

Who is Nietzsche?

ALAIN BADIOU

What is the true centre of Nietzsche's thought? Or: what is it that Nietzsche calls "philosophy"?

I believe it is essential to understand that, for Nietzsche, what he calls "philosophy" is not an interpretation, is not an analysis, is not a theory. When philosophy is interpretation, analysis, or theory, it is nothing but a variant of religion. It is dominated by the nihilist figure of the priest. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche declares that the philosopher is "the greatest of all criminals." We should take this declaration seriously.

Nietzsche is not a philosopher, he is an anti-philosopher. This expression has a precise meaning: Nietzsche opposes, to the speculative nihilism of philosophy, the completely affirmative necessity of an act. The role that Nietzsche assigns himself is not that of adding a philosophy to other philosophies. Instead, his role is to announce and produce an act without precedent, an act that will in fact destroy philosophy.

To announce the act, but also to produce it: this means that Nietzsche the anti-philosopher is literally ahead of himself. This is exactly what he says in the song from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* entitled: "Of the Virtue that Makes Small". Zarathustra introduces himself as his own precursor:

*Among these people I am my own forerunner, my own cock-crow
through dark lanes.*

Thus what *comes* in philosophy is what the philosopher bears witness to. Or, more accurately: the philosophical *act* is what philosophy, which nevertheless coincides with it, can only announce.

Straight away, we are at the heart of our examination of Nietzsche. For his singularity is entirely contained in his conception of the philosophical

act. Or, to use his language, in his conception of the *power* of philosophy. That is to say, of anti-philosophy.

In what do this act and this power consist?

It is by failing to place this question at the threshold of any examination of Nietzsche that both Deleuze and Heidegger partially missed his absolute singularity, the one that ultimately both fulfils and abolishes itself under the name of *madness*.

Deleuze begins his book, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, with this declaration: “Nietzsche’s most general project is the introduction of the concepts of sense and value into philosophy.” Now, I believe that the philosophical act according to Nietzsche does not take the form either of a project or of a program — rather, as in Sarah Kofman’s title, it could be called an *explosion*. Neither is it a question for Nietzsche — of introducing concepts. For the name of the philosophical event can be nothing other than a figure, and ultimately a proper name. The proper of the event deposes the common of the concept. To do this, it supports itself on the opacity of the proper name. Nietzsche’s philosophical thought is given in a primordial network of seven names: Christ, or the Crucified, Dionysus-Ariadne, Saint Paul, Socrates, Wagner, Zarathustra, and finally the most obscure of all the names, the name “Nietzsche”, which recapitulates the others.

Of course, Deleuze is aware of these names, the meaning of which he interprets. One can, as he does with virtuosity, read in these nominal series the coding of types of force, analyse them according to the grid of the active and the reactive. But in this case, the network of proper names is brought back to the commonality of sense, and Nietzsche is absorbed into the stream of interpretation. What is lost in Deleuze’s strong reading is this: it is through the opacity of the proper name that *Nietzsche constructs his own category of truth*. This is indeed what assigns the vital act to its nonsensical, or invaluable, dimension. Nietzsche’s last word is not sense, but the invaluable.

The common name of the supreme act, the one that puts an end to Christian enslavement, is “the reversal of all values,” or the transvaluation of all values. But the reversal of all values does not itself have a value. It is subtracted from evaluation. Certainly, it is life itself against nothingness, only that, as Nietzsche will say in *The Twilight of the Idols*, and it is a decisive axiom:

The value of life cannot be estimated.

To enter into Nietzsche, one must therefore focus on the point where evaluation, values, and sense all come to falter in the trial posed by the act. Thus where it is no longer a question of values or of sense, but of what actively surpasses them, what philosophy has always named “truth”.

In my view this is what Heidegger fails to grasp when he thinks that Nietzsche’s program of thought is the institution of new values. We know that Nietzsche analyses the old values as a triumph of the will to nothingness. They exist in virtue of a principle that for Nietzsche is the supreme principle, which is that man prefers to will the nothing, rather than not to will at all. For Heidegger, Nietzsche, in reversing the old values, in proposing the noon of affirmation over against the will to nothingness, actually intends to overcome nihilism. Now, Heidegger will say that by so doing, by willing to overcome nihilism, Nietzsche’s thought separates itself from the very essence of nihilism, which is not in fact the will to nothingness. This is because for Heidegger, if nihilism is the will to nothingness, it is then intelligible in its essence on the basis of the figure of the subject. But in truth nihilism is not a figure of the subject; nihilism is the history of the remaining-absent of being itself, as historicity. Nihilism is a historical figure of being. It is this that comes to be concealed within a Nietzschean program of thought, which consists in the overcoming of nihilism. As Heidegger will say: “The will to overcome nihilism [which he attributes to Nietzsche] does not know itself, because it excludes itself from the evidence of the essence of nihilism, considered as the history of the remaining-absent and thus prohibits itself from ever knowing its own doing.”

Is Nietzsche really so ignorant of his own doing? We find ourselves brought back to the question of the act. We must begin by asking if this Nietzschean doing represents itself as an overcoming, in the metaphysical form of the subject. It seems to me that there is here, on Heidegger’s part, a critique which Hegelianises Nietzsche before judging him. Because I believe that for Nietzsche the act is not an overcoming. The act is an event. And this event is an absolute break, whose obscure proper name is Nietzsche.

It is to this link between an act without concept or program and a proper name, a proper name that is his own only by chance, that one must refer the famous title of one of the sections of *Ecce Homo*: “Why I am a Destiny.” I am a destiny because, by chance, the proper name “Nietzsche” comes to link its opacity to a break without program or concept.

I am strong enough to break up the history of mankind in two.
(Letter to Strindberg of the 8th of December 1888)

I conceive the philosopher as a terrifying explosive that puts the entire world in danger. (Ecce Homo)

Nietzsche's anti-philosophical act, of which he is at once the prophet, the actor, and the name, aims at nothing less than at breaking the history of the world in two.

I would say that this act is *archi-political*, in that it intends to revolutionise the whole of humanity at a more radical level than that of the calculations of politics. Archi-political does not here designate the traditional philosophical task of finding a foundation for politics. The logic, once again, is a logic of rivalry, and not a logic of foundational eminence. It is the philosophical act itself that is an archi-political act, in the sense that its historical explosion will retroactively show, in a certain sense, that the political revolution proper has not been genuine, or has not been authentic.

It follows from this that in Nietzschean archi-politics the word politics is sometimes reclaimed and validated, and sometimes depreciated, in a characteristic oscillation. In the draft of a letter to Brandes from December 1888, Nietzsche writes:

We have just entered into great politics, even into very great politics... I am preparing an event which, in all likelihood, will break history into two halves, to the point that one will need a new calendar, with 1888 as Year One.

Here Nietzsche proposes an imitation of the French revolution. He assumes, as a fundamental determination of philosophy, the word "politics". Moreover, this imitation will go so far as to include images of the Terror, which Nietzsche will adopt without the least hesitation. Many texts bear witness to this. Let us cite the note to Franz Overbeck from the 4th of January 1889, where Nietzsche declares:

I am just having all anti-Semites shot...

On the other hand, in the letter to Jean Bourdeau from the 17th of December 1888, the word politics is subjected to critique:

My works are rich with a decision with regard to which the brutal demonstrations of calculation in contemporary politics could prove to be nothing more than mere errors of calculus.

And, in a draft letter to William II, Nietzsche writes this:

The concept of politics has been completely dissolved in the war between spirits, all power-images have been blown to bits, — there will be wars, like there have never been before.

The Nietzschean anti-philosophical act, determined as archi-political event, thinks the historico-political, sometimes in the figure of its broadened imitation, sometimes in the figure of its complete dissolution. It is precisely this alternative that gives legitimacy to the act as *archi-political*.

If the act is archi-political then the philosopher is an over-philosopher. Letter to Von Seydlitz of February 1888:

It is not inconceivable that I am the first philosopher of the age, perhaps even a little more. Something decisive and doom-laden standing between two millennia.

Nietzsche is first of all the chance name of something, something like a fatal uprising, a fatal, archi-political uprising, which stands between two millennia. But what then are the *means* of such an act? What is its point of application? And finally, what is an anti-philosophical event that would be archi-political in character?

To address this problem, we must examine the Nietzschean critique of the Revolution, in its political sense. This critique consists in saying that, essentially, the Revolution did not take place. What we should understand by this is that it has not happened as revolution, in the sense that archi-politics conceives it. It has not taken place, because it has not truly broken the history of the world in two, thus leaving the Christian apparatus of the old values intact. Moreover, the equality to which the Revolution lay claim was nothing more than social equality, equality as the idea of being the equal of another. And this equality, in Nietzsche's eyes, is always commanded by *ressentiment*.

In *The Antichrist* we can read the following:

'Equality of souls before God', this falsehood, this pretext for the rancune of all the base-minded, this explosive concept which finally

became revolution, modern idea and the principle of the decline of the entire social order — is Christian dynamite.

It is not at all for Nietzsche a question of opposing some sort of wisdom to Christian dynamite. The fight against Christianity is a fight amongst artillerymen, or amongst terrorists. In October 1888, Nietzsche writes to Overbeck:

This time — as an old artilleryman — I bring out my heavy guns. I am afraid that I am blowing up the history of mankind into two halves.

Archi-politics is thus the discovery of a *non-Christian explosive* .

Now, it is at this juncture that Nietzsche will have to pay with his person, for it is clear that he will apply himself to the radical impasse of any archi-politics of this type. But he will apply himself the more deeply and the more sincerely because he has defined archi-politics not as a logic of foundation, but as the radicality of the act.

Here everything rests on Nietzsche's conception of the archi-political event, of the event in which anti-philosophy breaks the history of the world in two.

At this point it must be said that this event does not succeed in distinguishing itself from its own announcement, from its own declaration. What is declared philosophically is such that the possibility of its declaration alone proves that the history of the world is broken in two. Why is this? Because the truth at work in the archi-political act is exactly what is prohibited, and prohibition is the Christian law of the world. To pass beyond this prohibition, as the declaration attests, is enough to make one believe in an absolute rupture.

One day my philosophy will win, because until now no one has, in principle, prohibited anything but truth. (Ecce Homo)

But all of a sudden, since what Nietzsche declares is also the event itself, he is caught, ever more manifestly, in a circle. I pointed out, above, that Nietzsche says: "I prepare an event". But the declaration concerning the preparation of an event becomes progressively more indiscernible from the event itself, whence an oscillation characteristic of Nietzsche between imminence and distance. The declaration will shatter the world, but that it is going to shatter it is precisely what it declares:

Foreseeing that I will shortly have to address to humanity the gravest challenge that it has yet to receive, it seemed to me indispensable to say who I am. (Ecce Homo)

This book belongs to the very few. Perhaps none of them is even living yet. (The Antichrist)

On one side the radical imminence that constrains me, as the only living proof, to declare who I am. On the other, a stance that leaves in suspense the question of knowing whether a witness of this act has been born yet or not. I think that this circle is the circle of any archi-politics whatsoever. Since it does not have the event as its condition, since it grasps it — or claims to grasp it — in the act of thought itself, it cannot discriminate between its reality and its announcement. The very figure of Zarathustra names this circle and gives the book its tone of strange undecidability with regard to the question of knowing whether Zarathustra is a figure of the efficacy of the act or of its prophecy pure and simple. The central episode in this respect is the song entitled “On Great Events.” This song is a dialogue between Zarathustra and the fire-dog. But who is the fire-dog? Rapidly, it becomes clear that the fire-dog is nothing but the spokesperson, the agent, or the actor of the revolutionary political event itself, of revolt, of the collective storm. Let us read a passage of the dialogue with the fire-dog.

Zarathustra speaks:

“Freedom,” you all most like to bellow: but I have unlearned belief in “great events” whenever there is much bellowing and smoke about them. And believe me, friend Infernal-racket! The greatest events — they are not our noisiest but our stillest hours. The world revolves, not around the inventors of new noises, but around the inventors of new values; it revolves inaudibly. And just confess! Little was ever found to have happened when your noise and smoke dispersed. What did it matter that a town had been mummified and that a statue lay in the mud!

The opposition here is between din and silence. The din is what attests externally for the political event. The silence, the world pregnant with silence, is instead the name of the unattested and unproved character of the archi-political event. The archi-political declaration misses its real because

the real of a declaration, of *any* declaration, is precisely the event itself. Thus it is at the very point of this real, which he lacks and whose presence and announcement he cannot separate, that Nietzsche will have to make himself present. And it is this that will be called his madness. Nietzsche's madness consists in this, that he must come to think of himself as the creator of the same world in which he makes his silent declaration, and in which nothing proves the existence of a break in two. That in some way he is on both sides; that he is the name, not only of what announces the event, not only the name of the rupture, but ultimately the name of the world itself.

The fourth of January 1889, Nietzsche situates himself as "Nietzsche", as a name:

After [and this after is necessary] it has been averred as irrevocable that I have properly speaking created the world.

A sincere archi-politics madly unfolds the *phantasm of the world*, because it is the process of the undecidability between prophecy and the real. It mimics, in folly, the intrinsic undecidability of the event itself; it is this undecidability turning upon itself in the figure of a subject. Whence this harrowing declaration from the last letter, the letter to Jakob Burckhardt of January 6, 1889, after which there is nothing more:

Actually, I would much rather be a Basel professor than God; but I have not ventured to carry my private egotism so far as to omit creating the world on his account.

Yes indeed, this statement is a statement of madness, but of madness coming at the real point of a lack, when the announcement fails. This ordeal takes place in three stages: the ambition of radical rupture, of archi-politics, is indeed that of creating a world, of creating the *other* world, the world of affirmation, the world which in fact is no longer the world, or the man that is no longer man, and whose name is "overman." But to create this world, the everyman must also be seized by its creation. Only this everyman can *certify* the appearance of the overman. And what would have been preferred, or preferable, is that the professor, in Basel, be seized as such and traversed by this unattested event. But since this is not the case, since this legitimate preference is not verified, the anti-philosophical hero is forced to declare that he *will* create this world. That he will create it, and not that he has been seized by its triumphal appearance. This world is thus

a program, but one that antecedes itself. And so one is a captive of the circle. And in the end to break this circle one needs the disinterested fiction of an integral creation, not only of a new world, but of the old world as well.

At this point, nothing but madness.

Upon what does archi-politics itself come to break? Upon the unavoidable necessity of politics. Of politics, which demands patience. Which knows that it is pointless to announce the event. That one must think and act with chance, and in circumstances that one does not choose. Of a politics which has had to renounce the idea of breaking the history of the world in two. A politics that is content — which is already a lot, and very difficult — with being faithful to a few new possibilities.

Equally, anti-philosophy comes to break upon the permanence, upon the resistance, of philosophy. Philosophy, which knows that its act, as act of truth, does not have the power of abolishing the values of the world. And that the labour of the negative may not be dissolved in the great Dionysian affirmation.

Is this to say that Nietzsche's force, his sincerity, his sacrifice, are of no use? That the idea of an archi-politics is a vain folly? I do not think so.

For there is in Nietzsche an extremely precious indication. An indication concerning a decisive question for any philosophy whatsoever. The question of the relationship between sense and truth. On this question of sense and truth there are, I think, three primordial stances. First, there is the stance that holds the idea of a rigorous continuity between truth and sense. I call this stance religion. There is a stance that unilaterally establishes the supremacy of sense and attempts to destroy the religious stance. This is Nietzsche's struggle. And finally there is the philosophical stance. It is in rupture with anti-philosophy because it both retains and develops, by means of a rational critique, the idea of truth. But it is also in rupture with religion, because it refuses to identify truth with sense; it even willingly declares that in any truth there is always something of the nonsensical.

But what happens historically is that the second stance, the anti-philosophical stance, is almost always what points the third stance, the philosophical stance, towards its own modernity. Anti-philosophy puts philosophy on guard. It shows it the ruses of sense and the dogmatic danger of truth. It teaches it that the rupture with religion is never definitive. That one must take up the task again. That truth must, once again and always, be secularised.

Nietzsche was right to think that his primordial task could be named the Antichrist. He was right to call himself the Antichrist. And in his role as radical anti-philosopher he pointed philosophy to the very place of its modern task. From Nietzsche, we need to retain what he designated as the task of philosophy: to re-establish the question of truth in its rupture with sense. Nietzsche puts us on guard against hermeneutics.

Therefore, I believe that Nietzsche is someone that one must at once discover, find, and lose. One must discover him in his truth, discover him in the desire of the act. One must find him, as he who provokes the theme of truth towards a new demand, as he who forces the philosophical stance to invent a new figure of truth, a new rupture with sense. And finally, of course, one must lose him, because anti-philosophy must, when all is said and done, be lost, or lost sight of, once philosophy has established its own space.

This discovery, this find, this loss: I often feel them with regard to all of the century's great anti-philosophers; with Nietzsche, with Wittgenstein, and with Lacan. I think that all three — but Nietzsche's case is without doubt the most dramatic — in the last instance sacrificed themselves for philosophy. There is in anti-philosophy a movement of putting itself to death, or of silencing itself, so that something imperative may be bequeathed to philosophy. Anti-philosophy is always what, at its very extremes, states the new duty of philosophy, or its new possibility in the figure of a new duty. I think of Nietzsche's madness, of Wittgenstein's strange labyrinth, of Lacan's final muteness. In all three cases anti-philosophy takes the form of a legacy. It bequeathes something beyond itself to very thing that it is fighting against. Philosophy is always the heir to anti-philosophy.

This is why I am so touched, in one of the last notes to Brandes, by this very Pascalian phrase of Nietzsche, which immediately speaks to me of this singular and intricate relationship to the great anti-philosophers of the century.

Once you discovered me, it was no great feat to find me: the difficulty is now to lose me ...

And it is true that the great difficulty for us all, that which demands of us a creation, is not to discover and to understand Nietzsche. The difficulty is to know, philosophically, how to lose him.

Translated by Alberto Toscano