially, it holds out the possibility of changing one's orientation in such a way that one might desire one's life to recur at a later time. Because the demon restricts himself to the arena of action within his control, the realm of ideas, and does not attempt to undermine individuals' autonomy (unlike the mole), his speech act is endowed with a kind of legitimacy the spirit of gravity's lacks. This suggests that eternal recurrence should be perceived as potentially liberating in the sense that it removes baseless, externally imposed constraints. Insofar as it shifts the responsibility of endowing empirical existence with meaning and significance onto the individual, however, it places the greatest weight on the life we actually live and experience.

We can now see that Zarathustra's ascent of the mountain in defiance of the spirit of gravity constitutes a reversal of the traditional symbolism that aligns God as the transcendent source of truth and morality and the earthly order he sanctions with goodness, while the devil embodies evil and falsehood. By featuring the spirit of gravity who represents the established order in the role of the deceptive oppressor, the text transposes the traditional good/evil dichotomy. Zarathustra's subsequent confrontation of the spirit of gravity is thus inversely analogous to the classic battle between good and evil in the desert that pits Jesus/God against the devil: here, the protagonist's (Zarathustra's) "devilish" urge to take charge of his empirical life is portrayed as good. There is little doubt that the reader is supposed to root for Zarathustra to succeed in his effort to throw off his oppressor's illegitimate

assertions of authority on the part of transcendent ordering schemes.

It is significant, therefore, that Zarathustra eventually summons his courage and confronts the spirit of gravity by invoking an even weightier proposition: “Stop dwarf!” he says, “It is I or you! But I am the stronger of us two: you do not know my abysmal thought. *That* you could not bear!” (Z, III, 2, 2). The dwarf, whose curiosity has been peaked, jumps off Zarathustra’s shoulder, making him lighter. Zarathustra then proceeds to describe the idea of eternal recurrence, which he visualizes as two paths, one leading into the past for eternity, the other into an eternal future. “No one,” we are told, “has yet followed either to its end.” The two paths meet under a gateway inscribed “Moment.” The fact that nobody has ever walked either path to its end serves a function equivalent to the speculative “What, if . . .” that qualifies the demon’s speech in GS 341, that is, it stresses the hypothetical nature of the question to follow. Zarathustra, who in this scenario occupies the role of the demon, challenges the spirit of gravity: “whoever would follow one of them (the paths), on and on, farther and farther—do you believe, dwarf, that these paths contradict each other eternally?” The dwarf replies “contemptuously:” “All that is straight lies . . . All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle.”

The spirit of gravity, true to the tradition he represents, construes the idea of eternal recurrence as a cosmological theory, conceived from an “objectifying” third person perspective that accords primacy to abstract, universal concepts. Zarathustra immediately reject this interpretation: “You spirit of gravity . . . do not make things

too easy for yourself! Or I shall let you crouch where you are crouching, lamefoot; and it was I that carried you to this *height*” (Z, III, 2, 2). He seems particularly annoyed by the fact that the dwarf’s representation fails to appreciate and incorporate some presumably crucial elements available from his currently elevated perspective.<sup>206</sup> Zarathustra’s response indicates that the spirit of gravity’s interpretation, ironically, fails to capture the idea’s gravity and significance, which suggests, in turn, that the authority of the tradition the dwarf represents is mere pretense. The reason for this becomes clear very shortly. As Zarathustra continues to fill in the details of the thought of eternal recurrence, he turns our attention toward the same set of perceptible elements that the demon of GS 341 mentions: “this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things, . . .” replicating the basic terms of the setting in which the demon had originally presented the idea.

The spider, the moonlight, and the two figures exchanging ideas in the “desert” are all what we might consider basic elements of our empirical experience in the sense that they are subject to perception in a fairly direct manner. Granted that they derive their names or labels (‘spider,’ ‘moonlight,’ etc.) by way of classification within the predominant set of cognitive categories,<sup>207</sup> they are nonetheless the most

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<sup>206</sup>The dwarf’s failure to appreciate the height indicates that the transcendent perspective he represents does not adequately take account of empirical states of affairs.

<sup>207</sup>Zarathustra comments on the status of words or labels in “The Convalescent,” which clarifies their function in a manner consistent with this supposition.

primitive, tangible components of our ordinary, everyday experience of the world. By directing our focus toward the hypothetical recurrence of ordinary objects, sensations, and events as we actually experience them, Zarathustra, like the demon of GS 341, shifts the “center of gravity”—away from transcendent cognitive structures and toward the elements that make up life as we do, in fact, live it. As a response to, and correction of, the spirit of gravity’s interpretation of eternal recurrence, therefore, Zarathustra’s elaboration of the idea indicates that actual, empirical experience should be accorded precedence over transcendent cognitive and moral structures because whatever occurs beyond the possibility of our experience is immaterial to the value and meaning of our life. The thought of eternal recurrence, in other words, *should* constitute the greatest weight.

This inference is corroborated in a very literal fashion by the narrative events that follow the confrontation. As Zarathustra continues to speak, the spirit of gravity vanishes into thin air, a sign that the terms and conditions he seeks to impose ultimately carry no real weight. The thought of eternal recurrence, in contrast to the dwarf’s portrayal of the situation, is obviously to be perceived as a deeply personal and significant challenge. This is clear both from GS 341, which asserts: “If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you,” and from the corresponding image in “On the Vision” that shows a shepherd choking on a black snake immediately following Zarathustra’s encounter with the spirit of gravity. After the spirit fades from the scene, Zarathustra has a vision of a

shepherd out of whose mouth hangs a “heavy black snake” that has bitten itself fast in his throat. This, presumably, marks the moment when the “thought [of eternal recurrence has] gained possession of its “victim,” as GS 341 suggests.<sup>208</sup> “Writhing, gagging, in spasms, his face distorted . . . “ the young shepherd experiences eternal recurrence as a highly personal, intense, and concrete problem. As such, it contrasts sharply with the dwarf’s cold, contemptuous attitude toward his own abstract and purely theoretical construal of the idea.

In addition to the fact that the vision of the shepherd resonates with the description of GS 341, Zarathustra’s respective responses to each of these characters (the dwarf and the shepherd) indicate that it instantiates the appropriate stance toward the idea of recurrence. While Zarathustra rejects the dwarf’s construal outright, he identifies with the shepherd’s experience so completely that he feels his own “dread,” “hatred,” “nausea,” “pity,” in short, “all that is good and wicked in [him]” cry out when he screams at the latter to bite the snake’s head off. Having complied with Zarathustra’s command, the shepherd is transformed, which again corresponds with the precedent of GS 341. “No longer shepherd, no longer human—one changed, radiant, laughing!” he is transfigured into a being no longer identical with his former self.

Having undergone this radical transformation, the shepherd may be said to

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<sup>208</sup>Eternal recurrence is symbolically represented as a snake biting its own tail, thereby forming a circle.

have effaced the path behind him in that he has parted with his former self. Specifically, he has turned into a luminescent, exuberant individual—quite a substantial change from the person gagging and writhing in spasms, who nearly suffocates. It is important to note, however, that it is the same idea, the thought of eternal recurrence represented by the snake, that motivates both of these responses. What has changed is not the state of affairs, that is, the thought, that occasions each of these diametrically opposed responses, but the shepherd's disposition and attitude toward it. As soon as he takes an active stance toward the problem and confronts it head on, quite literally, he is transformed and liberated, whereas a passive, submissive attitude would almost certainly have resulted in his death by suffocation. Moreover, the fact that he is no longer a shepherd after his transformation means that the past as cast through the shepherd paradigm can no longer haunt him. Having freed his earthly potential by means of the thought of eternal recurrence, which entails a radical reorientation toward the empirical realm insofar as actual, lived experience is accorded precedence, the former shepherd has left behind the Christian-Platonic world view that judges life in terms of transcendent ideals. This reversal of priorities constitutes a rejection of the idea that life's character is determined by the world's metaphysical structure, that is, the view endorsed by Schopenhauer.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup>One additional consequence of this restructuring is that we can neither shepherd nor be shepherded. Given that our actual life experiences are unique, rejection of the precedence of transcendent cognitive and moral categories in favor of allowing the

It is already becoming apparent how eternal recurrence might be instrumental to Zarathustra's redemption by allowing him to will backwards even though his identity with the shepherd is not officially revealed until much later in Part III in a chapter entitled "The Convalescent" (Z, III, 13). If the path that leads into the future and the path that leads into the past meet at some point, one would think, then projecting one's will into the past should be no more problematic than willing into the future. Unfortunately, the solution is not quite that simple or straightforward. Let us suppose for the moment that the past and the future do run into each other, that one begins where the other ends, and that everything that has occurred in the past will occur again in the future. This would also mean that everything that will occur in the future has already occurred in the past, and further, that nothing that has not already occurred in the past can happen in the future. Quite aside from the fact that Zarathustra has already rejected the dwarf's rendering of eternal recurrence as a theory of time or cosmology, which is what this supposition amounts to, this interpretation would undermine our ability to affect and alter the future because the future, as well as our disposition toward it, is already determined by its prior occurrence(s) in the past.

It would thus be pointless to ask, as the GS 341 passage does, how well disposed we would have to become toward our lives in order to be willing to

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interests and priorities that structure our individual lives as we do in fact live them to determine its value and meaning would render fixed, universal doctrines obsolete for that purpose.

embrace the idea of recurrence, since our reaction to that question would also be determined. We cannot become other than we have already been. Far from solving the problem of willing backwards, supposing that eternal recurrence is a factually accurate description of the cosmos or the nature of time undermines our ability to will into the future. And as Ivan Soll points out, we should react with utter indifference to the possibility that our lives might recur eternally.<sup>210</sup> If eternal recurrence is true, our response is already determined. If it is false, then it seems quite pointless even to entertain the idea. So why, we might wonder, should we want to “throw [ourselves] down and gnash [our] teeth and curse the demon” who asks us to consider the “what, if” of eternal recurrence? Why does the shepherd choke and gag?

In order to answer these questions, we need to recall the reasons for, and significance of, Zarathustra’s ascent of the mountain. Zarathustra climbs the mountain in order to put himself into a position overlooking the visible realm. From there, he can assume dominion over the empirical world, that is, his actual empirical experience, by imposing order and structure on the elements within his purview. The image of Zarathustra standing at the peak overlooking things down below mirrors the popular image of God looking down upon the world he has created to make sure that justice is maintained—that the faithful will be rewarded while those

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<sup>210</sup>Ivan Soll, “Reflections on Recurrence: A Re-Examination of Nietzsche’s Doctrine, *Die Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*,” in Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Nietzsche: A collection of Critical Essays* ( Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973) 322-342.

who break his covenants will be punished. Zarathustra's striving for the top of the mountain thus signifies his intent to displace God as the adjudicator of his empirical existence. Unlike God, however, who has access to the totality of all perspectives and transcends them all, Zarathustra's "rule" is restricted to his subjective experience of the empirical world. This constraint is acknowledged at the outset of Part III, where Zarathustra notes: "whatever may yet come to me as destiny and experience will include some wandering and mountain climbing: in the end, one experiences only oneself" (Z, III, 1), and again in "The Convalescent," following his confrontation with the thought of eternal recurrence: "For me—how could there be any outside-myself? There is no outside" (Z, III, 13,2).<sup>211</sup>

There is further reason to think eternal recurrence is intended to exclude what lies outside of the domain of possible empirical experience, rather than rely on it for its motivational force. We have already been informed that no one has ever explored either of the paths that represent eternal recurrence in their entirety. This means that no one knows whether these paths are in fact joined; and since no ordinary mortal is capable of living for an eternity, there is no way to find out because we cannot experience it. If it is true, therefore, that as ordinary mortals we can take charge only of what we are capable of experiencing, and verification of the truth of eternal recurrence lies beyond the possibility of experience, then we cannot confront eternal

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<sup>211</sup>We will consider the significance of this assertion further after discussing Zarathustra's redemption in "The Convalescent" (Z, III, 13).

recurrence construed as a theory of time or cosmology.<sup>212</sup> Insofar as the matter of eternal recurrence's truth transcends our empirical experience, it is irrelevant for purposes of determining the value and meaning of the lives we actually lead. This means that the thought's motivational force must be untied from any truth commitments—not because of the determinism its truth would entail, as Soll argues, but because its truth does not matter.<sup>213</sup> That eternal recurrence is not intended to describe any actual state of affairs is also suggested by the fact that the spider and the gateway vanish just as soon as the spirit of gravity disappears. This suggests that they, as well as the idea they represent, become immaterial once they have served their function and displaced God and other transcendent sources of meaning and value.

All of these considerations point toward the conclusion that eternal recurrence is a hypothetical thought experiment intended to reorient us toward the actual empirical existence that constitutes “the meaning of the earth” (Z, Prologue, 3). Having settled the issue of eternal recurrence's status, however, one of our initial question remains: why should this thought have a potentially devastating or

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<sup>212</sup>The potential truth of eternal recurrence is an issue only if it is thought to describe an actually existing state of affairs. As such, its relevance is limited to interpretations of eternal recurrence as a cosmological or metaphysical theory. Even in its normative versions its truth depends on the actual recurrence of all events, which is a cosmological matter.

<sup>213</sup>See *Nietzsche's Case*, 26-8 for an extensive discussion of the truth commitments implied by most of the favored versions of eternal recurrence.

transforming effect? The answer to this is suggested by examining the function eternal recurrence is intended to serve in more detail. We have seen above that Zarathustra's ascent of the mountain, which signifies his striving to take charge of his empirical experience, and his proposing the thought of eternal recurrence to the spirit of gravity, coincide. Ascending the mountain to displace God as the source of meaning and value and throwing off the spirit of gravity are thus portrayed as being part of the same process. More precisely, the thought of eternal recurrence is the means Zarathustra uses to expose the established order's lack of substance or authority, represented by the spirit, in order to be able to climb to the peak. Eternal recurrence, in other words, is instrumental to Zarathustra's efforts to displace God, to put himself into a position from which he can impart meaning and value to his empirical existence.

This means that the thought of eternal recurrence is a tool that enables us to envision our lives as we actually live them without the presence of any transcendent source of meaning. Stripped of the meaning and value God or culturally established cognitive and moral schemes bestow on the series of experiences that constitute our empirical lives, one may well react with despair at the possibility that one's life may be devoid of value and meaning. This reading of eternal recurrence as a thought experiment, quite similar in force and spirit to Descartes' evil genius device, is also corroborated by the GS 341 passage. GS 341 first asks us to imagine a demon propose the infinite recurrence of the set of empirical experiences we have actually

had in the course of our lives in order to restrict the scope of potentially meaningful elements to the empirical realm. Then, after God is taken out of the picture, it tells us to consider how well disposed toward our lives and ourselves we would have to become to want to relive it. In contrast to the many readings that tie eternal recurrence's motivational force to its truth, this holds out the possibility that we may change our disposition toward our lives instead of pinning us down to a deterministic conception and then, paradoxically, asking us to consider how we feel about the idea that our lives are determined.

As a thought experiment then, the motivating force of eternal recurrence lies in its excluding and reorienting function. It enables us to “translate” the loss of transcendent meaning due to God's death, or the abstract problem of nihilism, into terms applicable to our actual, lived experience. This places the burden of determining the value and meaning of life on the individual as the subject at the center of his or her experience—puts each of us at the mountaintop, so to speak. Assuming that few of us consider what makes our lives worth living when the value bestowed on them by culturally shared ideals is subtracted, this sudden shift of responsibility could well have a crushing effect. Nietzsche describes just this kind of scenario in GS 125, where a “madman” attempts to impress upon his fellow human beings the gravity of the existential crisis created by God's death.<sup>214</sup> The madman's

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<sup>214</sup>Claiming that we ourselves have murdered God, the madman announces the advent of nihilism: “What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not

contemporaries dismiss his lamentations as the ravings of a lunatic, which suggests that they have not yet grasped the personal implications of God's death. He concludes that "this tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men" (GS 125).

The madman's reaction to God's death thus provides an illustration of the appropriate initial response to the thought of eternal recurrence if, as I argue, the intended effect of the idea is to remove transcendent values and ideals that weigh us down without providing any positive benefit. Of course, mere liberation *from* those ideals does not suffice to endow our lives with meaning. It must be followed by the active creation of values that arise out of the context of our actual experience in order to render our actual lives meaningful and significant on their own terms. We must, in other words, be willing to take charge of the visible realm. The need for this is also already anticipated by the madman, who wonders "what sacred festivals of atonement, what sacred games" we shall have to invent to comfort ourselves.<sup>215</sup> GS 341 shares this concern, but puts it into more specific, as well as more positive, terms by asking us to consider how well disposed we would have to become in order to wish for our lives to recur eternally.

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plunging continually? . . . Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? . . . How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? . . . What sacred festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? . . ." (GS 125).

<sup>215</sup>The higher men invent the "ass festival" during their visit with Zarathustra in Part IV.

On this analysis, Zarathustra's ascent of the mountain signifies his willingness to confront nihilism by throwing off transcendent values and ideals as a first step, to be followed by the creation of cognitive and moral structures that originate from, and hence, accord priority to, our empirical experience. The idea is to make sense of this-worldly existence without the imposition of criteria that transcend the empirical realm because doing so necessarily deprives this life of its intrinsic value. By deriving values and ideals from elements within the domain of our empirical existence, however, life may be justified or redeemed on its own terms and nihilism overcome. We can now see how eternal recurrence, interpreted as a thought experiment, is instrumental to Zarathustra's efforts to "will backwards" in that it allows him to affirm the past while at the same time rejecting life-negating values. Eternal recurrence allows him to restrict the realm of potentially relevant "entities" to those we are capable of experiencing within the context of our empirical lives. If the past is construed simply as the period of time during which a certain set of experiences and events have actually taken place, rather than as already interpreted and value laden, then those experiences and events can legitimately be reinterpreted in light of newly constructed values.

This means that once Zarathustra has undergone the dispositional change that allows him to welcome the thought of recurrence, he can will the events of the past to have happened because the new values created in the process (of changing his stance) will have replaced transcendent, life-negating values and ideals. He will

have “effaced the path behind” himself in the sense of having stripped past events and experiences of the meaning and significance traditional moral and cognitive categories would bestow upon them. So instead of being compelled to consider anger, for instance, a negative and sinful emotion, he might, under certain circumstances, value it as a normal and healthy expression of passion. But even events and experiences, such as car accidents or injuries, which might be considered less than desirable upon re-evaluation can be affirmed, provided that they do not lead to wholesale resignation. Though perhaps not inherently desirable, those events may nevertheless be considered valuable learning experiences, or occurrences that give one’s life its peculiar character, or simply render an occasion memorable.

We have thus far considered the status of eternal recurrence, as well as its role in selecting evaluative criteria, in terms of their relevance in the context of our actual empirical experiences. I have argued that the ultimate aim of conducting the thought experiment that entails imagining the infinite recurrence of the series of events and experiences that make up our lives is to put us into a position to determine what it would take to change our disposition in such a way that we would want to relive this life. To affect this dispositional change, it has been suggested by analysis of the imagery, traditional Christian-Platonic values and ideals must be replaced by values that arise from, and are palpably relevant to, our empirical existence. Eternal recurrence, construed as a hypothetical thought experiment, thus emerges as a tool that allows us to visualize the conditions for overcoming nihilism

in concrete terms.

It might be objected that the conditions for getting on the “road to redemption” seem to impose two sets of mutually dependent or bi-conditional demands, each of which requires the other to obtain prior to itself, thereby posing a Münchhausen-type dilemma. We need new values in order to effect the dispositional change necessary for life affirmation, yet we must already be suitably disposed in order to want to create those new values. And since we are not free to choose our initial disposition, redemption is beyond the reach of those who do not happen to be endowed with the appropriate set of inclinations. There does not appear to be a solution to the dilemma, as far as I can see, that does not require one to “climb on [one’s] head and away over [one’s] heart”(Z, III, 1), as Zarathustra puts it during his trek across the island, *if* one accepts the main assumption motivating the criticism. If we suppose that everyone ought to attempt to “ascend the mountain,” then individuals need to be free to choose to have the type of disposition allowing them to create new values, since obligations impossible to satisfy do not oblige.

But this is assuming that *Zarathustra/Zarathustra* seeks to impose such an obligation. As we have seen in our analysis of the “last man” speech of the Prologue, Zarathustra has no more authority to prescribe universal moral values, or demand acceptance of his views, than do the proponents of the established order. While Zarathustra seems to have drawn the appropriate lessons from his unsuccessful attempt to persuade general audiences by teaching only those already

inclined to confront nihilism to do so, the objection that not every life can be redeemed implicitly assumes that every life should be redeemed. Further, not only should every life be justifiable, but in a particular manner, universally applicable to all. It is these assumptions—not Zarathustra’s idea of redemption—that entail holding individuals responsible for being the way they are even though they may have no control over the matter. Only if we adopt a typically Christian point of view and suppose that every life should be redeemed must every life be redeemable (in principle). And only in that case must we be able to choose our virtues and dispositions. Although it may be regrettable that not every person is in a position to create new, life-affirming values, it seems that little can be done to remedy this situation if it is true, as Zarathustra reminds himself prior to re-evaluating the three cardinal evils of the Christian-Platonic tradition, that “Everything small is innocent of its smallness” (Z, III, 9).<sup>216</sup>

Zarathustra’s weighing of the world in “On the Three Evils” (Z, III, 10) concludes an excursion on the way back to his mountain home “to determine what had happened to man” while he was away on the Blessed Isles, that is, “whether he (man) had become greater or smaller” (Z, III, 5, 1). Saddened by his discovery that people have become smaller, he infers that their small virtues are to blame: “. . .

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<sup>216</sup>Nietzsche comments on this point more specifically in TI, “Morality as Anti-Nature,” 6. He writes: “Let us finally consider how naïve it is altogether to say: ‘Man ought to be such and such!’ . . . The single human being is a piece of *fatum* from the front and from the rear . . . To say to him, ‘Change yourself!’ is to demand that everything be changed, even retroactively.”

they are becoming smaller and smaller; *but this is due to their doctrine of happiness and virtue*. For they are modest in virtue, too—because they want contentment” (Z, III, 5, 2). The people’s desire for contentment indicates that they are devolving toward the “last man” stage characterized by widespread nihilism and decline—the state where contentment is attained and labeled “happiness.” Zarathustra is appalled by what he finds, but reminds himself, as mentioned, that individuals ultimately cannot be held responsible for their virtues and dispositions.

The idea that people are responsible for being as they are is part of our Christian-Platonic heritage, whose vilification of natural, often irrepressible instincts and passions not only condemns the individual, but empirical existence as a whole insofar as our physicality exposes us to potentially irrepressible passions, change and decay. Zarathustra’s re-evaluation of the three evils or cardinal vices of the Christian-Platonic tradition, sex, the lust to rule, and selfishness, thus constitutes part of the “clean-up effort” necessary to vindicate this-worldly existence. It also provides an applied demonstration of how one might put the broadened perspective afforded by eternal recurrence to use. Zarathustra takes a given state of affairs—the fact that humans have certain drives and instincts—and portrays it in an entirely different light by changing the values brought to bear upon it. Instead of considering sex dirty and shameful, for instance, “free hearts” find it “innocent and free, the garden happiness of the earth, the future’s exuberant gratitude to the present” (Z, III, 10, 2). The lust to rule, in the end, becomes the “gift-giving virtue,” while

selfishness becomes the “self-enjoyment” of “the supple, persuasive body . . . whose parable and epitome is the self-enjoying soul.” Such “wholesome, healthy selfishness . . . calls itself ‘virtue.’”

Zarathustra’s re-evaluation of selfishness is of particular significance in that it takes place “on the mountain top,” so to speak. We are told, “at that time (while weighing the world) it also happened—and verily, it happened for the first time—that his word pronounced selfishness blessed . . .” (Z, III, 10, 2). The locution ‘verily,’ along with the suggestion that Zarathustra’s word constitutes an event, is clearly an allusion to the biblical creation story. In Genesis, God is said to bless each of his creations as soon as he has created them. And since God’s word is causally efficacious, his blessings are believed to confer normative value in a real sense. Zarathustra’s original blessing of selfishness, therefore, is portrayed as an act of creation on a par with God’s creation of the world. By blessing selfishness, however, Zarathustra overturns the Christian tradition’s value structure at its point of inception: the selfless sacrifice of God’s son, Jesus Christ, who was sent to redeem the world. Zarathustra’s final act of creation in “On the Three Evils,” therefore, displaces the Christian God as the source of value and meaning while affirming the value of bodily drives and passions in the empirical realm.

Zarathustra’s re-evaluation of the Christian-Platonic tradition’s cardinal vices, we learn in the following chapter, also banishes the spirit of gravity. As in “On the Vision,” Zarathustra again aligns himself with the devil, antithetical to the

spirit of gravity who represents the authority of the tradition: “My foot is a cloven foot; with it I trample and trot over sticks and stones, crisscross (*kreuz- und querfeld-ein*), and am happy as the devil while running so fast” (Z, III, 11, 1). The expression used in the German, ‘*querfeldein*,’ literally means ‘diagonally across the field,’ which suggests that Zarathustra is traversing set boundaries and taking devilish delight in forging his own path. Moreover, he tells us that once the potential creator has recognized what makes her individual existence meaningful and significant, enabling her to claim, “This is *my* good and evil,” she will have “reduced to silence the mole and dwarf who say, “Good for all, evil for all” (Z, III, 11, 2).

Zarathustra concludes this speech by explicitly rejecting the absolutism of the Western tradition: ““This is *my* way; where is yours?”—thus I answered those who asked me ‘the way.’ For *the* way—that does not exist” (Z, III, 11, 2). Instead, he advocates an experimental approach, “trying and questioning,” while also learning “to answer such questioning.” His advice that the road to redemption requires a playful, experimenting spirit indicates that Zarathustra may have finally “matured” to the child stage. The impression that Zarathustra has “become as a child,” as his stillest hour had demanded, is supported by his assertion that he is now unafraid to claim ownership of his subjective experience. “That, however, is my taste,” he tells us, “not good, not bad, but *my* taste of which I am no longer ashamed and which I have no wish to hide.” We might recall that his stillest hour had concluded that Zarathustra must still overcome his youth in order to “become as a child and without

shame” (Z, II, 22). Having become unashamed, he should now be prepared to “speak his word.”

“On Old and New Tablets” reinforces the expectation that resolution is imminent. Zarathustra, “surrounded by broken old tablets (of values) and new tablets half covered with writing,” is waiting for “the signs” that his hour has come: “the laughing lion with the flock of doves” (Z, III, 12, 1). He passes the time by “telling himself to himself,” since, he claims, no one ever tells him anything new. What follows are 29 sections that begin with Zarathustra’s recounting the experiences he has gained on his journey, followed by an account of values and ideals he has overturned and/or created in the process.

This survey and re-evaluation of actual events prior to confronting the challenge posed by the idea of eternal recurrence supports my reading of it as a hypothetical thought experiment intended to reorient us toward our empirical experience as the source of value and meaning. By revisiting the experiences most characteristic of his empirical existence in that they reflect his personal interests and priorities, Zarathustra is taking inventory of his life in the manner the demon of GS 341 suggests. Having considered “the spider and the moonlight between the trees along with every thought and sigh,” so to speak, one would now expect him to either “throw himself down and gnash his teeth,” or to wholeheartedly affirm his existence, depending on whether he deems his life sufficiently meaningful and worthwhile to wish for its eternal repetition. *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra, again, does not conform to

expectations—at least not in the manner one might envision. Zarathustra does both: in “The Convalescent” (Z, III, 13), he falls down in an apparent parody of the story of Christ’s death and resurrection, and in “The Other Dancing Song” (Z, III, 15) he chooses life over wisdom, followed by “The Seven Seals” (Z, III, 16), where he pledges his love to eternity.

In “The Convalescent,” we finally find Zarathustra conjuring up his “most abysmal thought” in order to confront it. Shortly after returning to his cave, we are told, he “jumped up from his resting place like a madman”<sup>217</sup> and “roared in a terrible voice,” frightening all the animals nearby, “Up, my abysmal thought, out of my depth . . . Up! Up! . . .” (Z, III, 13, 1). Having raised the thought, he is suddenly overcome by nausea, falls down “as one dead” and remains in this condition for a long time (Z, III, 13, 2). After coming to his senses, trembling and pale, he remains lying on his bed for seven days without eating or drinking. His animals, the eagle and the snake, stay by his side. Occasionally, the eagle flies off to gather food, placing what he got on Zarathustra’s resting place. At some point, Zarathustra is surrounded by “yellow and red berries, grapes, rose apples, fragrant herbs, and pine cones,” and even a couple of lambs. After seven days, Zarathustra picks up a rose apple, smells it, and finds “its fragrance lovely.”

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<sup>217</sup>The description of Zarathustra as a “madman” reinforces the reference to the madman of GS 125, who is reduced to utter despair by God’s death. It is also consistent with my claim that the thought of eternal recurrence is a response to the loss of meaning and value entailed by God’s death.

In conjunction with the allusions to the biblical resurrection theme, as well as the popular rendering of paradise, this passage is significant in that Zarathustra's recovery is initiated by his taking note of, and appreciating, the sensible qualities of the objects that surround him. The fact that Zarathustra's "awakening" coincides with his responsiveness to a colorful, fragrant object, whose perceptible qualities are representative of the empirical world, stands in marked contrast to Christ's resurrection, in which only his immaterial soul is raised to heaven. Zarathustra, it is suggested, is "revived" in body *and* spirit, enticed by the sensible aspects of his physical surroundings whereas Christ's physical body is left behind.

Extending the comparison between the biblical resurrection story and Zarathustra's experience, we also see the object of redemption transposed. While Jesus saves the world by aligning the mundane order with the divine, Zarathustra's redemption restores the innocence of the empirical world in its own right. After his seven day *Scheintod*, Zarathustra's animals, attempting to lure him out of his cave, tell him, "the world awaits you like a garden. The wind is playing with heavy fragrances that want to get to you, and all the brooks would run after you." The imagery depicts the world outside the cave like the garden of Eden, set up to accommodate Zarathustra's sensual desires and bodily needs, thereby suggesting that the world is innocent, that the object of redemption is not empirical existence *per se*,

but Zarathustra's attitude or stance toward it.<sup>218</sup>

This is consistent with GS 341 insofar as the central aim of the demon's proposing the thought of eternal recurrence is to motivate the type of dispositional change that will eventually allow one to affirm life as it is experienced. Accordingly, Zarathustra adopts an emphatically empiricist stance following his redemption. "It is so refreshing for me to hear you chattering," he responds to his animals' speech, "where there is chattering, there the world lies before me like a garden. How lovely it is that there are words and sounds! Are not words and sounds rainbows and illusive bridges between things which are eternally apart?" (Z, III, 13, 2). Although he dismisses the animals' talk as chatter, Zarathustra is not denying that the attractiveness or significance of things is based on our experience of them. What he is denying is that words and concepts provide a full and accurate representation of the world. "Have not names and sounds been given to things that man might find things refreshing?" he asks. "Speaking is such a beautiful folly: with that man dances over all things. How lovely is all talking and all the deception of sounds! Wish sounds our love dances on many-hued rainbows."

By claiming that names and words are illusory bridges between objects and our perceptions of them, Zarathustra rejects the idea that we can determine the truth of our perceptions by comparing propositional representations of them with actual

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<sup>218</sup>In "On Redemption" (Z, II, 20), Zarathustra claims that it is madness to suppose that the world is "ordered morally according to justice and punishment."

states of affairs. We cannot, in other words, get beyond our experiences. “For me—how should there be any outside-myself? There is no outside. But all sounds make us forget this,” he claims. Zarathustra’s adoption of a staunchly empiricist stance, though it resembles Berkeley’s view,<sup>219</sup> constitutes a rejection of his earlier idealist position that identifies life and wisdom. We may recall that in “The Dancing Song” (Z, II, 10) Zarathustra has trouble distinguishing between knowledge and reality because he assumes that his perceptions are representations of external states of affairs. On that assumption, the knowable is identical with the known as represented by our ideas. By rejecting the notion that our experiences of things are representations of external objects, however, Zarathustra abandons the comparative theory of knowledge. This means that words and concepts may label and describe our experiences, but they cannot be considered truth-functional in the sense that they can be used to mediate between perceptions and actual states of affairs.

If facing his most abysmal thought within the hypothetical framework provided by eternal recurrence allowed Zarathustra to realize that his actual experiences are the only existentially significant “entities,” then it seems clear, once again, that the truth of eternal recurrence is irrelevant. His response to his animals’ description of eternal recurrence as a cosmological theory supports this as well. The animals claim that

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<sup>219</sup>Zarathustra does not re-adopt the idealism of Berkeley’s view here. If “there is no outside,” it would follow that we cannot determine the source or nature of our perceptions.

Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again . . . . Everything breaks, everything is joined anew; eternally the same house of being is built. . . . In every Now, being begins; round every Here rolls the sphere There. The center is everywhere. Bent is the path of eternity (Z, III, 13, 2).

Zarathustra, though amused, refers to his animals as “buffoons and barrel organs” and accuses them of already having made a “hurdy-gurdy song” of his experience. This indicates that their rendering is not to be taken seriously, which is consistent with his earlier dismissal of the dwarf’s very similar interpretation: “All truth is crooked; time itself is a circle” (Z, III, 2, 2).

Although the precise cause of Zarathustra’s nausea and despair remains unclear at this point, we know that it cannot lie beyond the realm of possible experience. Zarathustra soon explains to his animals that it was “the great disgust with man” that “choked [him] and had crawled into [his] throat” (Z, III, 13, 2). The idea that “the small man recurs eternally,” that the greatest man and the smallest man” are “all-too-similar to each other . . . all-too-small, the greatest! . . . And the eternal recurrence even of the smallest,” had nauseated Zarathustra so much that he was on the verge of following Jesus’ example of renouncing this-worldly existence. As the reference to the young shepherd of “On the Vision” suggests, however, Zarathustra, whom we now recognize as the shepherd, must have bitten the snake’s head off.

We are not told what this signifies, though one might speculate that a snake biting its own tail, since it thereby forms an actual circle, represents eternal

recurrence as a cosmology. The snake biting itself fast in Zarathustra's throat might thus symbolize his belief in the possible truth of recurrence, which, as we have seen above, is equivalent to the belief that all events, values, and ideals, as well as our attitude toward them, are determined. As such, it would preclude the possibility of creating new values, since all values—as the dragon depicted in “On the Three Metamorphoses” (Z, I, 1) claims—have already been created. And if the creation of new values is necessary to confront and overcome nihilism, then nihilism cannot be overcome. The small man would thus, in fact, recur eternally.

Also supporting this hypothesis is the fact that when Zarathustra screams at the shepherd to bite the snake's head off, “everything good and wicked” in him cries out. But for everything good and wicked to cry out of him, it must already be clear what counts as good or wicked. In other words, there must already be some set of moral categories that allows Zarathustra to classify his dread, hatred, pity, etc. as either good or bad. In light of Zarathustra's and the shepherd's identity, the shepherd's act of biting the snake's head off and spewing it out would simultaneously purge him of the old values that are perpetuated indefinitely if eternal recurrence were a true cosmological theory. By biting off the snake's head, therefore, the shepherd/Zarathustra, quite fittingly, decapitates the thought of eternal recurrence construed as a cosmological theory that, while conceivable, does not contribute to the enhancement of our actual, empirical lives. As such, eternal recurrence as a purely conceptual construct, neither verifiable nor falsifiable, joins

God along with the rest of our traditional, otherworldly ideals that constitute “the entrails of the unknowable” (Z, Prologue, 3). As Zarathustra puts it during his first speech, that ought not to be esteemed more highly than “the meaning of the earth.”

Though initially appealing, the supposition that what has crawled down Zarathustra’s throat is the possible truth of eternal recurrence is inconsistent with Zarathustra’s emphatic rejection of the dwarf’s cosmological construal of the idea prior to his visionary encounter with the shepherd, who represents his future self. That means that Zarathustra has already discounted the relevance of the idea’s truth before himself becoming the individual choking on the snake. Moreover, Zarathustra’s accusation that the dwarf is making things too easy for himself by interpreting eternal recurrence as a cosmological theory gives reason to think that the matter of the idea’s potential truth cannot then provide the impetus for Zarathustra’s near death experience. It should also be noted that the image of the snake, which has bitten itself fast in the shepherd’s throat is, in this depiction, not forming a circle. So perhaps a more congenial reading of the snake’s function is to associate it with the snake who initiated Adam and Eve’s fall from grace in the garden of Eden. By decapitating the heavy black snake, the shepherd/Zarathustra restores the world’s innocense in the sense that he forestalls the occurrence of the chain of events that brought the notion of evil into the world.

This leads to the conclusion that what has crawled into Zarathustra’s throat is not the belief *that* the small man might actually return, which, as we have said, is

unverifiable and as such, irrelevant in addition to forfeiting the motivating force of the thought of eternal recurrence by tying its significance to its potential truth. It is more plausible, as well as consistent with GS 341 and “On the Vision,” to infer that what nauseates and chokes him is the thought that in order to embrace life as it is so completely that he would “*crave nothing more fervently*” (GS 341) than its eternal repetition, he must *wish for* the recurrence of the small man. This entails wishing that the future will resemble the past and the present in that there will always be an abundance of individuals who value and promote the regressive traits of the human race. Zarathustra has already provided a description of these “last men” in the Prologue, whose conformism and passive, submissive attitude provides fertile grounds for nihilism.

Since the problem of the “last man” has already been discussed at some length in Chapter 4, I will not address it here any further. We can infer, for present purposes, that Zarathustra must have overcome his objections to the existence of the small man somehow, since he now speaks of the cause of his disgust with all existence in the past tense. It remains unclear precisely how he managed to get past his disgust, but it seems that he must have taken to heart his previously expressed insight that “everything small is innocent of its smallness” (Z, III, 9). If individuals ultimately cannot be held responsible for being as they are, and the world is not inherently purposive, then Zarathustra cannot blame existence for the presence of

small people or his disgust.<sup>220</sup> With respect to taking this insight to heart, Zarathustra would have been in a position similar to the reader's. The reader, as we have noted throughout, is being challenged to translate her explicit, intellectual beliefs into practice by applying them in the course of her endeavor to make sense of this book. In this case, it was Zarathustra's turn to convert theory into practice and "realize" its implications on an existential level.

Having affirmed existence as it is, or better, as he now experiences it, Zarathustra presents an ode to his soul, followed by "The Other Dancing Song" (Z, III, 15), where he declares his love to life, choosing her over wisdom. In this dancing song, unlike the first one, Zarathustra is able to distinguish between life and wisdom. He expresses the nature of his attraction to life in contradictory terms, which suggests that his love for her is not rationally grounded. Zarathustra describes life as the one "whose coldness fires, whose hatred seduces, whose flight binds, whose scorn inspires," and asks, "who would not hate you, you great binder, entwiner, temptress, seeker, and finder? Who would not love you, you innocent, impatient, wind-swift, child-eyed sinner?" (Z, III, 15, 1).

In contrast to the first dancing song, Zarathustra's love of life is now a deeply emotional, passionate affair. He no longer complains of sinking into the

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<sup>220</sup>Nietzsche makes just this point in TI, "The Four Great Errors," 8. He writes: "What alone can be our doctrine? That no one *gives* man his qualities—neither God, nor society, nor his parents and ancestors, nor he himself. . . . No one is responsible for man's being there at all, for his being such-and-such, . . ."

unfathomable. In fact, he appears to embrace it, declaring his love in terms that obviously violate established cognitive and moral categories. Zarathustra's affirmation of his existence in this manner marks his redemption from the Christian-Platonic paradigm that seeks (in the end, unsuccessfully) to justify life on moral and/or rational grounds. Given that he cannot characterize the nature of his bond with life in a coherent manner, the grounds on which he overcame his nausea and disgust with existence on account of the small man remain mysterious as well. All we are told is that in Zarathustra's experience, life's joy is deeper than its woe, and that "all joy wants eternity . . . wants deep, wants deep eternity" (Z, III, 15, 3). As such, Zarathustra's redemption shows that life's value and significance, as I have argued above in connection with the thought of eternal recurrence, arises from actual, "raw" experience.<sup>221</sup>

Part III ends with Zarathustra's seven-fold declaration of his love to eternity in "The Seven Seals" (Z, III, 16). Having suggested that Zarathustra has been redeemed in the sense that he can now affirm life, one would expect the book to end here. Not surprisingly, numerous commentators have noted that it should. This is not to say that *Zarathustra's* message is clear at this point, or that the work offers substantial resolution that would be negated or undermined by the addition of a fourth part. Yet Zarathustra's affirmation of life as it is to the point of wishing its

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<sup>221</sup>This is in contrast to justifications that appeal to non-empirical facts, entities, and non-verifiable theoretical constructs.

eternal recurrence does bring to completion a most difficult task: to change his disposition in such a way that the set of actual experiences that constitutes his empirical existence is rendered meaningful and worthwhile in its own right and on its own terms. So in order to justify a continuation of the narrative, one would expect resolution of the main issue with which this book is concerned, namely, the problem of nihilism, that threatens to lead to the decay and disintegration of Western culture and humanity.

As an individual response to God's death and the ensuing devaluation of the highest values, Zarathustra's redemption seems adequately to confront and overcome the problem of nihilism on a personal level. Nihilism, however, is a more widespread, cultural phenomenon Nietzsche/Zarathustra believes will lead to the degeneration of humankind as a whole along the lines suggested by Zarathustra's "last man" speech.<sup>222</sup> Most readers who have stuck with the book so far, therefore, are likely to expect some guidance with respect to their own efforts to confront

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<sup>222</sup>Nietzsche writes in GM, I, 12: "The sight of man makes us weary—what is nihilism today if it is not *that?*—we are weary *of man*."

His solution comes in the form of a description of an individual much like Zarathustra:

But some day, in a stronger age than this decaying, self-doubting present, he must yet come to us, the *redeeming* man of great love and contempt, the creative spirit whose compelling strength will not let him rest in any aloofness or any beyond, whose isolation is misunderstood by the people as if it were a flight *from* reality—while it is only his absorption, immersion, penetration *into* reality, so that, when he one day emerges again into the light, he may bring home the *redemption* of this reality: its redemption from the curse that the hitherto reigning ideal has laid upon it . . . this victor over God and nothingness—*he must come one day*.— (GM, II, 24).

nihilism. Since the grounds of Zarathustra's redemption remain somewhat nebulous, aside from letting the reader know that *Zarathustra* simply experiences life's joy as more fundamental than its woe, *Zarathustra*, one would think, still owes its audience some explanation. It does the reader little good to know that Zarathustra, a fictional character, has confronted the problem of nihilism if she is left without the relevant information or tools to turn what she has learned thus far to practical use.

In addition to having neglected to provide guidance concerning the practical aspects of approaching the central problem of the book, *Zarathustra* has also set its readers up to expect that the protagonist's redemption will give rise to the creation of new values from a child's point of view. Zarathustra's affirmation of the thought of eternal recurrence, which, as we have seen, restores the empirical world's innocence, raises the expectation that Part IV will present at least a representative sampling of the types of values that reflect a life-affirming orientation toward the world. The garden of Eden allusions following Zarathustra's confrontation of his "most abysmal" thought suggest that the world's moral status is a function of his attitude toward it. Prior to his redemption, as Zarathustra tells his animals, all of existence seemed poisoned by the thought that its affirmation has to entail the perpetual presence of the small man. Once redeemed, however, the world outside of his cave appears like the garden of Eden—a place known for its inhabitants' ignorance of good and evil. In both cases, Zarathustra's and Adam and Eve's, the subjects' condition determines the state of the world. Given that the world's innocence is restored in the

course of Zarathustra's redemption, it can be inferred that he must have undergone the final metamorphosis to the child stage.

None of these expectations will be met. Without going into much detail, the book ends after Zarathustra declares that the higher men, each of whom caricatures one aspect of humanity overcome, are not his "proper companions" because "the *heedful ear*," that is, "the ear that listens for *me* (Zarathustra) . . . is lacking in their limbs" (Z, IV, 20).<sup>223</sup> This follows a series of cartoonish encounters with the higher men,<sup>224</sup> who are, one by one, sent to Zarathustra's cave after our protagonist answers their respective cries of distress. Once gathered at the cave, they prepare a feast, sing and drink together, and the higher men, while Zarathustra temporarily steps out of the cave, celebrate "The Ass Festival" (Z, IV, 17 & 18).<sup>225</sup> When Zarathustra returns and finds the higher men worshiping the ass, he becomes incensed about their behavior and calls them to account. Their answers suggest that the festival they invented was in part a prank they played on their host, and partly the sort of "sacred game and festival of atonement" the madman of *The Gay Science* (125) thought

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<sup>223</sup>It may be suggested that the higher men each represent an aspect of Zarathustra. It is difficult to see the parallels between Zarathustra's character as portrayed and that of the "ugliest man," for instance, or the two kings who abdicated their throne.

<sup>224</sup>For instance, Zarathustra accidentally steps on "*the conscientious in spirit*," and is so startled that, after stepping on the man, he adds to the injury by giving him a thrashing with his stick (Z, IV, 4).

<sup>225</sup>See *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, 206-232, for an analysis of "The Ass Festival" as Menippean Satire. The feast of the ass was also a regular part of carnival in the Middle Ages.

necessary to deal with the implications of God's death.

Zarathustra, who realizes that his rage was based on his misinterpretation of the situation, caused by a lack of attunement to his environment (much like the problems with the townspeople of the Prologue), becomes reconciled with the higher men. In the end, he even takes credit for having inspired the festival, which could be read as an act of blatant hypocrisy or as a concession to the higher men that he has made an ass of himself by imposing his own preconceptions and implicit pieties on his guests.<sup>226</sup> The higher men, lead by "the ugliest man," who articulates their collective reorientation toward, and appreciation of, earthly existence, "all at once became conscious of how they had changed and convalesced" (Z, IV, 19, 1). Indeed, the ugliest man claims that this "one day, one festival with Zarathustra," has "taught [him] to love the earth." Addressing the other higher men, he asks, "My friends, what to you think? Do you not want to say to death as I do: Was *that* life? For Zarathustra's sake! Well then! Once more!"

Zarathustra, however, does not reciprocate their affections. Withdrawn, "his spirit fled visibly and few ahead and was in remote distances" (Z, IV, 19, 2). In a scene reminiscent of the aftermath of Christ's crucifixion that shows his disciples

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<sup>226</sup>If the latter is the case, then Zarathustra would be in precisely the sort of position into which the book places the reader. Just as Zarathustra is appalled by the higher men's apparent apostasy, a reaction that turns out to be a function of his own implicit commitments to the tradition, so the reader, as we have seen throughout this work, is set up to stumble whenever her implicit pieties affirm the established order. Zarathustra's tripping over his own unrecognized presupposition could thus be considered a case of "poetic justice."

holding his dead body, the higher men “held [Zarathustra] in their arms.” Unlike Jesus, who welcomes his disciple’s worshipful submission to his resurrected spirit, Zarathustra, after regaining his (bodily) senses, “warded off the throng of the revering and worried.” Apparently, the higher men’s affirmation of earthly existence is problematic in that it is conditional upon Zarathustra’s leadership. Given that affirmation of empirical existence entails rejection of the shepherd paradigm in favor of an active, creative stance toward the world, as we have seen in our analysis of Parts I and II of *Zarathustra*, the higher men’s transformation falls short of the ideal. And again, Zarathustra’s voice is said to have changed, indicating his change of attitude toward them.

What follows is a lyrical poem described by the chapter title as “The Drunken Song,” which celebrates life’s Dionysian aspects. Each verse or numbered section ends with an italicized reiteration of the numbered one-line verses of section 3 of “The Other Dancing Song” (Z, III, 15, 3) that concludes Zarathustra’s declaration of love for life on the basis of his experiencing life’s joy as reaching deeper than its woe. While “The Other Dancing Song” omits the number twelve, however, which refers to midnight, the time at which “The Drunken Song” is performed, the latter completes the sequence by repeating the entire set of one-line verses in section 12:

Oh man, take care!  
What does the deep midnight declare?  
“I was asleep—  
from a deep dream I woke and swear:

The world is deep,  
Deeper than day had been aware.  
Deep is its woe;  
Joy—deeper yet than agony:  
Woe implores: Go!  
But all joy wants eternity—  
Wants deep, wants deep eternity.”

Zarathustra’s repetition in its entirety, and without the interjection of numbers, of the song that expresses his experience of life’s joy as deeper than its woe at a time and in a condition during which Dionysian elements predominate, that is, drunk at midnight, stresses again the non-rational nature of his bond with life. Since daylight, measure, form, and dreams are modes of Apollonian experience while darkness, inebriation, and emotional rapture characterize the Dionysian mode, the omission of numbers altogether, the mention of awaking from a dream, and the drunken midnight setting indicate that Zarathustra’s love of life is an exuberant, intoxicated, deeply emotional affair. It is, in other words, not rationally or morally justifiable. Moreover, by expressing his deep love of life by means of a song, Zarathustra, it is suggested, has finally managed to vocalize his message via the appropriate mode of communication.

This, again, parallels Nietzsche’s own maturation process in that Zarathustra’s style of communication now harmonizes with the content of his message. In fact, *Zarathustra* as a whole, and Zarathustra’s drunken love song in particular may be seen as an attempt to rectify Nietzsche’s earlier neglect to “permit [him]self . . . an individual language.” Nietzsche, as we can glean from the revised

Preface to *The Birth of Tragedy*, later regrets having “tried laboriously to express by means of Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulas strange and new valuations . . .” (BT, Preface, 6). “It should have *sung*, this ‘new soul’—and not spoken,” he tells us in the revised preface of *The Birth of Tragedy* about his own failure to express the Dionysian spirit in that work in a fitting mode (BT, Preface, 3). Zarathustra, therefore, sings.

The final chapter of the book, “The Sign,” completes Zarathustra’s estrangement from the higher men. While he rises the following morning, emerging from his cave “glowing and strong as a morning sun that comes out of dark mountains” (Z, IV, 20), the higher men remain asleep. The imagery is rather complex insofar as it draws a number of contrasts. By likening Zarathustra to the morning sun, on the one hand, it suggests that Zarathustra has displaced Plato’s sun symbolizing the Form of the Good, as well as Jesus, who is said to bring light to the world. On the other hand, it sets Zarathustra, who is awake, apart from the higher men, who are still in a dream state that characterizes the Apollonian mode of experience. But because the sun, too, is the symbol of Apollo, Zarathustra’s exhibition of sun-like characteristics is problematic. If his orientation toward the world is to be distinguished from that of the higher men by means of the Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy, then the distinction Nietzsche draws in *The Birth of Tragedy* must have undergone some modification. Gooding-Williams argues that *Zarathustra* represents the Dionysian via Apollonian images because Nietzsche revised his

earlier view that modern Europeans understood the Dionysian world and for that reason, “require[d] Dionysus to explain Apollonian appearance.”<sup>227</sup> His representing Dionysus by way of Apollo, according to Gooding-Williams, therefore marks the reversal of Nietzsche’s claim in BT that a resurgence of the Dionysian spirit in European culture is imminent.

I do not think this is correct because Nietzsche stresses the need for modern Europeans to rediscover Dionysus throughout BT. It is more likely that Zarathustra’s sun-like appearance is intended to balance the Dionysian tendencies suggested by his singing a drunken love song. This image is opposed to the higher men’s predominantly Apollonian orientation, and would explain what Zarathustra means when he says that the “*heedful ear*”—the ear that listens for him—“is lacking in their limbs” (Z, IV, 20). It may also provide some insight into their propensity to exhibit individual aspects of Zarathustra’s teachings in an exaggerated, caricatured fashion. Zarathustra’s complaint suggests that the higher men, due to their Apollonian mode of understanding, take his teachings quite literally. They tend to classify and categorize his words within the culturally predominant cognitive framework rather than listen to their spirit because they are not attuned to Zarathustra’s Dionysian mode of understanding. As such, they listen to his words, but not to him. Or alternatively, they listen to what he says, but do not hear what he means. And because the higher men classify or compartmentalize Zarathustra’s

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<sup>227</sup>*Dionysian Modernism*, 54.

teachings within a relatively rigid framework, their implementation of his message tends to emphasize certain aspects at the expense of others. This is due to the fact that their Apollonian tendency to impose measure and distinction cannot capture the Dionysian mode of experience, whose surging energy seeks to overflow these boundaries.

Zarathustra reinforces this distinction by acknowledging his affinity with his animals, also awake before sunrise, who represent Dionysian passions and instincts. After declaring his love for them, but noting that he still lacks the proper human companions, he is suddenly surrounded by innumerable birds. The terms used to describe the imagery of this flock of birds surrounding Zarathustra refer us back to his description of the conditions that would pave the way for the overman in the Prologue: “And verily, like a cloud it came over him, like a cloud of arrows that empties itself over a new enemy. But behold, here it was a cloud of love, and over a new friend” (Z, IV, 20). In the Prologue, he had described himself as “a heavy drop from” the “dark cloud that hangs over men,” and a “herald of the lightning” that “is called *overman*” (Z, Prologue, 4). Moreover, he had dreaded the day when all of humanity will have degenerated to the last man stage and its soil become “poor and domesticated” such that “man will no longer be able to shoot the arrow of his longing beyond man” (Z, Prologue, 5). The cloud of birds that empties itself over Zarathustra like “a cloud of arrows,” therefore, is a sign that humanity is still capable of creating beyond itself.

The other sign that new value creation may still be possible is the appearance of the laughing lion. The lion image from “On the Three Metamorphoses” (Z, I, 1) is here combined with the image of the transformed shepherd of “On the Vision and the Riddle” (Z, III, 2), which may suggest that Zarathustra has, at last, overcome the lion stage and become like a child, able to make a new beginning and create new values. While this would explain why Part IV, contrary to the expectation raised by Zarathustra’s redemption at the end of Part III, has so far failed to provide its readers with a list, or even a general characterization, of those new values, it raises questions concerning Zarathustra’s redemption. What, specifically, did Zarathustra accomplish in “The Convalescent” if he did not make the transition to the child stage? Did he perhaps not, as we had supposed, restore the world to a state of innocence?

Gooding-Williams argues that in “The Convalescent,” Zarathustra forms the lion’s thought of eternal recurrence, which allows him to nullify Christian-Platonic values by imagining his soul as an as “an omnipresent ‘now’” that “excludes from time the past per se,”<sup>228</sup> and does not form the child’s thought of eternal recurrence until “The Sign.”<sup>229</sup> This would mean that although Zarathustra may have rejected old values and “wiped the slate clean,” so to speak, at the end of Part III, he is unable from that perspective to create new values because the conception of time that allows

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<sup>228</sup>*Dionysian Modernism*, 223.

<sup>229</sup>*Dionysian Modernism*, 296.

him to will backwards also precludes the occurrence of future moments. The conception of time Gooding-Williams claims is operative when Zarathustra adopts the lion's point of view is "'spacialize[d]' time," which involves representing time as space.<sup>230</sup> While this allows him to avoid the eternal repetition of the Christian-Platonic past, Gooding-Williams notes, it also has "the paradoxical effect of eradicating the possibility of creating new values."<sup>231</sup>

Although this would explain why Zarathustra's Part III redemption does not suffice to put him into a position to create new values, it is at odds with the fact that in the chapter preceding "The Convalescent," Zarathustra is "surrounded by broken old tablets and new tablets half covered with writing" (Z, III, 12, 1). Apparently, some new values have already been created, or their creation has been initiated, prior to what Gooding-Williams interprets as Zarathustra's leonine affirmation of eternal recurrence. Moreover, during Zarathustra's declaration of his love of life in "The Other Dancing Song," following "The Convalescent," he is depicted as holding future intentions. Life, who is saddened because she knows that Zarathustra wants to leave her soon, complains that he does not love her enough. In response, Zarathustra whispers something into her ear that seems to reconcile life. We are not told what Zarathustra says, but I tend to agree with Maudemarie Clark's reading, which makes sense in the context, that it is something to the effect that Zarathustra recognizes that

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<sup>230</sup>*Dionysian Modernism*, 219.

<sup>231</sup>*Dionysian Modernism*, 221.

death, too, is a part of life.<sup>232</sup> In other words, in order for Zarathustra to affirm life as it is so completely that he would wish its eternal repetition, he must welcome death as well because death, too, is among the actual empirical experiences that constitute his life.

But it does not really matter what Zarathustra tells life. The relevant point here is that Zarathustra has intentions regarding the future while declaring his love to life, having just confronted the thought of eternal recurrence. If this declaration of love were based on Zarathustra's having affirmed eternal recurrence construed as a perpetual 'now,' as Gooding-Williams argues, Zarathustra should be unable to project his intentions into the future. The problem with this reading of eternal recurrence, as is the case with most interpretations, discussed at some length above, is that it appeals to the truth, or belief in the truth, of eternal recurrence construed as an abstract theory of some type. In this case, Zarathustra's leonine construal of eternal recurrence, as ascribed to him by Gooding-Williams, "involves his *belief* that his soul is an omnipresent 'now,'"<sup>233</sup> that is, an abstract theory concerning the nature of time. Aside from the fact that this seems inconsistent with Zarathustra's vehement rejection of the spirit of gravity's interpretation of eternal recurrence as a theory of time in "On the Vision," this type of reading self-destructs, as Gooding-Williams himself notes, rendering it trivial insofar as it forfeits the idea's

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<sup>232</sup>*Nietzsche on Truth*, 263-4.

<sup>233</sup>*Dionysian Modernism*, 296. My italics.

motivational force.

Instead of attempting to unravel Zarathustra's redemption, I propose that we shift our focus toward the larger philosophical aim of Nietzsche's project. Given that one of the central issues—perhaps *the* central issue—of *Zarathustra* is the problem of nihilism, the story of Zarathustra's redemption is of value insofar as it serves to illustrate, by means of a fictional character, how nihilism might be confronted. As such, his apparent failure to create new values, contrary to the expectations raised, can be explained with reference to the project as a whole. Assuming that Nietzsche's intent is to educate his readers, in the sense of enabling them to confront nihilism on their own, presenting them with a set of new values would undermine that endeavor. It would mean to offer prescriptions, assuming again a shepherd-like stance, rather than provide readers with the tools necessary to tackle the problem. It makes sense, therefore, that at this juncture, *Zarathustra* should avoid committing either itself or its readers to preconceived standards or limitations that do not reflect individuals' actual interests and experiences.

The problem with Zarathustra's redemption and the subsequent absence of new values can thus be solved by interpreting the laughing lion symbol as a harbinger of Zarathustra's long-awaited "children" whose creative spirit surpasses their "father's" because they start where he leaves off—at the lion stage overcome. This is consistent with Zarathustra's comment near the very end of the book: "Well then! The lion came, my children are near . . ." (Z, IV, 20), as well as his immediate

reaction to the laughing lion: “*My children are near, my children.*” Moreover, Zarathustra’s “children,” assuming there is more than one, would give rise to new sets of values from a plurality of perspectives, which would lend a greater degree of legitimacy to their confrontation of the Western tradition’s absolutism than a single voice of dissent can muster. Unlike Zarathustra’s critique of the established order, which pits his singular voice against the univocal voice of the tradition, and as such, threatens to undermine his message on an existential level in that he exposes himself to the problem of self-reference, his “children’s” creations would be immune to that criticism. Their ability to face the tradition’s single-voiced absolutism by creating a plurality of new, life-affirming values would render their practice consistent with the putative content of their message: that our empirical existence is rendered worthless and meaningless when we passively submit to any given set of externally imposed ideals that transcends our actual, lived experience.

The book, famously, ends soon after Zarathustra’s announcement of the impending arrival of his “children:” “The lion came, my children are near, Zarathustra has ripened, my hour has come: this is *my* morning, *my* day is breaking: *rise now, rise, thou great noon!*” (Z, IV, 20). This is followed by one final sentence: “Thus spoke Zarathustra, and he left his cave, glowing and strong as a morning sun that comes out of dark mountains.” The last sentence, which likens Zarathustra to the sun, is a reiteration of the first sentence of “The Sign.” As such, it raises some

suspicion concerning the status of the intervening “events.” Zarathustra is said to emerge from his cave in the beginning of the chapter and then again at the end. Yet in the meantime, he never returns to the cave. The narrative leaves him sitting on the big stone outside of the cave before he supposedly departs from it for the second time. This suggests that the signs, that is, the birds and the laughing lion, may have been a dream or a vision—much like Zarathustra’s encounter with the shepherd that foreshadows his redemption in Part III. Although the shepherd vision turned out to be a precursor to actual events within the context of the narrative, it is unclear whether Zarathustra’s hope for “children” is justified, since it is conditional upon other individuals’ receptiveness and responses to the problem of nihilism.

Despite all of these uncertainties and loose ends, the book just ends here, leaving resolution of even the main problem pending. I vividly recall the frustration and confusion the book’s ending evoked upon my first encounter with it. Aside from failing to offer substantive resolution with respect to the central issues it raises, the fact that this text puts the reader through all of the troubles associated with attempting to make sense of it, and then simply stops, was a major disappointment. *Zarathustra*/Zarathustra does not appear to tell the reader what she should think or do, does not offer clear instructions as to how she might deal with the implications of God’s death, nor any clear indication as to the conditions under which Zarathustra’s hope for “children” might be actualized. This inconclusiveness is contrary not only

to expectations raised within the context of the work itself, but also stands in crass contrast to the style of Nietzsche's other writings, which tend to be almost embarrassingly outspoken and direct.

Although it is true that Nietzsche had at one point planned to add further parts, he did not follow through on this intent. Yet he nevertheless lauds *Zarathustra*, in its current state, as "the greatest present that has ever been made to [humankind] so far" (EH, Preface, 4). Apparently he was more than satisfied with the work as it stands, which suggests that the offensiveness of the book's seemingly unfinished character may be welcome in that it constitutes yet another violation of the reader's implicit commitments to the established order and the life-negating, unattainable ideals it endorses. The lack of resolution, moreover, is consistent with Nietzsche's characterization of *Zarathustra* as a tragedy, which, according to its author, portrays and accepts suffering and failure as an integral and unavoidable part of life. Unlike the Christian-Platonic tradition, the tragic view of the world, as we have seen in Chapter 2, is capable of accepting the absence of moral or rational justifications for human suffering. For that reason, *Zarathustra's* "neglect" to conform to the ideals of justice by compensating the reader for the discomfort and trouble it has caused may be considered one among many instances in which the text implements its critique of the Western tradition on an applied level.

*Zarathustra's* indeterminate ending is thus consistent with the pattern of

violations of cognitive and symbolic boundaries that uphold and perpetuate the ideals of the Christian-Platonic world view we have traced throughout the book. As is the case with previous transgressions, the indeterminacy here *shows* the existential consequences of God's death in practice and forces the reader willing and able to do so to confront them in an effort to come to terms with this text, as well as its central problem: nihilism. Since Western cognitive and moral categories have lost their grounding due to God's death, human existence can no longer be justified by appealing to the world's ultimately rational and just arrangement, to be upheld in the afterlife if not here. The upshot of God's absence as the source and foundation of transcendent order is that the value and meaning of life, if there is any, must be sought within the context of our actual empirical experience. By continuing to submit to the ideals of the Christian-Platonic view perpetuated by cultural categorical schemes, however, individuals expose themselves not only to the danger of failing to make sense of their actual empirical experience, thereby rendering their lives meaningless. The submissive posture encouraged by Christian-Platonic ideals also threatens to render human beings unfit to live their empirical lives in a meaningful and worthwhile manner.

Should humankind continue to embrace the life-negating ideals enforced by the established order despite God's absence, Nietzsche feared, it would eventually degenerate to the "last man" stage, unable to confront and overcome nihilism, and

what may be worse, incapable even of despairing at the possibility that life may be utterly meaningless. *Zarathustra* counteracts the nihilistic tendency to bow to the powers that be, or to conform to general consensus, by strategically disrupting readers' cognitive habits. Its violations of symbolic and cognitive boundaries essential to the maintenance of the established order, I have argued, thwart the readers' attempts at passive assimilation of the work's semantic content, and thereby enable them to become aware of implicit commitments to life-negating values and ideals.

Unlike Nietzsche's other works, which present his critique of the Western tradition in a clear and easily accessible manner, and thus allow readers to side-step or rationalize instances in which criticisms might apply to them personally,<sup>234</sup> *Zarathustra*, as we have seen, entraps its audience by using readers' largely unconscious habits against them. In addition to setting readers up for failure with respect to eliciting the meaning of the text, Nietzsche's own attitude toward the protagonist is often ambiguous, thereby depriving the reader of the possible recourse of gauging the text's intent by way of its author's stance toward it. This tends not to be a problem with Nietzsche's other texts in that he tends to make his own views and

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<sup>234</sup>One possible exception to this pattern is *On the Genealogy of Morals*. As Kathleen Higgins argues, GM has a tendency to drive the reader into a corner from which there is no escape. See Kathleen Higgins, "On the Genealogy of Morals—Nietzsche's Gift" in Richard Schacht, ed., *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 49-62.

judgments quite clear. *Zarathustra*, however, puts the reader into the desert, so to speak, in the sense that it deprives her of the opportunity to refer to the established order or to the author for guidance concerning the appropriate stance toward this book. The reader, as we have seen, has little choice but to bring the set of assumptions and beliefs that characterize her orientation in general to bear on the text. This leaves her vulnerable to attack on a deeply personal level, given that textual violations of culturally grounded cognitive, moral, or symbolic boundaries should elicit a reaction from the reader only if she in fact relies upon and values them.

We have also observed in the course of our analysis that *Zarathustra's* cognitive opacity is frequently correlated with violations of assumptions that serve to maintain the established order. Among those are the idea that Zarathustra's Christ-like demeanor renders him an authority figure whom one ought to follow and trust, the belief that the world is arranged in accordance with accepted categories of reason and morality, that the intellect rules the passions and emotions, etc. Although these assumptions, and many others like them, are ungrounded by God's death, we continue to rely upon the ordering scheme they support to make sense of our environment because it is practically impossible to do without some set of cognitive categories. *Zarathustra's* opacity, as well as its tendency to generate disturbed responses from its reader, can both be explained with reference to its violations of

the established order that implement Nietzsche's critique of the Christian-Platonic tradition on an applied level.

It is in this respect that *Zarathustra* stands apart most drastically from Nietzsche's other texts. Whereas the rest of Nietzsche's writings tend to voice his critique of the tradition in a manner that respects its cognitive, though not necessarily moral, boundaries, *Zarathustra* does as Zarathustra says in that it violates accepted form. Its structure and style, in other words, reflect its content and subject matter such that the existential consequences of God's death, that is, the loss of transcendent meaning and value, are formally embedded in the text. I have argued that this allows *Zarathustra* to *show*, both in the sense of making the threat of nihilism experientially available to the reader and of illustrating by means of Zarathustra's example, dimensions of the problem that cannot be conveyed from within the traditional framework.

The text's heavy reliance on imagery and metaphor serves a similar function. Images and fresh metaphors allow for the possibility of communication outside accepted categories of reason by tapping into resources typically neglected in philosophical discourse. The idea that we must learn to "listen with [our] eyes" (Z, Prologue, 5), as Zarathustra puts it, in addition to prioritizing empirical experience, points toward extra-rational modes of insight as a source of meaning and value. If it is true that life cannot be justified on moral or rational grounds, then its meaning and

value must lie elsewhere. *Zarathustra* suggests that this “elsewhere,” or the proverbial desert, is the realm of our actual empirical experience.

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