



Nietzsche's Madness

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Nietzsche's Madness

On January 3, 1889,
fifty years ago,
Nietzsche succumbed to madness:
on the Piazza Carlo-Alberto, in Turin,
Sobbing, he threw himself about the neck
of a beaten horse,
Then collapsed;
When he awoke, he believed himself to be

DIONYSOS

or

HE WHO WAS CRUCIFIED

This event
should be commemorated
as a tragedy.
“When that which lives,”
said Zarathustra,
“is in command of itself,
that which lives must
expiate its authority
and become judge, avenger, and
VICTIM
of its own laws.”

I

It is our wish to commemorate a tragic event, and we stand here now, borne up by life. Overhead stretches the starlit sky, and beneath our feet the earth turns. Within our bodies there is life, but within our bodies, too, death makes its way. (A man can always feel, even from afar, the approach of the last gasp.) Above us day will follow night, and night the day. And still we speak, we speak aloud, all unaware of the nature of those beings that we are. And of him who does not speak according to the rules of language, the men of reason that we must be assert that he is mad.

We ourselves are afraid of going mad, and we observe the rules with great uneasiness. Besides, the derangements of madmen are classified, and repeat themselves with a monotony such as to elicit boredom. The madman's lack of appeal insures the grave severity of logic. The philosopher through his discourse, nevertheless, "mirrors the empty sky" with less honesty than the madman, and in that case should he not be eliminated?

This questioning cannot be taken seriously, since it would, if wise, immediately lose its meaning. And yet it is strictly foreign to the spirit of pleasantry. For it is necessary, too, that we know the sweat of anguish. Under what pretext can we reject the embarrassment which produces sweat? The absence of sweat is far less honest than the pleasantries of him who sweats. He whom we term "wise" is the philosopher, but he does not exist independently of men as a whole. That whole is composed of a few philosophers engaged in mutual destruction and of a crowd in a state of inertia and perturbation which knows them not.

At this point, those now in sweat will clash by night with those for whom history in action clarifies the meaning of human life. For truly, in history mutually exterminating mobs provide consequences to incompatibility among philosophies — in those dialogues which are so many acts of slaughter. But completion, like birth, means combat, and beyond completion and combat, what else remains but death? Beyond endless, mutual verbal destruction, what else remains but a silence driving one to madness in laughter and in sweat?

But if the generality of men — or if, more simply, their entire existence — were to be INCARNATED in a single being — as solitary and abandoned, of course, as the generality — the head of that INCARNATION would be the site of inappeasable conflict, of a violence such that sooner or later it would shatter. We can hardly conceive the intensity of the storm or of release attained in the visions of this incarnate being. He would look upon God only to kill him in that same instant, becoming God himself, but only to leap immediately into nothingness. He would then find himself as before, a man as insignificant as any passerby, but with no possibility of rest whatsoever.

He would surely not content himself with thought and speech, for inner necessity would constrain him to live out his thought and speech. An incarnated

being of this sort would know a freedom so great that no language could reproduce its movement (the dialectic no more than any other). Human thought thus embodied can alone become a celebration whose license and exaltation would find release equal to that of the sense of tragedy and anguish.

This leads to the inevitable acknowledgment that "man incarnate" must also go mad.

How violently within his head the Earth would spin!

How extreme his crucifixion! How like a bacchanal he would be (draw back, all those who fear to look upon his . . .)! But, Caesar, how lonely he would grow, omnipotent and so sacred that no man might conceive him without dissolving in tears. Supposing that . . . how would God not sicken at the discovery of his reasonable impotence to know madness?

January 3, 1939

II

This expression of violence does not, however, go far enough; these sentences betray the original impulse if they are not linked to those desires and decisions which are their living justification. Now, it is obvious that a representation of madness at the summit can have no direct effect; no one can voluntarily destroy within himself the expressive apparatus which links him to his fellows, like bone to bone.

Blake tells us in a proverb that *had others not gone mad, we should be so*. Madness cannot be cast out from the human generality, for its completion requires the madman. Nietzsche's going mad—in our stead—thus rendered that generality possible; and those who had previously lost their reason had not done it as brilliantly. But can the gift of a man's madness to his fellows be accepted without return plus interest? And if that interest is not the unreason of he who has received that royal gift of another's unreason, what might the return then be?

There is another proverb: He who desires but does not act breeds pestilence.

Surely the most extreme form of pestilence is attained when the expression of desire is confused with action.

For if a man begins to follow a violent impulse, his expression of it signifies that he is no longer following it, for at least the duration of its expression. Expression requires the substitution of an external figurative sign for passion itself. He who expresses himself must therefore pass from the burning sphere of passion to the relatively cold and torpid sphere of signs. When confronting that expression we must then always ask whether the subject is not headed for a deep sleep. That questioning must be conducted with unflinching rigor.

He who has once understood that in madness alone lies man's completion, is thus led to make a clear choice not between madness and reason, but between the lie of "a nightmare that justifies snores," and the will to self-mastery and victory. Once he has discovered the brilliance and agonies of the summit, he finds no betrayal more hateful than the simulated delirium of art. For if he must truly become the victim of his own laws, if the accomplishment of his destiny truly requires his destruction, if, therefore, death or madness has for him the aura of celebration, then his very love of life and destiny requires him to commit within himself that crime of authority that he will expiate. This is the demand of the fate to which he is bound by a feeling of extreme chance.

Proceeding, first, then, from powerless frenzy to power—just as he must in his life's crisis proceed in a reversal of power to collapse, whether slow or sudden—he must henceforth devote his time to the (impersonal) search for strength. He has seen, in that moment in which the wholeness of life appears as linked to the tragedy which is his final accomplishment, how weakening this relation can be. He has seen those about him approaching the secret—which thus represents the true "salt" or "sense" of the earth—succumb to the torpid dissolution of literature or art. The fate of human existence thus appears as linked to a small number of beings who are totally without power. For some carry within themselves far more than they, in their state of moral decay, believe; when the surrounding crowd and their representatives place in bondage all that concerns them. He who has been schooled to the limit through meditation upon tragedy ought not to take his pleasure in the "symbolic expression" of destructive forces; rather, he should instruct his fellows in the consequences. He should, by his firmness and persistence, lead them to organize, to become, in contrast to the fascists and Christians, other than the degraded objects of their adversaries' contempt. For it is incumbent upon them to impose chance upon the masses who demand of all men a life of slavery—chance, meaning that which they are, but from which, through failure of will, they abdicate.