

Lecture 31

On the Insanity of Nietzsche

A curious and tragic paradox faces the historian when he attempts to investigate and to understand the thought and the writings of one of those giants of modern culture who went insane towards the end of his life, at the very height of his intellectual productivity. To be sure, there have been at all times great personalities on the brink of insanity; they are not unusual. The nineteenth century was not lacking in heroes who were mad. Among others it had ^{its} Hoelderlin, ~~Dostoevsky~~, van Gogh, Robert Schumann, and Friedrich Nietzsche. It is of Nietzsche that I would speak here, for the work of a composer or of a writer may be loved and understood apart from the state of mind ⁱⁿ which ^{he} produced it. With Nietzsche the problem is different.

The thought of a man like Nietzsche one must interpret before one ^{can} attempt to evaluate it. Wholly to disregard the impact of disease upon the mind and its thoughts is being dishonest with oneself and with history and rendering a service to neither. On the other hand, simply to discredit the thoughts of a man because he was in (the) the process of becoming insane would be rash. Not seldom do those minds that verge on insanity exert much influence upon the development of thought; the proximity of genius to madness has only too often been commented upon.

But why, some will say, is it necessary at all to examine the thought of a man like Nietzsche as it stands in relation to his mental health? A thought is a thought, they will say, and can be

evaluated apart

evaluated apart from the mind that gave it birth. - True. - Perhaps it is superfluous to demand whether a thought is the child of a sick or of a healthy mind. And yet when we concern ourselves with the growth of ideas and the development of ideologies we are at once faced with questions. Should one take an idea at face value or should one attempt to interpret it relatively, or perhaps even allegorically? Was the author conscious of the myriad implications of the thesis that he proposed? Was his a coolly deliberated statement, the result of long and careful thought, or was it the product of an instant's inspiration, not subject to the discipline of logic or of reason? Was it the result of despair or of hate, was it a reaction, in self-defense against an opposite philosophy? Was this the product of sickness or of health?

All of these questions, - and many more, - arise with a conscientious examination of the philosophy of Nietzsche. The fearful ultimates of Nietzsche's thought are generally well-known: the idea of the superman, the vision of the blond beast, the will to power, the revaluation of all values. Should we attribute these extreme notions to his insanity and totally ignore them, or must we look somewhere else for an adequate explanation^{for them}? Nietzsche's life, I think, may give us a clue.

Nietzsche's life is a history of illness rather than of health. Moreover, it is a history of illness not unwanted, and yet cursed, a suffering not shunned, but accepted as the prerequisite to greatness. For greatness, to rise above the level of the crowd, was ever Nietzsche's goal.

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sche's goal. He said that he would have his life as hard as any man had lived it. He wanted to suffer because ~~he~~ felt that only in suffering could he find the justification for his philosophy. Nature and chance combined to fulfill his wish.

The story of Nietzsche's life is a chronicle of illness and of physical suffering which ~~begin~~ already with eyestrain and headache while the young Nietzsche ~~was~~ yet in preparatory school. It ended with the lonely and outcast philosopher. He had resigned his professorship on account of ill health, and lived henceforth in Northern Italy, on the Riviera, and in Switzerland at Sils Maria, 6000 meters beyond men and time, as he himself described it. Much of his time he spent sick and in bed, and when he was up he wrung from his weakened body the last measure of work. In December 1888 he became violently insane, and never recovered.

A positive and conclusive diagnosis of his insanity was never made. From much that Nietzsche himself wrote it would appear that he consciously worked and tortured his mind to the point of insanity. If this is impossible, as modern psychiatrists, then at least he was fitfully aware of the coming catastrophe. Nietzsche fondly cherished the idea of him who ~~exalts over and above himself~~ falls because of his own greatness. Zarathustra repeatedly tells of his love for him who creates over and above himself and ~~perishes~~ in the process. No matter where its origin, Nietzsche would have his insanity be a crowning symbol of what he considered ^{to be} his work and his mission.

The cause of Nietzsche's infirmity has never been determined. The hypothesis that Nietzsche was suffering from progressive paralysis, though widely believed, has to my knowledge never been proved. (Progressive paralysis is a syphilitic disease of the brain.) The psychiatrist Moebius has even attempted to analyse Nietzsche's later works in terms of the cycles of mental derangement which precede the violent outbreak of progressive paralysis. Nietzsche's sister, on the other hand, would explain his madness as the result of an excess of sedatives which Nietzsche is known to have taken to ease his pain. Her hypothesis has been medically discredited.

Accordingly we are left with few facts and with only one valid hypothesis, namely that of progressive paralysis, to shed light on the cause of Nietzsche's insanity. To be sure, if we could obtain from the scientists a complete description of Nietzsche's disease, our problem would be solved. But on this point the scientists themselves disagree and can give us no help. From a medical point of view the relationship of Nietzsche's madness to his thought remains enigmatic.

For our purposes, however, a medical diagnosis is not essential. We are not concerned here with an exact definition of Nietzsche's disease, nor with the nature of its origin. The relation of illness to thought we may ^{understand} gather from Nietzsche's works, ^{and thus} from letters and from reported conversations. Two categories of effects seem naturally to present themselves.

In the first place, Nietzsche's suffering heightened his poetic power and ~~increased~~ expanded his creative ambitions. Nietzsche

is not unique

is not unique in attempting to convert his suffering and his disease into constructive and creative channels. Beethoven, who had lived and suffered half a century before Nietzsche had proved that it was possible to convert the greatest infirmity and its attendant pain into the loftiest expression of human aspirations and human struggle, and in so doing to obtain at least some measure of release. Nietzsche greatly admired Beethoven for his hard and painful road, even as he admired Jesus for submitting to the cross. Nietzsche's most beautiful poetry is product likewise of his suffering as is the haunting unparalleled prose of Zarathustra. In this sense we may say that Nietzsche grew with his disease and created to the extent that he did because of it. In this sense the disease produced a reaction in his soul, and this reaction was beautiful, and remains today one of the unique monuments which human suffering has built to itself.

Nietzsche's disease had ^{also} a second and more obvious effect upon his work. Undoubtedly it was a combination of suffering and madness which removed for him the mental barriers, the limitations, the inhibitions which in Nietzsche's eyes Western Civilization had placed upon men's thought. ^{It is important to notice that} Those ideas which have shocked and deeply wounded our contemporary world were latent in Nietzsche's mind throughout his whole life. Although insanity made possible their expression, insanity was not their cause.

A rough sketch of the growth of one of Nietzsche's most bewildering ideas, namely that of the superman, will illustrate the point. Nietzsche ^{even as a boy} expressed the notion of a double morality for the genius. ~~while he was yet a boy~~. When he was only 16, in 1862, he wrote a

brilliant school-essay

brilliant school-essay about Napoleon III at that time self-styled emperor of France. A genius is not bound by the fetters of convention wrote the young Nietzsche, and may if it be necessary to the fulfillment of his goal transcend the rules of morality. The idea was common at the time; it is common even today. Nevertheless the vigorousness with which the youthful mind reflects it is significant.

The as yet undeveloped conception of the superman recurs again and again in Nietzsche's writings. Its growth may be conveniently cited from an essay on Schopenhauer (1874) twelve years after the school essay on Napoleon III. Every man, Nietzsche says here, should live not for himself, not for the state, but for the greatest individual, for only in so-doing can a man give the maximum of meaning and of power to his life.

The doctrine of the superman had been developed in all its complexity when, ten years after the Schopenhauer essay Nietzsche wrote his Zarathustra. God is dead, proclaims Zarathustra. Therefore man shall be god, shall be beyond good and evil, his life shall be the struggle of the will to power, and as a great going over into a higher state.

From these considerations we must conclude that Nietzsche's monstrosities were not the product of insanity, but rather a heritage to him from the century in which he lived, the century of Schopenhauer and of Darwin. By freeing him from the inhibitions of his social conscience and ^{from} the restraints which Jesus and Socrates have placed on western thought, Nietzsche's suffering and his madness, revealed the inherent brutality ^{to which} of the soul. ^{is susceptible} And being honest with himself in Nietzsche denied ⁱⁿ Christianity ~~and~~ that which he called Apollonian

and he professed to hate Socrates.

We can, therefore, no longer discount the theories of Nietzsche as the worthless products of a deranged mind. Instead we find in Nietzsche particularly striking and valuable insights into the blackness of the human soul. Instead of rejecting Nietzsche as insane we might do well to examine his life and his thought and there to find in strikingly clear pictures, many of the ever-recurring conflicts of our contemporary civilization.

In Nietzsche and in the suffering that made him to grow beyond and far above himself, and revealed by the madness that emancipated him, we see once more the struggle of the human soul for that which is greater than itself. His madness drew away the curtains from his soul, and permitted us to look into its awful depths, - and shudder.