

## The Rhetorical Paradigm of Nietzsche's Aphorisms

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Probably the most famous of Nietzsche's aphorisms, "God is dead," is a parody of Psalm 14, verse 1, "There is no God" (*King James Version*); it is a parody because Nietzsche deliberately fails to contextualize this statement, whose preamble is: "The fool hath said in his heart. *There is no God.*" His declaration uses the aphoristic form as a manifesto against theologians he accuses of having killed God. The *locus classicus* of the above declaration is the beginning of *Zarathustra* where the philosopher first contemplates the probability and then the certainty of the death of an outdated god (Haas 32ff.).

It is a very strange *modus operandi* for a classical scholar, well versed in classical rhetoric, and a strange role for the biblical court jester: namely to assign himself the role of an implied 'fool at heart!' A closer look at the Western tradition of the aphorism, however, reveals Nietzsche's use of this literary genre to be firmly rooted in its transformations throughout the centuries (Geary). What makes his use unique is the way he fully exploits its multi-purpose functions and, in the process, creates his own paradigm by mimicking biblical language. But this comes at a high price, for he ends up falling into the kind of assertive practice he tries to denounce and explode, sounding like a parody of his parody: a modern prophet! In classical Aristotelian rhetoric, this role touches on the issue of *ethos*; the credibility of the aphorist depends on wisdom, virtue, and good will. Nietzsche, in his self-representation as a cultural critic, does not necessarily live up to all these characteristics!

My short historical-systematic excursion is mainly based on the very substantial research article of Harald Fricke in volume I of the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*/The historical

Dictionary of Rhetoric, edited by Gert Ueding and others (Fricke cols. 773-790). The first function of the aphorism was as a non-literary genre in that it was used to state non-contextualized information of a didactic nature in prose form. This feature separated it as a paradigm from analogous short-text forms like the epigram, the anecdote, or the joke. However, its closest relative seems to be the maxim: “A general assertion expressed in a single sentence and formulated in a striking way” (Dupriez/Halsall 265f.). But one particular rhetorical dimension of the aphorism remained genre-specific: its use of reduction (*detractio*), one of the four basic rhetorical figurative devices—the other three being *exchange/immolation*; *rearrangement/transmutatio*, and *addition/adiectio*). This reduction could take on the form of an example without rule, intended banality, omission of a part in a logical sentence, and *double entendre*. The intralinguistic techniques to achieve this ranged from baffling word usage, neologisms, allusions, contrafacture, to juxtapositions of loaded words; these features apply to Nietzsche’s paradigm in one form or another. The rhetorical denominator is the comparatively poorly documented elocutional figure of *aporia*: the simulated technique of intentionally asking open-ended questions in the form of ambiguous and/or apodictic statements (Matuschek cols. 826ff.).

The case becomes more interesting when one tries to describe the unifying force behind the style of this unorthodox classical scholar who became a philosopher. “Through the aphoristic form, Nietzsche rejects on a stylistic level traditional philosophical thought, and furthers his project of the reevaluation of all values”; so writes Karin Bauer in her study *Adorno’s Nietzschean Narratives. Critiques of Ideology, Readings of Wagner* (Bauer 205). From a different perspective, or to use the description of a local latter-day prophet who introduced a new paradigm, Marshall McLuhan, when talking about his aphorisms that constitute his bestseller

*Understanding Media*: “aphorisms are verbal hand grenades!” (Fitzgerald 109) How they explode or implode is, of course, quite a different question. To return to Nietzsche, however, it is easy to observe how his aggressive playfulness coined aphoristic statements that, intentionally, left themselves open to many-layered interpretations. Douglas Burnham characterizes them as: “playful, almost vaudevillian... equivalent to a double-take, or a sarcastic taunt” (Burnham 2). Kathleen Merrow, a scholar of classical rhetoric, characterizes his technique with regard to the historical tradition as follows, drawing a link from antiquity to the Renaissance:

Intertextuality was a means to connect present to the past and to reconstruct this past by wrenching an allusion out of its original context and relocating it in a new one. Each such allusion redraws the line from past to present. Nietzsche is well aware of this practice. His highly allusive texts put it into use... Yet Nietzsche’s aphorisms are dense, and a single allusion condenses much that needs to be read, or perhaps unraveled into the threads that connect it to the larger problems it signifies (Merrow 288).

Let’s take a look at a random sample from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). In article 3 on “The Peculiar Nature of Religion,” No. 46, Nietzsche states:

From the very beginning, the Christian faith is a sacrifice, sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-assurance of the mind; at the same time it is servitude, self-mockery and self-mutilation./Der christliche Glaube ist von Anbeginn Opferung: Opferung aller Freiheit, allen Stolzes, aller Selbstgewissheit des Geistes; zugleich Verknechtung und Selbst-Verhöhnung, Selbst-Verstümmelung.

This sentence starts in a biblical tone, leading to a central concept, “sacrifice,” that, in a parodistic way, is undercut into a contrafacture, meaning exactly the opposite, using a mixture of chiasmic and anaphoric form. For good measure a hyperbole is thrown in, and the English translator has beautifully rendered the sardonic wit in appropriate alliterations.

When I mentioned that I chose a random sample, I was not quite honest! For *Beyond Good and Evil* probably offers the most striking examples of Nietzsche’s aphoristic style. In clear mockery, the nine “articles”—a parodistic reference to both traditional theology and

philosophy-are subdivided into nearly 300 enumerated sections, many of which contain just one short aphorism; especially in the fourth article. Douglas Burnham, in his *Reading Nietzsche: An Analysis of 'Beyond Good and Evil,'* has devoted a whole chapter to this section (Durham 99-106), characterizing these aphorisms as Nietzsche's being "after a rhetorical effect –giving an entrenched metaphysical, moral or social prejudice a jolt by way of deliberately hyperbolic expression." Another *locus classicus* and the subject of much debate has been the "Third Essay" of the *Genealogy of Morals* (Bauer 207ff.). Thematically, it deals with the problem of "what do Ascetic ideals mean?" The XXVIII sections (roughly 70 pages in the English translation) are prefaced by a quotation from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885): "Wisdom likes men who are reckless, scornful and violent; being a woman, her heart goes out to a soldier./Unbekümmert, spöttisch, gewaltthätig-so will uns die Weisheit: sie ist ein Weib, sie liebt immer nur einen Kriegsmann."

The Nietzsche reader can contextualize this aphorism with the notorious provocation in the first sentence of *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Supposing that truth is a woman - well, now, is there not some foundation for suspecting that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have not known how to handle women?/Vorausgesetzt, dass die Wahrheit ein Weib ist -, wie? Ist der Verdacht nicht gegründet, dass alle Philosophen, sofern sie Dogmatiker waren, sich schlecht auf Weiber verstanden?

According to Douglas Burnham, in interpreting this preface remark (Burnham 2ff.), Nietzsche frequently resorts to this form of thought construction: asking a "hypothetical" question loaded with puns. E.g., in the above quotation the last German term "verstanden" takes on a derogatory meaning although its basic meaning, the simple past tense of the verb "to understand," is also neutral-standard vocabulary of traditional philosophy. The modern debate has contextualized the former quotation in two diametrically opposing ways. For the Critical School, the whole third

essay is a series of aphorisms elaborating on the ascetic ideal as an analysis of the mechanism of power and domination. For the disciples of the postmodern-e.g. Derridean-persuasion, it is a clear indication of the philosopher's "indeterminacy and undecidability."

But the recent history of reception has also brought quite a different clientele of Nietzsche readers into play: an angry young generation that delights in Nietzsche's rejection of traditional values and the individualist's right for self-determination. One of the most colorful examples is Tom Tykwer's film *Run Lola Run (Lola rennt, 1998)* that translates one of Nietzsche's key concepts, the eternal recurrence, into an innovative kind of movie plot (Ludewig/Keller 130ff.). In three 20 minute segments that are filmed as real time, the heroine has 20 minutes to recover 100,000 marks that her boyfriend has misplaced. If she does not turn up with the dough, he will be killed by his gangster boss. Lola careens across the screen from one near-disaster to another in order to save him from his grisly fate. Each possible story constitutes also her will to self-determination; e.g. in the second segment the soundtrack erupts in a series of aphoristic exclamations proclaiming her will to self-determination: "I want to go/I want to fight/I want to rush/I want to run....Never, never, never letting go/Never giving up, never saying no." So Nietzsche's thoughts in aphoristic form are very much alive and have received, true to the originator's intention, diverse interpretations. They even made their way to Hollywood into all kinds of vulgarizations and misconceptions of the "Übermensch." Matthew Pollard found the image of "Nietzsche as a social/sexual deviant" perpetuated in numerous movies where a "Nietzsche citation in these films replaces the viewer's actual act of reading any of Nietzsche's works" (111). "In lieu of aphorisms there are 'informational soundbites'-fragments that refer in vague ways to statements of "that insane German philosopher" and stand for irrationality and evil (Pollard 112). But before returning to the rhetorical aspect of his

aphoristic style, one more salient feature in the history of reception has to be mentioned. It was precisely Nietzsche's aphoristic style that made the Western philosopher palatable to modern Chinese philosophical thinking. Adrian Hsia/Chiu-Yee Cheung cite several instances where Nietzsche's aphoristic style (conceived as being "rather assembled than composed") proved to have an elective affinity to major traditional Chinese philosophical classics (Hsia/Cheung 308f.).

The modern aphorism has, through history, picked up a sizeable number of literary relatives similar in their concise literary structure and form, such as the maxim, the curse, the proverb, exclamations, etc. A showcase in Nietzsche's work is, as mentioned above, *Beyond Good and Evil*, whose subtitle "Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future"/Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft is omitted in the English translation by Francis Golffing. It playfully contains whole sections that are labeled as collections of aphorisms, most notably the Fourth Article, or the "Seven Little Woman-Aphorisms" in No. 237 of the Seventh Article. A few samples shall preface my rhetorical conclusion: that Nietzsche, a sage in the classical and biblical tradition, got caught in his attempt to devalorize the Christian tradition in becoming an anti-prophet who articulated his non-systematic cultural critique in precisely the paradigm that he vowed to ridicule and to undermine: biblical statement of truth. These aphorisms should demonstrate the philosopher's systematic use of the classical figure of *dissimulatio*, a specific species of provocative irony through which the speaker insinuates that he holds back far more than he is questioning. "Love for any one thing is barbaric, for it is exercised at the expense of everything else. This includes the love for God / Die Liebe zu Einem ist eine Barbarei: denn sie wird auf Unkosten aller Übrigen ausgeübt. Auch die Liebe zu Gott" (IV 67). The two salient features creating the dissimulating shock effect are the juxtaposition of "Love" and "barbaric," and the afterthought- a reference to Jesus of Nazareth's first commandment! If one searches for a

sympathetic exegesis of this loaded aphorism, then one has to hinge it on “for any ONE thing,” for we should not overlook that Nietzsche uses another rhetorical-philosophical form, that of *definition*. But, of course, the attribute of the predication “one” leads to a whole number of other interpretations. For what Nietzsche does foremost question, undoubtedly, is the validity of the first Christian commandment.

Not always is the reevaluating onslaught so direct. Dissimulation can also come in the form of witty mockery; Nietzsche’s rhetorical relation to language as persuasive *doxa* (consensual meaning) and *episteme* (not fully attainable knowledge) leads to other facets for this technique and paradigm of persuasion (Kopperschmidt 44 et passim):

The devil has the farthest perspectives for God - that is why he stays so far away from him. The devil, in other words, is the oldest friend of insight. /Der Teufel hat die weitesten Perspektiven für Gott, deshalb hält er sich von ihm so fern: - der Teufel nämlich als der älteste Freund der Erkenntnis. (IV 129)

If you remember the biblical context, the devil’s mode of distancing himself away from God happened quite differently! A first reading simply seems to advocate that critical thinking automatically demonizes from the perspective of religious orthodoxy, but then one has also to take into consideration the biblical account of Satan’s temptation of the first couple; “insight” then becomes Nietzsche’s mocking *dissimulation* of “then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” (*Genesis* 3.5) This also reiterates the theme of the whole book *Beyond Good and Evil* and is, again, a very concise aphorism with multiple reverberations.

A last example should demonstrate how dissimulation can take the form of direct biblical parody:

Jesus said to his Jews, “The Law was made for servants. Love God, as I do, love him as a son does. What do we sons of God care about morality!”/Jesus sagte zu seinen Juden:”das Gesetz war für Knechte, - liebt Gott, wie ich ihn liebe, als sein Sohn! Was geht uns Söhne Gottes die Moral an!” (IV 164)

The compressed juxtaposition of *New Testament* concepts - Law/servant/sons of God, etc. - starts out with an authentic premise, but the continuing phrasing perverts the morality implied in the Law into its dialectic opposite. When one reflects on this last aphorism some more, one will detect other parodistic features, e.g. the formula “as I do” with its implications.

I think that Nietzsche’s aphorisms, his rejection of formulating his ideas in a traditional systematic fashion, had repercussions that got him caught in his own parody. The history of reception provides ample paradoxical proof that his aphorisms as open forms of thought-provoking moral reflections suffered the same fate as the Bible, whose sayings-maxims, warnings, curses, proverbs, etc.-by Jesus also originally questioned a religious status quo according to our modern understanding, but when taken over by various organized religious factions throughout history, could be contextualized to whatever controlling mechanisms of an existing power structure they should serve. The *ethos* of the originator was then shifted to the text that took on a life by itself. Or, as German satirist Kurt Tucholsky phrased it in “Fräulein Nietzsche:” ”Tell me what you need, and I’ll supply you with the right Nietzsche quotation” (Frisch 11).

I would like to close on a lighter note from my teaching experience. One of my wittiest students, when delivering an oral presentation on Nietzsche, began as follows:” Nietzsche became famous with his dictum ‘God is dead.’ Well, we know that Friedrich Nietzsche has been dead for about 100 years; news about the demise of God, however, are still unconfirmed!” Well, when questioned in the ensuing discussion, he had to admit that his aphoristic statement had slightly overreached the state of discourse of a critique of our contemporary culture. It seems

that both God's and Nietzsche's aphorisms are still very much alive.

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