



The Case of Nietzsche's Madness

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Abstract: It is essential to know how many of Nietzsche's books, if any, were written under the spell of madness. This matter becomes even more significant when one realizes that in the year leading to his street collapse in Torino Nietzsche wrote six of his most fascinating works. This essay's route of reaching its goal has a direction opposite to Nietzsche's own advice. Instead of learning a text by knowing the biography and personality of the author, this essay tries to evaluate the author's mental state by detecting signs of madness in his writing, especially some letters hitherto untranslated. The reason for this method of approach is the lack of psychiatric records in his medical files—a major difficulty, as researched and stated by Jaspers. While Nietzsche's fuse burned out on 3 January 1889, it is unclear when the fuse was lit. We understand that Nietzsche was always eccentric, always a little odd and crazy. We also understand that, as Nietzsche himself insisted, a spice of madness is necessary for creativity. He was undoubtedly very creative. But how mad was he, and when did he really go mad?

On Thursday, January 3, 1889, the Torino police respond to a disturbance on the Piazza Carlo Alberto. When they arrive, they see a stocky, middle-aged dark-haired man lying unconscious on the pavement. The bystanders report that before his collapse, he was loudly declaring that he was "the Tyrant of Torino," was "God come among men," and similar pronouncements. The police soon discover that the Tyrant/God is a resident German philosopher with the name of Friedrich Nietzsche. His landlord Davide Fino, whose newspaper kiosk is located nearby, quickly receives the news and rushes to the scene. Nietzsche, who has now recovered some consciousness, recognizes the landlord and agrees to be carried home.

As this event is unfolding, Nietzsche's former colleague and long-time friend Franz Overbeck is about to embark on the train to Torino to take Nietzsche back to Basel. What has prompted this timely decision are the strange letters that Overbeck, his fellow Basel historian Jacob Burckhardt, and the Basel jurist Andreas

Heusler have been receiving from Nietzsche since late December. When Overbeck arrives at Nietzsche's residence in the evening of January 8, he finds him in his room crouched in a corner of the sofa. Nietzsche, whose sedating medication has nearly worn out, recognizes him, convulsively surges towards him, hugs him tightly, and falls back onto the sofa. Then suddenly, the church historian hears him proclaiming with an astonishingly clear and confident voice that he is "the successor to the dead God!" Meanwhile, Davide's wife Candida tells Overbeck that Nietzsche's loud singing and piano playing in his room for several nights before his collapse had made her so curious that on one occasion she peeped through the keyhole and saw him dancing savagely in the nude.¹

¹ Interestingly, everything about this street collapse, like almost everything else about Nietzsche, is imbued with uncertainties, controversies, and contradictions. Most of the contradictions,

Who's dancing there nude and so savagely? Of course! It's that intoxicated Dionysus! But wait a minute! Wasn't Zarathustra a dancer, too? Yes, indeed—though he never had danced nude before. Does Dionysus get jealous of Zarathustra's flirtations with Ariadne? Oh, sorry, we forgot that Dionysus at times *becomes* Zarathustra!

What happened to Nietzsche? What went wrong? When did this all begin? The aim of this inquiry is *not what* caused Nietzsche's madness; it is *when* his madness began. This is a significant question for philosophy, for if his street collapse was the culmination of a serious mental illness that had been underway for even a few weeks before this event, at

like the street on which he fell, or the identity of the person(s) who carried him home, are not crucial for this inquiry. However, in determining the intensity and conditions of his illness, it would have been helpful to know whether he was carried or he walked home, even though an assurance of the former would still leave a slight possibility that it could have been a precautionary measure for his safety and not because of a physical disability due to paralysis. The biggest controversy about his street fall is the famous tale of the cruelly flogged horse, around whose neck the hopelessly sympathetic and tearful Nietzsche had thrown himself in order to protect it, or to protect himself from a sudden fall. This tale seems to be intended to show that Nietzsche had a genuinely kind and gentle nature—the tale that has been exploited optimally by Walter Kaufmann in his relentless attempt to dissociate Nietzsche's temperament from the cruelties of his National Socialist admirers. Lesley Chamberlain takes the tale a step further: "Nietzsche rebelled against human cruelty and crudeness by hugging this horse who was his partner in metaphysical abjectness.... In the case of the horse he had already dreamed the gesture the previous May and written it in a letter[?]... Now in reality some ultimate autobiographical urge made him embrace a real horse, and the shock of willing his own life to the last conscious moment, that momentary exciting flush of power, precipitated his collapse." (*Nietzsche in Turin: An Intimate Biography* [New York: Picador, 1996], p. 209). More absurd is the interpretation of this tale by a recent writer, Milan Kundera, who claims that Nietzsche's hugging of the abused horse in the very last seconds of his conscious life was a forgiving gesture to Descartes' exclusionary notion of animal soul. According to Chamberlain, Kundera "wondered in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* if Nietzsche did not beg this wonderful equine specimen to forgive Descartes for believing animals do not have souls. Kundera found Nietzsche's to be a symbolic gesture against the dominance, the arrogance of the human mind over nature, against blind worship of progress. The idea is convincing, even if in that case Nietzsche's gesture seems overblown." *Ibid.*, p. 210. "Convincing"? For a more reliable account of Nietzsche's last days of conscious life, see Anacleto Verrecchia, *Zarathustras Ende: Die Katastrophe Nietzsches in Turin* (Wien/Cologne/Graz: Böhlau, 1986).

least one or two of his six 1888 books must have been written under the spell of madness. If this were indeed the case, the difficult question is precisely how many of these books have been infected by his illness.

Our ultimate task, then, is to determine at what point in time Nietzsche entered the realm of madness. This task has several obstacles to overcome. To start with, if madness is generally defined as "the condition of suffering from a mental disorder," it is impossible to determine who is truly mad insofar as there are numerous people who are suffering from some mental disorder but for different reasons they are not considered mad. On the other hand, if madness means "the condition of lacking restraint or reason," this definition seems to apply to Nietzsche because for a considerable time he showed no restraint in his writing and rejected reason (*Vernunft*) philosophically. In this case, the difficulty is this: since this definition does apply to his thinking before and after his street collapse, while his distaste for and rejection of reason is understandable from his philosophical perspective, the question of how early the outbreak of this lack of restraint and reason was first manifested becomes impertinent. Further, if madness is simply "a persistent mental derangement," where derangement is a state in which "mental order or arrangement is disturbed," Nietzsche's condition would and would not fit this definition. For before and shortly after his collapse, he repeatedly went in and out of derangement (of a sort); and what in the end became persistent was not any display of derangement but was rather a complete silence with apathetic stare. Furthermore, a search for the start of madness has the peril of presupposing a defined sphere in which, upon entrance, one is stripped of one's personality in exchange for the generality that is madness. Yet, experience has shown this to be untrue. In fact, when one is presumably crossing the line into this state, the baggage of personality is always carried over with oneself. In virtue of this fact, it is always difficult to decide at what point in time madness has become an added predicate to the subject's other qualities. What in this connection makes the Nietzsche case doubly difficult is that even if there were a line, it would have been meandering and serrated; and because of his unmistakable eccentricity from the time of his youth, this would have been like a thick twilight zone that became increasingly darker as he traveled on until the arrival of the pitch black silence, the silence that, when it came in 1889 and settled for the next eleven years, left him with no trace of personality

and thus no sign of derangement, nothing suggestive of disorder, and not any disturbance to speak of.

In view of the definitional and technical difficulties of framing and consequently of applying the term "madness" to the Nietzsche who did, by any standard, spend the last decade of his life in madness, it should be clear from the outset that the aim of this inquiry is a tall order.

Astonishingly, though, in his venerable book *Nietzsche*, Karl Jaspers on this subject immediately and unequivocally responds by denying any sign of madness in Nietzsche before December 27, 1888 (N 92-3).² This date is only seven days before Nietzsche's collapse, the date that leaves all of his books safely outside of the madness. Jaspers unhesitatingly adds: "To search his writings for any madness before this date has been shown to be futile." What happened on December 27? According to Jaspers, on this day Nietzsche wrote a letter to Carl Fuchs that was sane and clear; but he wrote another letter, this time to Overbeck, that was completely delusional. It is quoted in part by Jaspers: "I myself am working on a promemoria for the European palaces with an intent of an anti-German league. I ordain to constrict the *Reich* in an iron shirt and to provoke war of desperation" (N 92). Jaspers insists that "*no indication of such madness*" is to be found "*prior to Dec. 27, '88*" (*Ibid.*).³ The accuracy of this

claim depends, of course, on whether Nietzsche had never written anything like this before and, more specifically, whether it was penned subsequent to the letter to Fuchs. If the answer to the first question is negative and to the second positive, then the conclusion must be drawn in favor of Jaspers that, indeed, Nietzsche's delusional state began minutes or, at most, hours after he finished off his letter to Fuchs. Furthermore, this unprecedented mental state must have persisted and, in fact, rapidly deteriorated for the next seven days, the last day being the tipping point when his nervous system completely broke down in the street.

These preliminary remarks on Nietzsche's breakdown should be put in perspective with his overall condition five days later on January 8, as reported by Overbeck and quoted in part by Jaspers, that "I found him 'crouching in a sofa corner'; 'he rushes toward me, embraces me fiercely, then sinks into convulsions back onto the sofa'" (N 92). Overbeck's dramatic depiction of this incident, and Nietzsche's December 27 letter to him, therefore give Jaspers a short timeline that leads him to diagnose Nietzsche's madness as an instance of psychosis—suggesting that psychosis alone could be diagnosed for such a quick degeneration. In spite of Jaspers' reputation as an eminent Nietzsche specialist, as a practicing psychiatrist, and as a Heidelberg existential philosopher, one may dare to ask, what if we could find some other piece of Nietzsche's writing prior to December 27 that was as strange as the one above and, if so, would it still be possible to diagnose him as psychotic? While Jaspers' diagnosis leads him to an etiological investigation, which is unrelated to this paper's concern, an examination of Nietzsche's December 27 letters is of immediate importance. Here the question is whether Nietzsche did in fact write the two aforementioned letters in the same day and in the same order: first to Fuchs, and then to Overbeck.

By a brief search, I have found that Nietzsche did write that "clear" letter to Fuchs on December 27 (*KSB* III/5, 553-5).⁴ In fact, on this day Nietzsche wrote not two but three letters: one to his publisher Constantin Georg Naumann, another to Carl Fuchs, and a third to

² *Nietzsche: Einführung in das Verständnis seines Philosophierens* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1935); translated by C. F. Wallraff and F. J. Schmitz as *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965). In this essay all the references are from the 1947 Berlin edition, and cited parenthetically as *N*, followed by page number(s). (All the translations of this German edition are mine unless indicated otherwise.) Jaspers also wrote *Nietzsche und das Christentum* (Hameln: Bücherstube Seifert, 1946 and München: R. Piper & Co., 1952); translated by E. B. Ashton as *Nietzsche and Christianity* (Chicago: Henry Regenry Co., 1961). Also, "Kierkegaard und Nietzsche" is a substantive chapter in his *Vernunft und Existenz: Fünf Vorlesungen* (Groningen: J. B. Walters, 1935; 4th ed., München: R. Piper & Co., 1960), translated by W. Earle as *Reason and Existenz* (New York: Noonday Press, 1955; 2nd ed., 1959), and P. Vandavelde as *Reason and Existenz* (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 1997). Jaspers' other works on Nietzsche include "Nietzsche" in vol. 2 of *Die Großen Philosophen* (3 vol.), (München/Zürich: R. Piper & Co., 1981); translated by E. Ehrlich and L. H. Ehrlich as *The Great Philosophers* (4 vol.), "Nietzsche" in vol. 4 (New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt Brace Co., 1995), pp. 291-310.

³ Stresses and abbreviations are by Jaspers.

⁴ *Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe* (8 vol.), edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter Verlag 1986, 2nd edition 2003), cited parenthetically as *KSB* followed by division numbers (Roman/Arabic), followed by page number.

Heinrich Köselitz—but none to Overbeck! That delusional letter to Overbeck is in fact dated one day earlier, on December 26. This single-day difference gears Jaspers' chronological sequence in reverse and thereby wrecks his psychobiographical train.⁵ Further, Nietzsche's letter to Overbeck preceding the one to Fuchs reveals the possibility of a series of intervals between sanity and insanity that may have existed for some time, possibly even before 1888. This possibility not only significantly widens the range of our investigation, but it also introduces an entirely new perspective on his condition.

In fact, by looking at some of Nietzsche's letters preceding December of this year, we can find some that would be rated by Jaspers' standard as "delusional" (as distinct from others deemed "normal"). For example, in the November 25 letter to Köselitz he wrote: "I believe that when a person has achieved such a state he is prepared to be a 'savior of the world'" (KSB III/5, 489). And more than a month earlier, on October 18, he wrote to Burckhardt: "Regrettably, I am cutting the history of mankind into two halves" (KSB III/5, 453). One can therefore suspect that for at least a few months before December, Nietzsche's letters must have been worrisome to Burckhardt and to Overbeck to the extent that, possibly after some hesitation, they finally consulted with the Basel Psychiatric Clinic's chief Dr. Wille, who in turn urged them to take immediate steps to rescue their friend; and Overbeck, as a result, took that timely trip to Torino and brought Nietzsche back to Basel in January. Since this version of events extends the timeline back to October, one cannot help suspecting that these Basel friends must have been unaware of Nietzsche's equally disturbing letters to friends and acquaintances residing elsewhere. For example, on October 30 to Köselitz (then in Berlin) Nietzsche wrote: "Concerning the *consequences*, I now occasionally look at my *hand* with some distrust because it seems to me that I hold the destiny of mankind 'in my hand'" (KSB III/5, 461-2).⁶ Nonetheless,

the evidential timeline still extends significantly backwards, for ten months earlier he wrote on February 12 to Reinhart Seydlitz (in Cairo): "It is not impossible that I am the foremost philosopher of this age, indeed perhaps even more, something decisive and fateful that stands between two millennia" (KSB III/5, 248). Evidently, then, this letter alone stretches the timeline of his delusional state still further back to the beginning of 1888. Between these delusional correspondences, Nietzsche, as mentioned above, wrote some letters that were normal by any standard. Therefore, to the question of how far one can backtrack to see the fluctuations between normalcy and delusional, or sanity and insanity, the answer remains elusive.

This difficulty arises partly because radical fluctuations of nearly all kinds, including those between depression and euphoria, melancholy and elation, excitability and apathy, or rage and calmness, were no strangers to Nietzsche for most of his life. Nonetheless, because of the lack of complete psychiatric records, these swinging moods cannot even be diagnosed as signs of bipolar disorder, much less of approaching madness. Furthermore, there is nothing un-Nietzschean in the pronouncements above, given his known conceit, habit of boasting, sense of an historic mission and, perhaps understandably, a self-evaluation for nearly his entire adult life, as having only Plato as his true rival. What are noticeable in the last year of his conscious life are an increase in intensity and a decrease in inhibition. A clear example of this change of degree is his unique philosophical autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (November 1888), whose chapter titles are of interest here: "Why I Am So Wise," "Why I Am So Clever," "Why I Write Such Good Books," "Why I Am a Destiny." Another interesting example is in *Twilight of the Gods* (September 1888) where, in less than a single page, he boldly outlines the history of philosophy under the title "How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable" – with the subtitle: "The History of an Error." For

matters not how they may twist and turn and hold their hands in front of their revealing eyes (... as if hands were not revealing!)" (quotation from *Beyond Good and Evil*, 288). Lou Andreas-Salomé, *Friedrich Nietzsche in seinen Werken* (1894), edited and translated by Siegfried Mandel as *Nietzsche* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 9. In the above letter to Köselitz, Nietzsche is evidently referring to his right (writing) hand. For my critical review of Salomé's *Nietzsche* see [The Journal Of Nietzsche Studies](#), 33 (2007), pp. 88-91.

⁵ This is in spite of the fact that Jaspers' psychological discussion of Nietzsche's madness has remained to this date the premier source for nearly every researcher on this topic.

⁶ Nietzsche's reference to his hand was, of course, not a new phenomenon. Even during the days of his companionship with Lou Salomé and Paul Rée in 1882, he used to speak about his hands. Salomé writes: "He believed that his hands revealed his inner spirit and aptly commented on this: 'There are people who unavoidably possess an intellect; it

showing the uniqueness of his self-image and historic station, this piece is worthy of full quotation here:

1. The true world attainable for the wise, the pious, the virtuous, – he lives in it, *he is it*.
(The oldest form of the Idea, relatively clever, simple, persuasive. A paraphrase of the sentence, "I, Plato, am the Truth.")
2. The true world, unattainable for now, but promised for the wise, the pious, the virtuous ("for the sinner who repents").
(Progress of the Idea: it becomes subtler, insidious, incomprehensible, *it becomes a female*, it becomes Christian...)
3. The true world, unattainable, undemonstrable, unpromisable, but the very thought of it a consolation, an obligation, an imperative.
(At bottom, the old Sun, but seen through mist and uncertainty all along; the Idea has become elusive, pale, Nordic, Königsbergian.)
4. The true world – unattainable? At any rate, unattained. And being unattained, also *unknown* [*unbekannt*]. Consequently, not consoling, redeeming, [or] obligating: how could something unknown obligate us?
(Gray morning. The first yawn of Reason. The cockcrow of Positivism.)
5. The "true world" – an Idea no longer good for anything, not even obligating – a superfluous Idea, *consequently* a refuted Idea: let us abolish it!
(Bright day; breakfast; return to *bon sens* and cheerfulness; Plato's embarrassed blush; infernal noise of all free spirits.)
6. The true world we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps?... But no! *With the true world, we have also abolished the apparent one!*
(Noon: moment of the shortest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA.) (KSA 6 2.4)⁷

Here, then, by narrating the gradual history of the Apollonian (*Apollische* or Apollinian) paradigm down to its complete refutation and heralding his very own Dionysian succession, it is fair to say that Nietzsche is "cutting the history of mankind into two halves."

⁷ *Kritische Studienausgabe* (15 vol.), Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, ed. (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), cited as KSA followed by volume number, followed by section number. The punctuations, parentheses, italics, and formatting of the above quotation are all Nietzsche's.

Likewise, by recognizing and overcoming the nihilistic consequences of the two-millennia old metaphysical monism, he is "the foremost philosopher" and *has* been "a savior of the world" from its consequent emptiness, hopelessness, and nothingness. Therefore, by bringing in a brand new paradigmatic set of values, he is "the successor of the dead God!" From this standpoint, Nietzsche's most provocative and apocalyptic utterances as reflected in his last books, in his letters of the same period, and even in his pronouncements on that Torino piazza, would not yield easily to the delusional. What is delusional may in fact be one's lack of appreciation and misunderstanding of Nietzsche's uniqueness in history, which Jaspers himself is among the first to recognize and admire. Remarkable in his 1888 books and concurrent letters is the bluntness of an economical lucidity that has surged above all conventions. The rest, it seems, is the same Nietzsche to whom we have been accustomed since his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (January 1872).

However forceful the language of this extenuation, it nonetheless ignores the deteriorating mental condition that actually led to Nietzsche's street collapse just seconds after such pronouncements. This could hardly be coincidental. In particular, what do we mean when we say that by 1888 he lacked inhibition? This compels the question of *when* this lack began. His friends knew him best; his latest letters made them worried to the degree of attempting to rescue him and, as it turned out, their worries were warranted. Jaspers' general concern is legitimate, because (in spite of the inaccuracy of his December 27 starting-time) there is no question that something went terribly wrong with Nietzsche in that period. To explore the nature of this problem, Jaspers turns to a scrutiny of Nietzsche's literary and philosophical development. After dividing it into "three distinct periods"⁸ – in parallel to his letters,

⁸ Jaspers is not first in suggesting such triadic division. It was Lou Andreas-Salomé who first divided Nietzsche's work into three "overlapping periods, each encompassing a decade." First, the Wagner discipleship and influence of Schopenhauer's metaphysics (1868-1878); second, the positivistic writings (1878/9-1882); third, the late period (1883-1888) (*Nietzsche*, p. 8). However, the first scholarly division of Nietzsche's work was proposed by his own nephew Richard Oehler (1878-1948) who, in addition to being a chief representative of the Nietzsche Archive, compiled and edited three editions of Nietzsche *Werke*: the Grossoktav edition, the Musarion edition, and the Kröner edition. In his "Vorwort zur Musarion Ausgabe" to *Friedrich Nietzsche Gesammelte Werke*, 23 vol. (München: Musarion

medical records, and particularly psychiatric problems—he says that "toward the end of 1887," and especially "after September 1888," a "new phenomenon" begins to dominate his mood and attitude. Specifically, "the harbinger of the pending mental illness [*Geisteskrankheit*] runs parallel to the new writing" (N 105). This change, he says, is not in "substance" but rather in the form of "pronouncement" (*Mitteilung*) (*Ibid.*). Jaspers' tracing of Nietzsche's changing mental condition leads to what he sees as the last and

indeed radical disturbance [which] is occasioned at the end of 1888 through the *premature breaking off* of his spiritual progress by the paralyzing illness ... The place of this work is taken by the polemical writings of the last period—writings which are unparalleled in their raging tension, clairvoyance regarding specific matters, injustice, and overpowering diction ... It is as though the most incisive, or rather the most decisive, spiritual event of the last century has been ruined from ambush by the indifferent causality of nature and thus prevented from attaining its inherent clear grandeur. (N 107)⁹

There is no question that the mental illness that took its toll on Nietzsche at forty-four cut short an exceptional literary career. It is also indisputable that his last writings in prose are incomparable in the history of German letters. Jaspers is right in noticing a change in Nietzsche's late 1888 polemic work. Yet, I happen to value greatly Nietzsche's 1888 writings over and above his previous work precisely because of their tensions and extremities, their brazen quality and crystal clarity. As Jaspers himself admits, in this year "Nietzsche intentionally goes to extremes" (N 103). But why? To go to one extreme and then to the opposite is his way of leaving the synthetic union most forcefully to the disturbed readers to contemplate for themselves.

Verlag, 1922), Oehler distinguished three categories: "Early" (1872-1879), "Positivistic" (1880-1882), and "Mature" (1883-1888), pp. x-xvi. Indispensable for any scholarly study of Nietzsche for many decades was Oehler's *Nietzsche-Register* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1943). Jaspers' citations are all from the Musarion edition. I, personally, would favor separating the aggressive and radical "Books of 1888" from the "Mature" period and classifying them as the fourth and final category. They are: *Der Fall Wagner* (*The Case of Wagner*), *Götzen-Dämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*), *Der Antichrist* (*The Antichrist*), *Ecce Homo*, *Dionysus-Dithyramben* (*Dithyrambs of Dionysus*), *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. Nietzsche's notebook of 1888 should also be included in this category.

⁹ Wallraff and Schmitz tr., p. 106.

Moreover, what struck from the ambush could not ruin the many skirmishes of the warrior who always refused to systemize the chaos that is within this very world. This intellectual honesty, whose magical expression reached its zenith in the end, is undoubtedly unrestrained and unusual, but still resistant to be branded as a signature of approaching madness.

This disagreement with Jaspers' general assessment is, of course, reflective of my personal view without dismissing the fact that an inner disposition of presumably a chemical-biological kind must have been at play and significantly intensified near the end of 1887, which led to this extraordinary style and prolific writing of 1888, followed by his collapse on January 3, 1889. Was this late-1887 noticeable change the precursor of what eventually burned out his fuse? For finding an answer, Jaspers delves deeper into Nietzsche's letters of this period. For instance, he finds an unprecedented intolerance and a frustration for belated fame, both often oddly mixed with a heightened sense of euphoria (N 98-101). In one of these so-called "blunt letters" (*schroffen Briefe*) dated October 9, 1888, Nietzsche writes to Hans von Bülow: "You did not reply to my letter. I will never again break your peace, that I promise you. I think you have a conception [*Begriff*] that the foremost spirit of the age expressed a wish to you" (N 99; KSB III/5, 449). Another "blunt letter" is dated October 20 to the old mutual friend of the Wagners' Tribschen times, Malwida von Meysenbug (KSB III/5, 457-9).¹⁰ However, Jaspers' recognition of this intolerance in these two cases is one thing; one's relying on it as a sign of the arriving insanity would obviously be a bit of a stretch.¹¹

¹⁰ According to Rüdiger Safranski: "When [she] reacted to *The Case of Wagner* by remarking that one ought not to treat one's 'old flame' so badly, even if the spark is gone, he answered her: 'I have gradually broken off almost all contact with other people, out of *disgust* that they take me to be something other than what I am. Now it is your turn.'" *Nietzsche: Biographie Seines Denkens* (München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2000); Shelly Frisch tr., *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002), p. 315. It is to be noted that Jaspers' date citation of this letter, as October 18 (N 99) is inaccurate since the correct date is the 20th in the reliable KSB. Moreover, this letter is not Nietzsche's last communiqué with Malwida, as he wrote her on November 5 1888, as well as on the day after his street fall and signed as "The Crucified."

¹¹ Jaspers also mentions Nietzsche's "farewell" letter to his sister in December of this year (N 99), but I have found no

To explore a clear path toward a psychobiographical trend of this last—so-called outbreak—period, Jaspers turns to those early 1880s letters that reflect Nietzsche's account of his own feelings. An example cited is a letter, dated as early as August 14, 1881, to Köselitz: "At times, the forewarning runs through my head that I am actually living a very dangerous life since I am one of those machines that may *explode!*" (N 97; KSB III/1, 112). Particularly in the early to mid-eighties, "explode" and "explosion" in relation to his brain are among his favorite words.¹² We must appreciate Jaspers' professional concern that it "is always a question of how the patient himself sees his illness from the medical point of view ... unless he is prevented from doing so by the disease itself" (N 110).¹³ In Nietzsche's case, though, strict reservations about the accuracy of his words are necessary for the same reason that his mental health itself is at issue. In particular, whenever his letters are addressed to persons like his sister Elisabeth, Köselitz, and Overbeck, who all had sympathetic ears for his appetite for reassurance of his historic mission or for being an awe-inspiring prodigy, it is hard to know what was truly going on in his head. In each of such letters, we cannot determine whether he is exaggerating for attention or whether he is experiencing (besides the migraines) an incredible pressure in his skull, or whether both, an existent pressure exaggerated in speech in different degrees and at different times.

Meanwhile, Nietzsche was suffering from numerous physical ailments whose interactive complications further impede the prognosis of his psychiatric problem. That Nietzsche had permanent eye-problems was well known among his friends. Sever nearsightedness and sensitivity to light from his youth had been permanent and emotionally agonizing

such letter in *KSB*. In fact, because beside the two above breakup letters I have found no other instances in my source that could be included in this category, I must conclude that Jaspers' notion of Nietzsche's increasing intolerance and breakups is an overblown generalization. In fact, in his October 20 letter to Malwida (endnote 10), Nietzsche says he has "gradually broken off almost all contact with other people," which is far from "suddenly" or "abruptly." In addition, by not mentioning "letters," he could mean breaking off by other means.

¹² In this connection, see Jaspers' quotation of Nietzsche's letters to Overbeck on July 11 and December 26, 1883, and February 8, 1884 (N 97).

¹³ Wallraff and Schmitz tr., p. 109.

companions for the rest of his life. Whether or while these optical problems could or would have been contributing factors to his complaints of splitting headaches, he eventually reached the point of near-blindness and had to have somebody take his dictations and to read to him. He was also suffering from constipation, the chronic condition whose interruptions would have been fomented by such opposite symptoms as dysentery, diarrhea, or vomiting. In addition to the optical and digestive ailments, Jaspers' research into Nietzsche's medical records reveals that he had been reporting feelings of general paralysis, conditions resembling seasickness, and complete blackouts, which made him bedridden for weeks (N 93). Nietzsche has also been reported, especially at length by Lou Salomé, as having a weird psyche and persona.¹⁴ Reports by eyewitnesses about his physical presence are equally disturbing: "His head set deep between the shoulders on a stocky but fragile body" (N 38). "Stocky but fragile"? Considering Nietzsche as an abnormality, Burckhardt used to say: "That Nietzsche fellow? He couldn't even have a healthy bowel [movement]."¹⁵

Furthermore, the prognosis of Nietzsche's madness through his writing is complicated by his abusing drugs, such as hashish, opium, potassium bromide, chloral hydrate, and a mysterious "Javanese" preparation (probably of an opiate variation), among others.¹⁶ While hashish can have a delusional and occasionally paranoiac effect, potassium bromide and chloral hydrate are not only powerful sedatives but, like sulfonmethane, have a serious medicinal use for

¹⁴ Nietzsche, pp. 6, 9-14, 28, 29-30, 79-80, 87, 130, 147-8, 156.

¹⁵ Cf. Chamberlain, *Nietzsche in Turin*, p. 211.

¹⁶ Daniel Breazeale says, "Acting as his own physician, Nietzsche prescribed—in addition to ever changing of regimen of diet, exercise, climate, etc.—massive and regular doses of drugs, including chloral hydrate, bromide, opium, hashish, and a mysterious 'Javanese preparation'" ("Ecce Psycho: Remarks on the Case of Nietzsche," *International Studies in Philosophy*, XXIII/2, p. 19). With regard to the Javanese drug, David B. Allison says that it was given to Nietzsche "by an unknown gentleman of Dutch extraction, which was called 'Yauma'" (ibid., "Recipes for Ruin," p. 47). It makes sense that Java and the rest of Indonesia having been at the time a colony of Holland, the Dutchmen would have been a dealer of this drug through the Dutch smugglers of it to Europe.

hypnotic effects.¹⁷ In addition, opium, as one of the most powerful narcotics, has strong withdrawal symptoms, including diarrhea, loss of appetite, lack of energy and bodily aches for four to seven days, as well as depression, impatience and growing frustration for months. As a wandering man, Nietzsche, it can be assumed, would lose contact with the drug suppliers of the towns and countries left behind and have unwillingly have his rapturous intoxication and ravishment be quickly replaced by melancholic and agonizing withdrawal symptoms, until the next contact and intoxication, followed by another retreat to anguish and depression, and so on. It is therefore impossible to know how much of this addiction-related roller-coaster, of which he may have been at least partially unaware, contributed to the swing of his moods, to his complaining and occasionally confused letters, and to the inconsistencies of his writing, whose aphoristic style could dissemble. While *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883, 1885) is probably influenced by morphine, some readers believed that it was a product of a madman. Likewise, his 1888 books are imbued with such a novelty of style and inflated conceit that it cannot be decided for sure whether their author had been under the influence of a more potent strain of narcotics, or whether his mental state was rapidly eroding, or whether both of these factors existed side-by-side and fed on each other.

Nietzsche's habit of using humor—often of a dark variety—is yet another factor that casts dark shadows on his true mental state. He named it as "*schlechte Witze*" (bad/wicked jokes); he used this term even in the very last letter, which he wrote on January 6, which was to Overbeck (*KSB III/5, 578*). It was, in fact, because of the *schlechten Witze* that Overbeck and Köselitz, in spite of all their concerns for their friend's condition, remained unconvinced for months that the master of disguise and pretense had become truly insane. In that last letter,

it seems as though Nietzsche is trying, half-knowingly but vainly, to drop a couple of wicked jokes in order to dissemble his uncontrollable barrage of crazed expressions.

In sum, Nietzsche's melodramatic statements about his own mental state, his numerous medical problems, his massive dosage of toxins, and his use of "wicked jokes" introduce so much complexity that they make prognosis of his madness impossible. Yet this prognostic impossibility should not be confused with diagnostic impossibility. From the day of his collapse on January 3 until his last correspondence on January 6, he wrote a total of nineteen letters, of which eight are signed as "The Crucified," seven as "Dionysus," three are incomplete and unsigned and, strangely enough, only the last one bears the signature "Nietzsche" (*KSB III/5, 572-9*). "The Crucified" is a disturbing reminder that the self-proclaimed "Antichrist" and the "successor of the dead God" is now also crucified! As for those incomplete and unsigned letters, they are all addressed to Cosima, the widow of Richard Wagner, who is now assigned the role of Ariadne. On this stage, Dionysus/Nietzsche is trying to seduce Ariadne/Cosima, the deserted wife of Theseus/Wagner. These unsigned, incomplete letters are reminiscent of Nietzsche's lifetime insecurity and lack of confidence concerning the women to whom he was attracted; and now it seems as though even the secure and confident Dionysian mask cannot mitigate or conceal this weakness. More bizarre is the multiplicity of transitory characters in his very last letter in which the term *schlechte Witze* and the "Nietzsche" signature seem to imply a desperate, half-conscious struggle to be in control of his thinking process. Nonetheless, in the letters between the last days of December and early January Nietzsche is everybody. In these last days, termed by the chronographer Schlechta as *Wahnsinnzettel*, among the characters that went in and out of Nietzsche in these letters are Prince Carlo Alberto and his son Count Robilant, the painter Fromentin, Lesseps, Alexander Herzen, Prince Taurinorum, the Duke of Cumberland, and Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm IV.¹⁸ And since in every madhouse

¹⁷ In fact, Jaspers first questions whether Nietzsche's massive drug use had hastened his madness, but he later dismisses it in favor of a "biological factor." (Nietzsche's mother Franziska blamed drugs as the reason for his insanity.) For Jaspers, the biological factor is still in its infancy and, hence, it strikes without any medical predictability or warning. Nietzsche's father, Karl Ludwig, died at thirty-five of the softening of the brain tissues. The biological factor is further strengthened by the fact that, on his maternal side, one of Nietzsche's uncles died in a mental institute in 1881. Also: Carl Paul Janz, *Friedrich Nietzsche Biographie* (München/Wien: Carl Hansen Verlag, 1978), Vol. One, Ch. I & II.

¹⁸ Karl Schlechta, *Nietzsche Chronik: Daten zu Leben und Werk* (München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1975). Noteworthy in this brief period are two of the thirteen letters that he wrote on January 4, one to Cardinal Mariani of Rome, and the other to King Umberto of Italy, both signed as "The Crucified" (*KSB III/5 577*). Nonetheless, it must be noted,

there is a resident Napoleon, Nietzsche, sure enough, is Napoleon, too! He is also Pardo and Chambige, the two violent criminals whose serial killings had been at the time the subject of much fascination in the European newspapers. Identifying himself as these criminals shows some remnant of the Nietzsche of *Morgenröte* (1881-1882), who had repeatedly praised violent criminals for breaking the norms and conventions (D 20, 50, 164, 202, 366, 413). Nietzsche's inner battle over his personal identity is perhaps best seen in the Foreword to *Ecce Homo* where he warns: "Hear me! For, I am such-and-such. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else!" (KSA 6, 3.1, V).

Since madness, as an abnormality, is scaled by a norm, and the norm is determined by social convention, Nietzsche's mental state during the final days of his conscious life was consumed in madness. Clearly, the Nietzsche-Jesus-Dionysus-*et al.* by any norm—except that of the madhouse—is an instance of insanity. The consequent paralysis, however, confirms the severity of his mental ailment beyond any axiology. At the outset, we worried whether his 1888 books were infected by mental illness. Subsequently, we decided that their style and temperament were different from anything he wrote previously. We are now to say that even if this different style and temperament contained an element of madness, all the better! What nearly all Nietzsche commentators have overlooked so far is that brain disease can be, in some cases, beneficial. This is the case especially for the creative individuals and innumerable people who benefit from such creativity. Furthermore, genius is a species of the abnormal, and there is some madness in every genius. Nietzsche himself once said: "a grain of the spice of madness is joined to genius." He also said "it was madness that prepared the path to the new idea, that broke off the spell of a venerated usage and superstition. Do you

understand why it had to be madness that did this?" (D 14). Yes, I think I do. Alas, the surcharge that began in the late 1887 and sustained through the astonishing 1888, finally burned the bulb and brought total darkness to his consciousness. In *Daybreak* (1881-2) his pen cries out:

Ach, give me madness, you heavenly ones! Give deliriums and convulsions, sudden lights and darkness, frighten me with frost and fire such as no mortal has ever felt, with deafening bedlam and prowling forms, make me howl and whine and crawl like a beast so that I may only come to believe in myself! (ibid.)

Did he get what he asked for? He did, but partially. Paralysis forbade him a lot of howling and whining, and misfortune robbed him of old age. But, in retrospect, the surcharge in question was not too bad after all, for this unfortunate facticity proved fortunate for the transcendence of his ego. What brought this surcharge evidently had a long history with fluctuations traceable to *The Birth of Tragedy*.

also, that Nietzsche's out-of-control, crazy letter writing can be detected several months prior to these days, e.g., the early December drafts of three letters: two addressed to Kaiser Wilhelm II and one to Otto von Bismarck (KSB III/5 503-5). Interestingly, the letter to Bismarck is signed, "The Antichrist." These three letters, alone, show Nietzsche's troubled state of mind about a month before the street fall, i. e., several weeks outside of the *Wahnsinnzettel*. In addition to the craziness of these letters, I suspect that inside and outside of the *Wahnsinnzettel* Nietzsche is trying to influence his readers. For instance, to the Cardinal and to the Italian king he is choosing "The Crucified" for sympathy, while to Bismarck, he signs as "The Antichrist" (as if the Chancellor had read the *Genealogy*)!