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NIETZSCHE

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CHAPTER 1

NIETZSCHE AND THE FAMILY

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From his early utterances through to the last days of sanity Nietzsche exhibited an unusually deep feeling of connection with the ancestors, a feeling that corresponds, in spite of all subsequent conflicts, to an ultimately indestructible sense of family.

Curt Paul Janz¹

NIETZSCHE's direct experience of family life was intense but somewhat one-sided, for he never became a parent and his relations were generally with relatives older than himself. Instead of fathering, like most males of the species, literal offspring, he chose the Platonic way of giving birth to philosophical thoughts, which he embedded in books that he sometimes called his "children." Though one would hardly turn to Nietzsche for advice on parenting, some of what he writes about children, and especially about how to educate them, is well worth our attention. Similarly with his observations about marriage, another institution in which he declined to participate.² But limitations of space necessitate a narrower focus, on the familial relationships that he did actually experience, and on his ideas about the effects of such relationships on the individual who grows up among them.

Families tend to be intense complexes of relations—intense because determined by fate: you can't choose your grandparents, parents, or siblings, nor effectively divorce them—and the larger the family, the more relations, the greater the intensity. Nietzsche grew up within a large extended family of relatives who lived within visiting distance, while the immediate family in which he spent the first part of his youth consisted of six others, all of them female: his mother Franziska, his sister Elisabeth, his aunts Rosalie and Auguste, his grandmother Erdmuthe, and the live-in housekeeper, Miene. After the death of his father when young Fritz was four, he grew up as a lone boy among six women. One might imagine

¹ Janz 1981: vol. 1, p. 23.

² For example, an aphorism with the title "Marriage as a long conversation": "When entering into a marriage one should ask oneself: do you think that you can enjoy good discussions with this woman into your old age? Everything else in marriage is transitory, but most of the interaction takes the form of conversation." (*HAH I*: 406)

then that he lacked male companions and role models, even if in compensation he had a rich experience of the female psyche. But after his father's death he developed a close relationship with his maternal grandfather, David Ernst Oehler, and from the age of eight he formed firm friendships with two intelligent and creative boys, Gustav Krug and Wilhelm Pinder, with whose distinguished fathers he also enjoyed good relations.

The family is important for Nietzsche not only because it constitutes the world that conditions the individual's early development, but also because he thinks that the ancestors behind the grandparents continue to influence unconsciously one's present experience. He even claims to owe his becoming a philosopher to the ancestors and the capabilities they bequeath to later generations.

One has a right to philosophy... only thanks to one's line of descent, the ancestors: what is "in the blood" is decisive here. Many generations must have worked to prepare for the philosopher; each one of his virtues must be acquired, cultivated, handed down, incorporated. (*BGE* 213)

There's a distinctly Lamarckian tone to this, and although Nietzsche makes occasional mention of Lamarck, he remains vague about just how this kind of inheritance works, content to leave it as being simply through "the blood" in some sense.

Let us begin with this extended, less literal, sense of family and what Nietzsche thinks we inherit from our ancestry, as it continuously conditions our experience of the world through an influx of embodied energies from past worlds. This is especially worth considering because it continues to be a remarkably neglected aspect of Nietzsche's thought.³

ANCESTORS

One can never erase from the soul of a human being the traces of what his forbears most liked to do and did most often... It is quite impossible that a human being should *not* have the qualities of his parents and ancestors in his body, whatever appearances may say against it. (*BGE* 264)

In 1881 Nietzsche reports the realization of an archaic dimension to his experience, one that has drastically transformed his relations, he says, to "existence as a whole":

I have *discovered* for myself that ancient humanity and animality, indeed the entire primal age and past of all sentient being continues in me to create, to love, to hate, to infer. I suddenly awoke in the middle of this dream, but only to the consciousness that I am indeed dreaming and that I *must* continue to dream in order not to perish. (*GS* 54)

The personal tone here—discovered *for myself*—is significant: he is reporting an experience and its consequences rather than asserting a universal truth or framing some kind of theory. The tone is "experimental" (in the spirit of Montaigne and Emerson) insofar as the idea is to be tried out and tested for the ways it might transform one's experience. This constant creating, loving, hating, and inferring Nietzsche calls a "dream"—an imaginative process always going on, of which we are mostly unconscious, but which keeps us going, saves us from

³ For a discussion of the issue of ancestral inheritance in Nietzsche, see Parkes 1994: 305–34.

perishing. And yet also something to which we can awaken, and thereby perhaps discover the deep-level human and animal fantasies that underlie every moment of experience.

Nietzsche knows that commonsensical, realistic people are going to find this idea ridiculous, and he harangues the professional “realists” for naively supposing they can be unaffected by such atavism.

You are still carrying around with you evaluations of things which have their origin in the passions and loves of earlier centuries! . . . In every feeling, in every sense impression there is a piece of this ancient love [of “reality”]: and so some phantasy, some prejudice, some unreason, some ignorance, some fear and heaven knows what else have always worked and woven their way into it. That mountain there! That cloud! What is “real” about those? Try taking away the phantasm and the whole human *contribution*, you sober ones! Yes, if you only could do *that!* If you could only forget your heritage, your past, and training—your entire humanity and animality! (GS 57)

We can’t forget our entire humanity and animality, since this heritage induces in us a continuous dream that helps us survive. While such dreaming is unavoidable (“I must continue to dream if I am not to perish”), it’s possible to wake up and recognize the dreaming for what it is, and so by imaginative correlation and subtraction develop a keener sense for what might be “real.”

Indeed Nietzsche reserves the highest praise for those few human beings who are able to fully appropriate this archaic inheritance: one who “knows how to experience the history of humanity as his own history” can be considered “the heir of all the nobility of all previous spirit and an heir under obligation” (GS 337). The obligation is to be grateful for what one has inherited. Nietzsche was fascinated by “the tremendous abundance of gratitude” that flows from “the religiosity of the ancient Greeks” (BGE 49), and in keeping with this his Zarathustra praises “the way of noble souls” because

. . . they want nothing *gratis*, and least of all life.

Whoever is of the rabble wants to live gratis; we others, however, to whom life has given itself—we are always wondering *what* we can best give *in return!* (Z III: “On Old and New Tablets” 5)⁴

Since life has given itself to us all in the form of a body that bears with it a heritage of millennia, there is much to be grateful for—though also to be wary of, for as Zarathustra warns: “Not only the reason of millennia—but also their madness breaks out in us. It is dangerous to be an heir.” (Z I: “On the Bestowing Virtue” 2) No wonder then that Zarathustra regards those who ignore this noble heritage as baser souls: “Whoever is of the rabble, his memory goes back to his grandfather—but with the grandfather time stops.”

We were all “mayflies and rabble” until some of us acquired “the historical sense,” which gives us “ancestors” and our “*noble family tree*” (KSA 9: 15 [70]). Rather than conducting research into one’s personal family tree (a topic Nietzsche appears to have lost interest in after his childhood), exercising the historical sense means inquiring into “the dream” that’s always going on in the deeper reaches of the soul.

⁴ Contrast the biblical injunction: “And whoever will, let him take the water of life gratis” (Revelation 22:17).

Direct self-observation is not nearly sufficient for us to know ourselves: we need history, for the past flows on within us in a hundred waves; indeed, we ourselves are nothing but that which at every moment we experience of this continual flowing. (*HAI* II: 223)

This kind of experience enabled Nietzsche to situate his life, through imaginative engagement with psyche and history, within the larger matrix of Western culture.

This is not to say that an understanding of one's literal forebears is irrelevant: since Nietzsche thought that inherited nature outweighs environmental nurture, knowledge of one's more immediate heritage is also helpful.

Given that one knows something about the parents, a conclusion concerning the child is permitted. . . . Even with the best upbringing and education one can do no more than manage some dissimulation concerning such an inheritance. (*BGE* 264)

What many of Nietzsche's "forebears most liked to do" was to read the Bible, pray, and preach. His family tree shows that his father, both grandfathers, and one great-grandfather were clergymen—one of them a bishop and one an archdeacon. Farther back on his paternal grandfather's side are six more clergymen, three of them bishops or archdeacons. Given Nietzsche's view of the power of heredity, it would be remarkable if his soul did *not* bear the traces of so much Bible reading and praying and preaching; and so even though he became unable to believe in the religion of his forefathers, it would be surprising if all traces of religiosity had vanished from his being.

There was a legend in the Nietzsche family, to which Friedrich was happy to subscribe, to the effect that they were descended from members of the Polish nobility by the name of "Nietzky," who had left their homeland to avoid persecution because of their Protestant faith. This gave the family a feeling of being different (and superior) in which Nietzsche indulged throughout his life. But subsequent genealogical research by one of his younger cousins has proved this legend to have no basis in fact.⁵ What that research has revealed, however, is more interesting. On the Nietzsche side of the family he is also related to the Schlegel brothers, who played a major role in the beginnings of German romanticism at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, and further findings could show that he was even related to Goethe.⁶ But he also turns out to be related, through his mother's side of the family, to the composer Richard Wagner (!) through a common ancestor named Spörel at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

GRANDPARENTS

One is much more the child of one's four grandparents than of one's two parents: this is because at the time we were engendered, the parents had usually not yet established their own characters. The seeds of the grandfatherly type come to fruition in us, and in our children the seeds of our parents. (*KSA* 12: 9 [49])

⁵ See Janz 1981: vol. 1, pp. 26–7. See *KSA* 9: 21 [2] for Nietzsche's own account of his Polish ancestry.

⁶ See Janz 1981: vol. 1, p. 32, based on Oehler 1939.

So who were these grandparents whose child Nietzsche felt himself to be? He knew only three of them in person, since his paternal grandfather, Friedrich August Ludwig Nietzsche (1756–1826), died eighteen years before he was born.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche came into the world on October 15, 1844 in the tiny village of Röcken, some 35 kilometers west of Leipzig. His mother's family were the Oehlers, who lived in the nearby village of Pobles, where his grandfather, David Ernst Oehler, was the pastor. This grandfather was the son of a weaver, and having excelled at school he went on to study theology at the University of Leipzig. He arrived there in 1807, some thirty years after Friedrich August Nietzsche had studied in the same faculty. By that time theology at Leipzig had become more liberal, and David Ernst seems to have come away with a broad-minded and undogmatic view of the world, according to which all areas of human endeavor, from the natural sciences and history to music, poetry, and the other arts, are to be regarded as precious gifts from the Lord. He was thus not the kind of man to be attracted, as Nietzsche's father was, to the Pietist "Awakening" movement that was popular among the Lutheran clergy of the time. According to one of his grandsons: "Grandfather Oehler was no Pietist but rather lived in the era of rationalism, and as was customary he was a member of a freemasons' lodge."⁷ With its openness to other systems of thinking and emphasis on a humanistic and cosmopolitan morality, freemasonry was quite compatible with the Enlightenment ideals of contemporary Lutheran Protestantism and the Prussian political system connected with it.

A year after receiving the pastorship of Pobles and surrounding villages, David Ernst Oehler married Wilhelmine Hahn, daughter of a landowning family in the region, so that the parsonage soon became a working farm. But since the Oehler family eventually grew to eleven children, their standard of living remained modest. An avid reader and very much concerned with education, David Ernst regarded teaching as an important component of his duties and expended a considerable amount of energy on educating the children in the village as well as his own offspring. He greatly enjoyed spending time in his study, which had a comprehensive library where works of theology by no means predominated. "His study was his own special realm. Books that he had opened and wanted to consult further would lie open, and pieces of paper on which he had made notes also had to be left where they were."⁸ Unsurprisingly, young Fritz especially enjoyed spending time in his grandfather's study when he visited Pobles: "My favorite occupation was to be in grandpapa's study, and my greatest pleasure was browsing through all the old books and magazines there." (KGW I.1: 303) An indication of the breadth of his grandfather's intellectual interests is the fact that young Fritz found numerous works on such relatively occult subjects as magnetism and somnambulism in his library, including Justinus Kerner's well-known *The Seeress of Prevorst*, which appear to have influenced Nietzsche's later ideas about the multiplicity of the psyche.⁹

The grandfather was also a man of unusual physical vitality who enjoyed the work of running the farm as much as tending to the spiritual needs of his human flock. He was a keen huntsman and was by no means above enjoying a good game of cards, not to mention regular beer and occasional wine.¹⁰ (He has thus been aptly compared to Laurence Sterne, a man

⁷ Adalbert Oehler, "Erinnerungen meines Lebens" (unpublished manuscript), cited in Goch 1994: 79.

⁸ See Goch 1994: 78, 76, 81.

⁹ See Parkes 1994: 255–6.

¹⁰ Adalbert Oehler, cited in Goch

of the cloth with similarly secular inclinations, whose masterful *Tristram Shandy* would become one of young Nietzsche's favorite novels.)¹¹ In many ways quite a theatrical character, David Ernst had the ability "to deliver speeches in a masterful way" and possessed "a wonderful gift of being able to portray persons or events in a vivid and dramatic manner" (Janz 1981: vol. 1, p. 41). He was also a musical soul with some talent for the piano, and his large brood of children, sometimes supplemented by friends and guests, afforded him the opportunity of staging musical and theatrical performances. Life in the Pobles parsonage was thus a great deal livelier than in the Nietzsche household, and so Fritz and his sister Elisabeth always enjoyed staying with their grandparents, where there was fresh and wholesome food from the farm and its vegetable gardens, much opportunity to be in the open air, and within the house an abundance of entertainments in which to participate.

Writing about the educational aspects of the holidays that she and Fritz spent at the Pobles parsonage, Elisabeth remarks of her grandfather:

In the background of it all stood the figure of our grandfather Oehler, who, despite his good nature, was an astute observer of people and things, and also, as I realized later in life, an exceedingly skeptical critic of the human comedy, especially when it assumed pathetic airs. Every kind of cant . . . was anathema to him. (Förster-Nietzsche 1912: vol. 1, p. 29; translation modified)

His daughter's biographer emphasizes David Ernst's psychological acuity and his consequent lack of patience with the morally narrow-minded and the intellectually lazy, quoting one of his sons on the topic of his father's short temper and a strategy he had developed for mitigating its effects.

If Father was annoyed, he wouldn't say much about it but would simply write it down: he would discharge most of his anger and bitterness onto pieces of paper. He would often say, "The paper is patient, and can put up with anything." But he would then put away what he had written in a secret part of his writing desk. (Oscar Ulrich Oehler, cited in Janz 1981: vol. 1, p. 39)

His grandson Fritz clearly inherited this psychological acuity and became a past master of the technique of transmuting emotion into writing, often for himself but also for an audience. After Nietzsche's father died when the boy was only four, the genial and literate grandfather became the male figure he was closest to for the next several years. As Nietzsche later put it, in a note with the title "Correcting nature": "If one doesn't have a good father, one should get oneself one." (HAI: 31)¹²

The matriarch of the Oehler family, Wilhelmine, was also temperamental, though some of her irritability could be ascribed to her physical handicaps: she had lost the sight of one eye during a bout of chicken pox, and one of her legs was shorter than the other owing to an accident in childhood. But these impediments in no way diminished her ability to run the household, even though, with eleven children to care for, she had no time to spoil any of them through excess attention. An extremely vigorous woman, she kept the whole family so healthy through her skills as a gardener, and as the main cook and preparer of the bounty

¹¹ The comparison with Sterne is made by R. J. Hollingdale (1965).

¹² Nietzsche's mentor in classics at the Universities of Bonn and Leipzig, Friedrich Ritschl, was also significant father figure for him, though this role was soon taken over by Richard Wagner.

from the garden, that her daughter Franziska (Nietzsche's mother) claims not to remember a doctor's ever having visited the Oehler home.¹³

Not much is known about grandmother Wilhelmine (with eleven children to take care of she can't have had time to write many letters), but the accounts of holidays that Fritz and his sister spent in Pobles suggest that his relations with her were warm, since her emotional outbursts were brief and interspersed with longer periods of calm. As one of her sons reported: "Sometimes she was like a keg of gunpowder that easily explodes; but after the explosion she would have an immediate feeling of relief and everything would be fine again." (Oscar Ulrich Oehler, cited in Goch 1994: 86) The grandmother's temperamental nature seems to have bypassed the Oehlers' daughter Franziska, to resurface again in *her* daughter Elisabeth (who was not so much inclined to rapid reconciliation). Nietzsche himself also seems to have inherited, in accordance with his idea that character traits skip a generation, the passionate natures of these grandparents. His parents and schooling tended to discourage displays of emotion during his youth, but in later life he often refers to his own "explosive" potential.

Although Nietzsche never knew his paternal grandfather in person, he was at least able to get to know him through the works he left behind, since Friedrich August Ludwig Nietzsche had been a prolific author. His books naturally held pride of place in the household of his widow, Erdmuthé, Nietzsche's grandmother. The family of Friedrich August's mother, the Herolds, had been Lutheran pastors for four generations, since the early seventeenth century, so it was taken for granted that the latest scion should become a man of the cloth too. Friedrich August studied theology at the University of Leipzig just ten years after Goethe had been a student there, and he was educated in a Protestant worldview that advocated a rational, historical, and philological approach to Holy Scripture, with the aim of critically filtering out what was "inauthentic" in the text of the Bible by trying to remove later interpolations from alien sources.¹⁴ In choosing to study philology and history the grandson was to some extent following in his forbear's footsteps. Yet whereas the rational-critical method practiced by the elder Friedrich Nietzsche was by no means destructive of religious faith, but was intended rather to strengthen it by providing an authentic foundation, in the mature hands of the grandson it would serve an opposite aim.

Friedrich August Nietzsche published several books on theological topics, including a textual-critical study of the New Testament written in Latin. His most famous work was the profusely titled *Gamaliel, or the Everlasting Duration of Christianity, for Instruction and Tranquilization amidst the Present Ferment in the Theological World*, published in Leipzig in 1796. (The grandson would eventually arrive at a more modest appraisal of the "duration of Christianity.") The title of another of his books, *Contributions toward the Propagation of Reasonable Thinking about Religion, Education, the Duties of Subjects, and Human Love* (1804), conveys a further sense of his rationalist approach and the breadth of his scope as a writer. His works give a favorable picture of the human race as being endowed by nature with considerable powers of understanding which, if properly developed, can to a large extent replace divine revelation with human reason. Nevertheless, "religion is not merely a matter of the understanding, but must also be a matter of the heart," since even the most

¹³ Franziska Nietzsche, "Mein Leben" (1895); printed in Goch 1994: 32–64, 47.

¹⁴ See Pernet 1989: chapter 3.

highly developed human reason is incapable of understanding the totality of God and His creation. Friedrich August's theology is thus a kind of "rational supranaturalism," the goal of which is the progressive "enlightenment and ennoblement" of the whole of humanity and the "furthering of human happiness through the promotion of wisdom and virtue."

The seeds of Friedrich August's energetic rationalism, with its reverence for the indefatigable questioning powers of the human intellect, surely came to fruition in his grandson. But they were so well nurtured by the philological regimen to which the younger Friedrich was subjected at school and university that, when the equilibrating force of faith fell away, his intellectual acumen would be employed to undermine rather than support Christian belief. Literally prolific as well as literarily, the grandfather sired nine children in his first marriage before marrying Erdmuthé Dorothea Krause at the age of 53, a union that produced a further three offspring: Fritz's father, Carl Ludwig, and two sisters (Fritz's aunts), Rosalie and Auguste.

Erdmuthé Krause herself came from a family of pastors and was matriarch of the household in which young Fritz grew up. She had spent her youth in Weimar, in circles associated with Goethe, and there was speculation that her mother's name appears in the young Goethe's diary. Her brother, Johann Friedrich Krause, was a professor of theology who was ultimately appointed to a high official post in Weimar that had been occupied by Johann Gottfried Herder—a formidable thinker whose ideas about the human soul in many ways anticipated Nietzsche's (though he acknowledges Herder only cursorily).¹⁵

Erdmuthé married a lawyer to the Court of Weimar, but amidst the devastation of the country following the battle of Jena in 1806, where Napoleon defeated the Prussian army, her husband contracted a fatal disease and died. Her second husband was Friedrich August Nietzsche, twenty-two years her senior, who by the time of their marriage had reached the exalted rank of superintendent in the Lutheran Church. After his death, she did her best to keep alive the spirit of his theological worldview in the household of her three children, and especially after the arrival of her grandchildren. According to the younger grandchild, Elisabeth:

The whole milieu in which we lived, especially thanks to the profound religiosity that pervaded it, must have had the most powerful influence on my brother. Although our grandmother Nietzsche had grown up in the rather sober period of the Enlightenment with its simplified ideals of God, virtue, and immortality, and so felt far from comfortable in the atmosphere of the Pietistic movement of the eighteen-fifties, when people became "awakened" and passionately and publicly declared themselves to be miserable sinners, her entire being and life were nevertheless permeated by a delicate and touching religiosity. (Förster-Nietzsche 1912: vol. 1, p. 32)

The contrast between sober Enlightenment and enthusiastic Pietism refers to a deep and widespread conflict in the religious life of Protestant Europe at the time, and one that caused a rift in the microcosm of the Nietzsche family. Erdmuthé's adherence to the rationalist ideals of her late husband appears to have been anything but delicate, and her consequent discomfort with the more emotional and fundamentalist outlook of the Pietistic "Awakening" movement set her at odds with her own son (Nietzsche's father) when his faith veered in that direction.

¹⁵ See Förster-Nietzsche (1912: vol. 1, p. 4). See also the discussions of Herder in Parkes 1994.

Young Fritz's autobiographical writings exhibit great affection and respect for his paternal grandmother, and his attitude toward religion was much closer to hers than to his father's—another exemplification of his idea that inherited character traits tend to skip a generation.

PARENTS

As my father I am already dead, while as my mother I am still alive and growing old. These dual origins, from the highest and lowest rungs of the ladder of life as it were, decadent and at the same time beginning—this explains, if anything does, that neutrality, that freedom from taking sides with respect to the entire problem of life, which is perhaps my distinctive feature. (*EH*: “Why I Am So Wise” 1)

Nietzsche's father, Carl Ludwig, was born in October 1813, when his own father was 57 years old and his mother 35. This was the year that Prussia declared war on France, and when Napoleon, after his victory at the Battle of Lützen (near Röcken), met defeat at the Battle of Leipzig some twenty kilometers farther on. The year 1813 also saw the births of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who developed a form of existentialism that bears striking similarities to Nietzsche's, and of the composers Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the several territories that comprised Saxony at the time came under the jurisdiction of the victorious state of Prussia, so that the soil from which Nietzsche's ancestors had sprung became known as Prussian Saxony.

In the Nietzsche household, as in the whole of Saxony at that time, the Lutheran catechism held sway, which stressed hard discipline, conscientiousness, and a dedication of one's person to serving the greater community. Not only did Carl Ludwig know as a 12-year-old that he wanted to become a preacher, but he actually wrote his first sermon at that tender age (Bohley 1980: 390). He did not, however, inherit his parents' physical robustness and was a somewhat hypochondriacal child. The death of his father when the boy was 13 increased his insecurity and sense of isolation from his peers, which in turn engendered an almost pathological dependence on his mother that would last for the rest of his life. A defensive reaction set in, whereby he rejected everything “worldly” and took refuge in a realm of the spirit. His pious and serious demeanor at school, and his eagerness to be a model pupil, further alienated him from his classmates and earned him the nickname “the little pastor”—a name his son's peers would apply to him in turn (Max Oehler, “Nietzsches Vater” (unpublished manuscript based on the extant correspondence); cited in Goch 1994: 367).

In his letters home from the seminary he attended during 1827 and 1828, he frequently complains of violent headaches and other pains, acute homesickness, and nocturnal anxiety, especially during thunder- and hailstorms (*GSA* 100/100).¹⁶ As one commentator concludes: “Impression from the letters of the thirteen-to-fourteen-year-old boy: an extremely sensitive, pious, physically delicate boy, with a tendency toward hypochondria and an anxious concern over his health. Frequent complaints of violent headaches.” (*GSA* 100/445 [2])¹⁷ A fellow seminarian, who would later become the school doctor at the prestigious school at Schulpforta (and so have the occasion to treat young Fritz there for eye problems and

¹⁶ Carl Ludwig Nietzsche, letters from October 1827 and March–April 1828.

¹⁷ Ingeborg Krüger, “Notes for a Biography of Nietzsche's Father.”

headaches), attributed the father's sickliness to the fact that he was engendered at a time when his own father was already ailing.¹⁸ At 18, Carl Ludwig underwent prolonged medical treatment in Leipzig; two years later he was declared provisionally unfit for military service on grounds of "general physical weakness"; four years after that he was deemed unfit indefinitely (Goch 1994: 102).¹⁹

The valetudinarian father is a striking exception among Nietzsche's ancestors, most of whom were not only long-lived but also unusually prolific. Great-grandfather Gotthelf Engelbert Nietzsche, born in 1714, was one of eleven children and lived to be 90 years old. His son, Nietzsche's grandfather, was one of eight children and reached the age of 70, having sired twelve children in two marriages. His second wife, Erdmuth (Nietzsche's grandmother), lived to be 77. The maternal grandparents had eleven children and died at 72 and 82. Nietzsche's mother lived to be 71 and his sister 89. For the most part the life force flowed strong and long in the immediate family—with the exception of Nietzsche's father.²⁰

Carl Ludwig studied for four years at the University of Halle-Wittenberg (1833–7), when the theological faculty was in transition between traditional rationalism and the new "Awakening" theology that was revolutionizing Lutheran Pietism in Saxony. Pietism had the aim of infusing Protestantism with deeper religious feeling, and the Awakening movement sought to make the emotional elements in piety and faith even more central. By the end of his course of study Carl Ludwig had shifted most of his allegiance to the new movement, having come under the sway of the charismatic preacher Christian Couard. He was deeply influenced by this teacher's emphasis on the direct experience of sinfulness and grace. What is paramount is: "faith in the power of God through which the sinner is reborn and becomes a new creature in Jesus Christ. This new birth, or rebirth, is the indispensable condition for participation in the kingdom of heaven." (cited in Pernet 1989: 20)

Although Carl Ludwig was an industrious student, his teachers noted a weakness in his grasp of theoretical theology as a result of the time and energy he devoted to writing sermons. In this area he received the highest praise, not only for the eloquence of his language but also for his powers of memory—the sermons had to be given without a text—and the effectiveness of his gestures. Indeed his preaching would sometimes become so impassioned that he would be moved to tears by his own performances, so that some of his superiors complained of "too much pathos." But it becomes clear from his letters and from much of the content of the sermons themselves that the role of fervent preacher was to some extent a mask he was obliged to adopt in order to conceal the fragility of his personality. He himself admitted that the pulpit was the only place where he could avoid being plagued by "doubts and fears": "As soon as I begin to preach. . . I become peaceful, self-assured, courageous, and decisive."²¹ Perhaps some of Nietzsche's later insights into the phenomena of actors, masks, and personae derive from early experience of the complex defensive strategies deployed by his father.

Another way of shoring up internal fragility is to attach oneself to strong external structures in the outside world. In Carl Ludwig's case he was happy to find refuge in a time of political turmoil at the court of Duke Joseph of Saxe-Altenburg, one of the small dukedoms

¹⁸ C. A. Zimmermann, *Krankenbuch Schulpforte 1862*, reprinted in *GAB* 1: 340.

¹⁹ See also Bohley 1987: 176 n. 73.

²⁰ See Volz 1994: 326.

²¹ Cited in Bohley 1980: 392.

of which Saxony was composed at the time. Joseph was a conservative ruler who used a repressive force of soldiers and police to stifle any progressive or democratic movement that might threaten his hegemony. Carl Ludwig was given the post of tutor to the duke's three daughters, and through his employer's good graces he traveled to Berlin in 1841, where he eventually obtained a brief audience with King Friedrich Wilhelm. The fruit of this meeting was his being granted the pastorship at Röcken later that year. Though this was hardly the level of post he had hoped for—in a tiny village situated in flat and somewhat featureless countryside far from the city—he moved into the parsonage there with his mother and two unmarried sisters, whose presence would serve to allay his continuing “doubts and fears.”²²

Franziska Ernestine Rosaura Oehler, the sixth of the eleven Oehler children, was given names (as all her siblings were) that formed acrostics in Latin. “Our dear father,” she wrote late in life, “loved giving us each a word to accompany us for the journey of life: so I received *FERO* (I bear, tolerate).” (Goch 1994: 34) The child's initials dictate the posture she is to adopt toward the world, and in view of the burdens that were to be laid upon her as a young woman, “I bear” was an apt adage indeed. David Ernst Oehler's concern for education did not transcend the customs of the time, which reserved thorough schooling for the boys in the family alone. And so Franziska, though possessed of native wit and practical good sense, received little in the way of a formal education. In a letter to her son written later in life, she remarks: “I feel that my education was insufficient and our energies were directed more toward practical and useful work.”²³ In spite of the relatively secular atmosphere of the parsonage, the Oehlers' was another home in which the precepts of the Lutheran catechism held sway; and although the family's churchgoing habits were remarkably relaxed, Franziska's upbringing instilled in her an unshakable faith in the power of prayer, a practice that appears to have figured in every day of her adult life.²⁴ Three of her brothers eventually became pastors and two of her elder sisters married into the ministry. The next generation also tended to become or marry clergymen: there were seven pastors among Nietzsche's cousins on his mother's side. No wonder, then, that young Fritz should characterize himself in one of his autobiographical sketches as “the son of a Protestant country pastor.”

Looking back on her childhood Franziska writes: “To grow up as the only girl in a series of five brothers surely contributed to my good health, since I had to participate in the wildest games if I didn't want to be exposed to their scorn.” Being especially close to her brothers, the young girl was at first something of a tomboy. She eventually acquired a reputation as the most adept tobogganer in the family: “My brothers later teased me for being such an excellent steerer, since I often had two or three smaller siblings on board with me. On some of the steeper hills you could sometimes even take off into the air for a bit, but I would only attempt that trick when I was on my own.”²⁵

Since Pobles is less than an hour's walk from Röcken, it was natural for Carl Ludwig Nietzsche to introduce himself to his colleague David Oehler. By the time he visited the

²² In a letter to a friend Carl Ludwig wrote: “Trembling with doubts concerning my abilities, I am often seized with such fear that I would rather not take up the post at all” (November 16, 1841; cited in Goch 1994: 110).

²³ Franziska Nietzsche, letter to Friedrich Nietzsche, March 3, 1877.

²⁴ On Franziska's churchgoing, see Goch 1994: 73 and 360; on prayer, see Pernet 1989: 28.

²⁵ Franziska Nietzsche, letter from October 1895, cited in Goch 1994: 30; “Mein Leben,” cited in Goch 1994: 35, 46.

Pobles parsonage, Franziska had grown into a beautiful young woman of seventeen and a presence that even he, with his general lack of interest in “worldly” things, could not help noticing. In an account of a visit from the handsome young pastor (who was twelve years her senior), she writes:

The company drank coffee amid gay conversation, after which Pastor Nietzsche, whom we already knew to be a piano player, was persuaded to improvise, which he did in an especially masterful way that day. We then went into the garden, where he asked me for a bouquet, and also for a sprig of dill since he loved the fragrance.

Overwhelmed by Carl Ludwig’s handsome looks, courtly demeanor, and elegant attire, Franziska nevertheless knew from the start that he was not exactly “single,” since she observed that “the young Pastor Nietzsche visited with his mother and two sisters . . . who live with him.” Nevertheless, it wasn’t long before Carl Ludwig asked his older colleague for the hand of his daughter in marriage. Franziska was overjoyed—but also anxious, since she was still so young and had little experience of the world beyond the village. But her mother encouraged her by pointing out that lack of life experience was something that “every day would help to remedy.”²⁶

Carl Ludwig pressed for an early wedding, since as a pastor approaching the age of 30 he needed a wife. Although his mother was at first less than enthusiastic about the prospect of having an unrefined country girl as a daughter-in-law, she apparently encouraged him to pick Franziska over her elder sisters.²⁷ Since the Oehler family was under some financial pressure to get their daughters married off, and none of the older sisters had received any proposals, David Ernst gave his consent. According to Elisabeth, he warned the bridegroom-to-be: “Our Fränzchen is a bit of a tomboy, and allow me as a horticulturist to tell you that you are taking a wild shoot into your family, from which you must rear a noble tree.” The staid and proper Nietzsche clan must indeed have been unnerved by the young woman’s spiritedness, though Elisabeth’s report of grandmother Erdmuthé’s saying, “Fränzchen is a magnificent savage, and her vigor and roughness are just delightful,” makes the matriarch sound uncharacteristically gushing (Förster-Nietzsche 1912: vol. 1, p. 13).

A year after the wedding Franziska bore their first child, bringing into the world on the birthday of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, King of Prussia, the future philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. Carl Ludwig was overjoyed at the arrival of a son on such an auspicious day, but for Franziska the labor and birth were so difficult that she was still bedridden when her son was baptised, ten days after the birth. Since she was a vigorous young woman of 18, such indisposition was unusual, and it appears that she had contracted some kind of inflammation in the chest, which must have made nursing her newborn a torture instead of a delight.²⁸

However, the birth of the son served to secure for Franziska a determinate position in the Nietzsche household—that of second mother to grandmother Erdmuthé. Her status was further consolidated by the birth of another child, Elisabeth Therese Alexandra (one name from each of her father’s former royal pupils), twenty-one months later, and a third, Carl Ludwig Joseph, nineteen months after that. Such a consolidation was much needed, since

²⁶ Franziska Nietzsche, “Mein Leben,” cited in Goch 1994: 54–5, 50, 59.

²⁷ See the extract from Franziska’s journal from August 1849 reprinted in Goch 1994: 151.

²⁸ See Goch 1994: 129–30 on Franziska’s indisposition after giving birth.

when Franziska was brought into the Nietzsche household as a bride of 17, she was made to feel insignificant in relation to the matriarch Erdmuthe (65) and her two daughters, Rosalie (32) and Auguste (28). All the more so since the Nietzsches saw themselves as exalted socially far above the naïve young farm girl, pretensions that were to generate considerable tension between them and the down-to-earth Oehler family.

One of Nietzsche's most psychologically acute reflections on the parent-child relationship is to be found in a one-sentence aphorism in *Human, All Too Human* that bears the title, "The parents live on":

The unresolved dissonances between the characters and dispositions of the parents continue to resound in the nature of the child, and constitute the history of his inner sufferings. (*HAAH* I: 379)

A sense of the dissonances that set in early on between his parents is well conveyed by a passage from a letter that Carl Ludwig wrote to a friend shortly after the marriage.

The longer I know my in-laws the less I am able to respect them; my mother-in-law in particular is a totally worldly and common woman. It oppresses and tortures me terribly sometimes that I have to be so ashamed of my in-laws, and I am astonished that my Fränzchen could have grown from this kind of soil! My bad relationship with her parents has led to many an hour of discord with my Fränzchen: it pains her so much that I cannot stand her parents, for they do not do anything against me. That is true, but our orientations toward life and faith are so different that when it comes to an exhortation, *which I am nevertheless careful to avoid*, I am afraid of a formal break with the Pobles parsonage, if I don't manage to put up with the whole thing for Fränzchen's sake, and let her see as little as possible of my aversion and disgust for her parents, in order not to hurt her, since she is so fond of her family—although she must have noticed that I have expressed myself definitely against mutual visits. (Carl Ludwig, letter of February 22, 1844; cited in Goch 1994: 127)

This letter is evidence of the considerable stresses generated by the largely unexpressed emotional life within the Röcken parsonage. There is no indication that Carl Ludwig's aversion was reciprocated by his in-laws, though they must have been aware of a cool distance on the part of their son-in-law. But even allowing for David Ernst's more liberal theological outlook, and the more secular home life that followed from it, Carl Ludwig's antipathy is remarkable in its intensity. It is probable that he sensed his father-in-law's ironic distaste for the Awakening movement to which he was so passionately committed, and he may even have suspected that David Ernst's psychological perspicacity could see through the mask of his own extreme piety.

In spite of her husband's efforts to suppress his antipathy toward her family, it was clearly a cause of deep distress to Franziska; yet she had no alternative but to resign herself to the situation. The natural consequence was a tendency to withdraw into herself, so as to minimize domestic discord. This must have been hard for her as a natural extravert, but she apparently put her trust in God that He would guide her through this trial. That she managed to negotiate the difficult transition from her carefree life in Pobles to the oppressive existence in the parsonage at Röcken at the age of only 17 attests to her robust and resourceful nature.

Considering what the mature Nietzsche says about parents in general, it becomes clear that the "nurture" counterpart to the "dual origins, from the highest and lowest rungs of the ladder of life" had its share of negative effects on him. In the context of discussing what it means for a man to possess a woman, Nietzsche invokes the parents.

Parents can't help making their child into something similar to themselves—they call this “education”—no mother doubts at the bottom of her heart that with the child she has borne herself a possession, no father disputes his right to subject it to his own conceptions and evaluations. (*BGE* 194)

FATHER AND SON

[In several respects] I am merely my father once again and, as it were, the continuation of his life after an all-too-early death. (*EH*: “Why I Am So Wise” 5)

In the numerous autobiographical sketches Nietzsche wrote during his youth, he always mentions his father with affection and respect, and often remarks on his love of music. “He occupied his leisure hours with study and with music. He had a distinct talent for playing the piano, especially in free improvisation.” (*KGW* I.1: 282) Franziska corroborates with respect to her son's early years: “The boy always listens quiet as a mouse and refuses to take his eyes off his father when he begins to play the piano.” So it became natural for Franziska to request some music from the father when her son started crying.²⁹

But when the soothing powers of music failed, stricter measures were required. Carl Ludwig wrote to his friend: “Brother Fritz is a wild boy, and sometimes only Papa can bring him to reason, since he has the rod at hand.” (Carl Ludwig, letter of December 15, 1846; cited in Bohley 1987: 171) In his enthusiasm for the Awakening movement, the father apparently subscribed to the Pietist educational maxim whereby “the child's willfulness has to be broken so that it may later be open to the will of God.” The talk of bringing the child to reason suggests he also believed that this process can be effected at the tender age of 2. Whether the rod was actually employed or its nearness used as a threat cannot be determined, though physical punishments by parents at that time were the norm. In a letter Franziska wrote late in life, she says of her son: “When he was very small, and my husband was still alive, he would throw himself onto his back when things didn't go according to his will, but dear Papa's *manual* intervention soon cured him of this habit.” (Franziska Nietzsche, letter of June 23–4, 1895, in *Der entmündigte Philosoph*: 38) Just as the Lutheran catechism, which had dominated Carl Ludwig's early childhood, was still widely in force, so the father recreated, as often happens, the conditions of his own upbringing for the benefit of the next generation.

A popular writer (Miller 1991) on the effects of overly severe discipline on young children has claimed that Nietzsche was badly abused as a boy and that this accounts for the harshness of the philosophy he developed as an adult.³⁰ But the biographical evidence adduced in support of this claim is minimal, and the case is made to rest instead on poorly understood quotations from Nietzsche's philosophical writings. Young Fritz's behavior, as well as the parental reactions and his responses to those reactions, hardly sounds unusual—let alone pathologically extreme—for a bright and headstrong two- to three-year-old. And considering the high tensions between Franziska and her in-laws that underlay daily life in the home,

²⁹ On Fritz's early fascination with the piano, see Oehler 1940: 42.

³⁰ On Fritz's good and bad behavior, see Bohley 1987: 169 and Goch 1994: 135–6.

together with all the unspoken as well as spoken judgments and the repressed reactions and feelings on the part of the adults, it's a wonder there are no reports of *more* difficult behavior on Fritz's part.

Although there are no other mentions of caning or spanking, it is likely, given the practices of the time, that both Nietzsche children were spanked for misbehaving when they were very young. Fritz certainly learned early to internalize parental discipline, and an incipient sense of pride (and fear of shame) soon came to inhibit punishable behavior, so as to avoid the embarrassment of being overtly disciplined. Such a regime leads naturally to a certain amount of repression, but it rarely proves traumatic, and Fritz seems to have passed through the process relatively unscathed. The "harshness" of Nietzsche's philosophy is a response to a culture and civilization that he sees as badly in need of improvement, rather than a product of childhood trauma from being continually beaten.

Nor does it seem that young Fritz was unduly thrown off by the arrival of two siblings, Elisabeth (when he was almost two) and Joseph (when he was three-and-a-half). What did upset him, profoundly, was the traumatic event of his father's succumbing to a fatal illness.

It was in the course of the revolutionary uprisings that shook the established political order in Europe during 1848 that Carl Ludwig's health had begun to deteriorate. As a staunch royalist loyal to King Friedrich Wilhelm, he wrote to his closest friend: "My nerves have been badly affected by the recent political disturbances: I am unable to sleep properly and have been having all kinds of strange visions." (Carl Ludwig, letter to Emil Julius Schenk, April 17, 1848, cited in Goch 2000: 376) Even the account from Elisabeth, who generally paints as rosy a picture of family life as possible, makes clear the dire effect on her father of the King's conciliatory response to the rebellion in Berlin: "He burst into tears, left the room, and was able to rejoin the company only after spending several hours alone. Nor were we permitted to speak of the event ever again." (Förster-Nietzsche 1912: vol. 1, p. 15)

In an autobiographical essay from 1858 the 14-year-old Fritz writes as follows:

Up to this point happiness and joy had always shone on us, and our life had flowed by untroubled as a bright summer's day. But now dark clouds gathered, lightning flashed, and devastating blows fell from heaven. In September of 1848 my dear father suddenly became ill. (KGW I.1: 284-5)

The talk of "devastating blows from heaven" suggests the incredulity to which the boy must have been subject, at the tender age of almost four, at seeing his beloved, admired, and revered father be suddenly laid so low. By November Carl Ludwig's condition became serious enough to warrant his being taken to a clinic in the town of Naumburg, several hours' journey away, to undergo homeopathic treatment at the hands of a renowned practitioner. Toward the end of the month Fritz went with his mother to visit the invalid father, but his condition was worse than ever and they felt their presence was aggravating his mood rather than cheering him up. As Franziska wrote to a friend:

The vomiting and then every day the most terrible headaches. . . cause my dear husband indescribable torment, and it becomes so bad on the days of vomiting that he says that he might lose his mind because of it. May our dear God in his mercy prevent that from happening. . . . We had hoped to bring him a little joy, but found him extremely sad and weeping a lot. . . . I forgot to say that unfortunately the doctor also said that it was a brain disease, but

promised a slow but sure recovery. (Franziska Nietzsche, letter to Emma Schenk, December 1, 1848; cited in Goch 1994: 141)

After the patient returned home from the treatment in Naumburg, his sister Auguste sent the doctor a report that suggests it had been ineffectual:

Toward four in the morning on Sunday I gave him [a homeopathic powder] but half an hour later he vomited, felt more ill in the course of the day, and became very weak, lying mostly in bed with shortness of breath and screaming from the pain in his head whenever he had to move. . . . At midnight the terrible moaning began again. (Report to Dr Stapf in Naumburg; cited in Goch 2000: 381)

Given the modest size of the parsonage, young Fritz couldn't have avoided hearing the sounds of his father's agony. And even if the children were kept physically insulated from the scene of the sickness, the distress of the adults would have been palpable.

Early the next year a specialist from the city of Leipzig was brought in, who offered a grim diagnosis. As Nietzsche recounted several years later:

We were horrified to learn that the doctor thought it was softening of the brain: not yet a completely hopeless case, but nevertheless very dangerous. My beloved father had to endure terrible pain, and instead of becoming better the illness grew worse from day to day. (*KGW* I.1: 285)

By April, Carl Ludwig had gone completely blind: "Eventually even the light from his eyes failed, and he was condemned to spend the rest of his suffering in eternal darkness" (*KGW* I.1: 285)³¹ Franziska wrote to a friend that her husband was still able to think and, with great difficulty, to talk: "But this thinking and not being able to express it properly seems to be embarrassing and stressful for him: he always shakes with irritation when he hasn't spoken the way he wanted to." (Franziska Nietzsche, letter of April 4, 1849; cited in Bohley 1987: 179)

With the coming of spring and better weather, the young children were granted some respite from the misery of being cooped up in the house with a father who had gone blind and was almost mute, except for groans of pain. The son of a pastor friend of Carl Ludwig's visited the Röcken parsonage for a weekend in April and sent his parents a less than encouraging report.

I found Pastor Nietzsche in very poor condition. He sits in a chair most of the time, for he is extremely weak but doesn't like staying in bed since he also can't sleep properly. . . . He is unable to see, though it's only a temporary condition according to the specialist from Leipzig, and that's why his eyes are always rolling from side to side. . . . They say he is now well on the way to recovery, but I can hardly believe that he'll be back to normal within half a year. (Gustav Karl Ferdinand Menzel, letter of April 12, 1849; cited in Goch 2000: 387–8)

It is harrowing to imagine the contrast for the four-year-old Fritz between the father he was used to seeing—preaching sermons from the pulpit of the church by the parsonage, reading and writing in his study, improvising at the piano—and this shell of the former person, sitting immobile, sightless, eyes rolling in his head. It must have been hard to reconcile the

³¹ In a letter from April 4 Franziska writes of her husband's "not being able to see at all"; cited in Goch 2000: 387.

constant talk of the patient's being "well on the way to recovery" with his daily experience during that dismal period. Indeed Fritz's saying that his father spent "the rest of his suffering in eternal darkness" suggests that he knew that the blindness was not the "temporary condition" that he and the weekend guest had been led to believe.

Even though I didn't fully comprehend the magnitude of the imminent danger, the sad and anxious mood must have made an unsettling impression on me. The suffering of my father, the tears of my mother, the worried expressions on the doctors' faces, and eventually the careless remarks of people in the village—all must have given me a premonition of a threatening misfortune. And this misfortune did eventually strike. (*KGW* I.2: 260)

The eventual "careless remarks" no doubt contradicted the consistently optimistic view of the situation presented by his mother. One must remember that although young Fritz wrote his autobiographical essays for his own enjoyment, they were also to be read by his mother and aunts and grandmother, and so he was unable to be totally candid or to contradict what he had been told during the ordeal of his father's decline.

For many weeks Carl Ludwig lay in bed, his energies unrestored, tormented by bed-sores and becoming weaker and weaker. On July 26, 1849, at the age of 35, he lapsed into a coma. Nietzsche recounts in retrospect:

When I woke up the next morning [July 30], I heard nothing but weeping and sobbing all around me. My dear mother came in, in tears, crying mournfully: "Oh God! My dear Ludwig is dead!" Although I was still very young and inexperienced, I nevertheless had some idea of death. Overcome by the thought of being separated from my dear father for ever, I wept bitterly. The next few days were spent in tears and in preparing for the funeral. Oh God! I had become a fatherless orphan and my dear mother a widow! (*KGW* I.1: 285)

Not long after the event Carl Ludwig's step-sister, Friederike Dächsel, gave the time of death, with Prussian precision, as 5:49 a.m. "His skull was opened up and it was confirmed that he had died of softening of the brain, which had already affected one quarter of his head." (Janz 1981: vol. 1, p. 19) Max Oehler, a nephew of the deceased, stated that the surgical section performed during the autopsy had revealed some kind of "tumor." (Janz 1981: vol. 1, pp. 46–7) And the teenage Fritz's final comment about his father's death: "This was the first disastrous event, which changed the shape of the rest of my life for ever." (*KGW* I.2: 259) This death changed the shape of Nietzsche's life by initiating a gradual loss of faith in the religion of his father and forefathers: the death of the father thus anticipated the son's later ideas concerning the death of God.

Biographers and commentators tend to date Nietzsche's loss of faith much later, to his arrival at the University of Bonn, but careful study of the juvenilia, and especially the poems he began writing from the age of 12, suggests that the One Christian God became unbelievable much earlier.³² His autobiographical essays had to remain silent on such a crucial matter. But imagine the context: a family life saturated with religiosity, in which the four-year-old's father is the most revered figure in the community, a paragon of the virtues, and God's representative on earth. When he gave his weekly sermon, he would appear in the pulpit high

³² See Schmidt 1991 for a comprehensive discussion of the poems Nietzsche wrote during his youth, many of which suggest a loss of faith that he couldn't possibly acknowledge openly.

up on the wall at the end of the church's nave (the staircase to it being hidden) as if he had swung down from Heaven to preach. The young boy must have wondered why the Almighty had singled out his father for subjection to such an excruciating illness and death. Although what psychologists call childhood amnesia tends to prevent our remembering the experiences of our early years, it may also be true, as Fritz later writes, that "the early impressions the soul receives are enduring." (KGW I.2: 3)

Six months after his father's death, something else happened to further disrupt the daily activities of life: Fritz had a dream in which the dismal tones of mourning resound again.

I heard the sound of the organ in the church as at a funeral. Then I saw the reason: a grave suddenly opened up and my father climbed out from it wearing a burial shroud. He hurries into the church and soon comes out again with a small child in his arms. The burial mound opens again, he climbs in, and the lid sinks back upon the opening. The thundering organ sounds fall silent and I wake up.—The next day little Joseph suddenly became ill, got cramps, and died within a few hours. Our grief was enormous. My dream had been fulfilled completely. The small body was laid in the arms of the father. —In this double misfortune God in heaven was our only consolation and protection. (KGW I.1: 286)

A double misfortune indeed, especially since Joseph was just a few weeks short of his second birthday. He had been intermittently ill during the preceding nine months, and although Franziska attributed his death to "teething cramps" it was more likely the result of an infection of some kind.³³ Since her special fondness for her youngest child had been intensified by the loss of his father, the burden of grief was especially crushing for her, but surely also "enormous" for her five-year-old son. No wonder that young Fritz should write that his exposure to deaths in the family had produced in him a tendency toward seriousness and sadness.

In view of these events, it is instructive to consider an aphorism from *Human, All Too Human* with the title "The tragedy of childhood."

It is perhaps not uncommon that those who strive for noble and lofty goals have to undergo their hardest struggle during childhood: perhaps through having to maintain their attitude in the face of a low-minded father prone to illusion and lying, or else, like Lord Byron, to live in constant strife with a childish and irascible mother. If one has experienced such a thing, one will never as long as one lives get over knowing who one's greatest and most dangerous enemy has really been. (HAHI: 422)

If Nietzsche is writing here, as he so often does, about himself, one wonders what brought about this change of attitude toward his progenitor. The major factor is probably his reading of the writings that Carl Ludwig left behind, and especially the letters, since these paint a picture of the author that is considerable less flattering than the impression one receives from his widow, from Elisabeth, and from Fritz's autobiographical writings.

Under the circumstances one could well imagine Nietzsche wanting to deny the influence of heredity in matters of health and illness after the experience of witnessing his father's awful demise, even though his psychology emphasizes the importance of what is inherited by the

³³ Bohley (1987: 181) quotes a letter of Franziska's from April 1849 where she mentions little Joseph's illnesses; see also Volz (1994: 36) on the probable cause of death.

individual from parents and forebears.³⁴ And indeed his chronic headaches and eye trouble, which began in his mid-teens, later gave rise to the fear that the fate that befell his father would also befall him. Letters he wrote as he approached the age of 35 evidence considerable anxiety over this possibility: “Now at ‘the midpoint of life’ I am so ‘surrounded by death’ that it might seize me at any hour.” (Letter of September 11, 1879, *KSB* 5: 441) And as he later commented in retrospect: “In the same year as his life declined, mine declined, too. In the thirty-sixth year of my life I arrived at the nadir of my vitality.” (*EH*: “Why I Am So Wise” 1) But it is characteristic of Nietzsche that he made no attempt in his thinking to construct defensive rationalizations against the haunting fear—real, as it would ultimately turn out—of his own mental collapse.

In writing about this period of his life, during which he was moving away from the influence of Wagner (and his power as a father figure), Nietzsche explains how he turned the fateful legacy from his father to his advantage.

Now that *bad* inheritance from my father’s side came to my assistance in a way I cannot admire enough, and just at the right time—basically a predestination to an early death. Sickness *gradually liberated me, cleaning me out*. . . . Sickness likewise gave me the right to a complete change in my habits. . . . it bestowed on me the *compulsion* to lie still, to be idle, to wait and be patient. . . . but all that means to think! (*EH*: “Human, All-Too-Human” 4)

This is a fine example of Nietzsche’s technique of turning fateful necessity to his advantage, of creating value from what at first appears an utter liability. He owes his being the thinker he is to the sickness inherited from his father.

But if his father was in fact “prone to illusion and lying,” to what extent was Nietzsche’s mother “childish and irascible”?

MOTHER AND CHILD

Usually a mother loves herself in her son more than the son himself. (*HAH* I: 385)

At the age of 11, Fritz began the practice of presenting his mother with a collection of his poems for her birthday.³⁵ The first poem begins with effusive good wishes and ends with an ardent declaration of filial love:

I love you oh so much that I want to squeeze you flat
 But perhaps I’d better not, since you might not relish that.
 Yet there’s more I’d like to give you
 Which the last two lines will point to.
 Perhaps you’d like to know
 What else I want and how.
 I so much want to kiss you
 That I’ll do it here and now.

³⁴ Some late remarks from *Ecce Homo* constitute a striking exception, though the hyperbole suggests that they are perhaps not to be taken at face value: “One is related least of all to one’s parents. . . . The higher natures have their origins infinitely farther back. . . . I don’t understand how, but Julius Caesar could be my father—or Alexander, this embodiment of Dionysos.” (*EH*: “Why I Am So Wise” 4)

³⁵ The group of nine poems is in *KGW* I.1: 115–25.

The passion sounds genuine—if unusual for an 11-year-old to put in writing. The opening lines certainly made a powerful impression on Franziska, for her nephew reports that she remembered them until the end of her life (Oehler 1940: 59). Three years earlier she had remarked in a letter on Fritz's need for affection by saying: "Whenever he can he sits—just imagine—in my lap, or else stands behind me on a chair in order to hug me and kiss me." (Franziska Nietzsche, journal, cited in Goch 1994: 179–80; letter to Edmund Oehler, November 1, 1852, GSA 100/1110) The "just imagine" suggests that it was not customary for a boy just turned 8 to enjoy such physical closeness. At any rate, the lack of subsequent remarks on the topic probably indicates a gradual reduction of affectionate behavior on the part of the mother.

Along with the reasonable project of reducing his dependence on her, Franziska apparently began to impose her will on him with greater force. It was also to make up for the loss of the father, who could have exemplified the stern, manly virtues to which a son must aspire, that she concealed her maternal tenderness. Under pressure from the Nietzsche family to ensure that Fritz grow up to be a paragon among pastors, she found herself assuming more masculine postures in order to play the role of strict disciplinarian.³⁶ By withholding the natural expression of love in closeness and intimacy, she created a distance from which she could better keep the son's nose to the grindstone of schoolwork, music practice, Bible reading, and the refinement of proper manners.

A letter Franziska wrote while she was away visiting relatives indicates the extremity of her desire to exert control and ensure that order prevailed even—or especially—in her own absence.

Be a good boy and take your umbrella when it rains and if you do happen to get wet then make sure to change your clothes as soon as you get home, for you know that it's not good for you if you don't. All your things are lying on the bed near the wardrobe, and for daily wear put on your *old jacket and light gray trousers*, which you have in Pobles with you, as well as your *waistcoat*, if it's *cold* wear the *thicker gray trousers* and on Sundays *the good coat as well* which you can get Frau Ludwig to clean for you with a piece of flannel and hot water, and make sure it's well brushed before and after wearing it; and for special occasions there's your good jacket and waistcoat [and so forth, concerning underwear, shirt collars, etc.] ... Always be sure to shut whatever you've opened and lock the room when you go to school. ... Take this sheet of paper with you and put it in your desk and read it over now and then or check it to make sure that you're doing everything it says for these are "*rules of conduct*." (Letter to Fritz of June 10, 1857, KGB I.1: 321–2)

These instructions, so breathlessly punctuated and frantically over-underlined, are addressed to a boy of 12—yet since he was by all accounts remarkably mature, serious, and self-disciplined for his age, the nagging certainly seems excessive.

With no alternative but to tolerate her attempts to regulate his life down to its tiniest details, Fritz developed an obedient conformity on the outside while maintaining a private world of phantasy within, where he could enjoy a measure of autonomy and freedom. Emotional energy that had flowed toward the mother when she was more demonstrative of her affections was now, in this phase of withholding, being turned back onto the boy's

³⁶ There is an insightful discussion of Franziska's emotional attitude toward her son during the period in Goch 1994: 188–90.

own psyche. The reduction of maternal love, especially with the father absent, would feed the already anxious son's anxiety—though the increase in psychic energy as a result of the retroflection of his emotions would nourish his imaginative life. At the same time, lacking a father with whom to vie for the mother's love, Fritz still found himself confronted with "paternal" authority emanating from the formidable Franziska. But since he couldn't oppose this openly, he tended to turn his combative energies back upon himself in the form of harsh self-discipline.

In the summer of 1858 the family, now consisting of only Franziska and her two surviving children, moved again, to a larger house at Weingarten 18 in Naumburg, which would remain the Nietzsche family home until her death forty years later. The children spent most of the summer with the grandparents in Pobles, and Elisabeth reports that Fritz and their grandfather enjoyed especially frequent and intense conversations that year. But even though David Ernst Oehler, who was renowned for his pedagogical expertise, played such an important part in Fritz's intellectual development, his wishes concerning the grandson's further education were not to be fulfilled (Förster-Nietzsche 1912: vol. 1, p. 34).³⁷

The grandfather had always thought that the best training for the pastorship was the illustrious Waisenhaus, a school in the city of Halle which gave full scholarships to boys who were orphaned. Franziska had been against this because it would mean "giving up the dear boy at the age of ten," which she thought was painfully early. She was able to prevail against her father by holding out the possibility that Fritz would win a scholarship at Schulpforta, which was one of the very best schools in Europe at the time, and was situated by fortunate happenstance just outside Naumburg, an hour's walk from the new family home (Franziska's journal, GSA 100/850, and letter to Adalbert Oehler, June 24, 1895; cited in Goch 1994: 187, 186).³⁸ And indeed, whether as a result of a visit from a Pforta inspector to the school Fritz was attending or general word-of-mouth reports of the boy's unusual abilities, Franziska received a letter announcing an award.

The abundant correspondence that has survived from Fritz's first months at Pforta exhibit intensely ambivalent feelings. In the first letter to his mother, written on his first day at school, he writes that he is feeling well so far but asks what "well" can mean "in a strange place." Five days later, he writes, "Just wait, the homesickness will soon come!"; and after a further month, "I almost have the impression that homesickness is catching up with me: there are already a few signs of it." (Letters of October 6, October 11, mid-November 1858, *KSB* 1: 16, 20, 29) He clearly thinks that he ought to be feeling homesick, but is very much immersed in the new world of the school. Nevertheless, these early letters are full of complaints that he is sending many letters but receiving hardly any in return: why isn't his mother writing more often—and Elisabeth, and Wilhelm, and Gustav? He feels abandoned and is afraid that they have forgotten him already. He even writes to his mother on the third day, "*Don't forget my birthday!*"—an inconceivable eventuality in the Nietzsche family. But then two days later he is more relaxed, and jokingly requests "around 40 letters and 20 boxes and packages full of presents."

³⁷ On David Oehler as a pedagogue, see Pernet 1989: 46 n. 12 and Goch 1994: 376 n. 244.

³⁸ See also Bohley 1987: 193–4.

But the most remarkable phenomenon is the bizarre game he and his mother play concerning things he needs her to send him urgently. As soon as he arrives at Pforta he writes listing numerous items that weren't in his trunk—"inkstand, pens, soap and several other small things"—and asks for, in addition, chocolate powder and a geography textbook. Three days later he adds to the list: a pair of strong eyeglasses, his boot-jack, a small brown jug, sewing kit, and scissors, ink, a dozen writing tablets, and dress-shoes. In a second letter written the same day, he sums everything up in a large list, adding "drawing pins" and an instruction to "see the first and second letters." (Letters of October 6 and October 9, 1858, *KSB* 1: 16–19)

After four weeks and several more letters, he is *still* requesting ink, sewing kit, and scissors. The situation is all the more strange because there was an efficient postal service between Schulpforta and Naumburg—hampers of laundry, a frequent topic in the letters, were sent back and forth every week—and Fritz even met his family in Altenburg (a village halfway to Naumburg) on the second Sunday after leaving home. One has to wonder whether Franziska, usually so efficient, was at some level intentionally forgetting to send things, as a way of maintaining her son's dependence on her. Fritz certainly seems, through his insistent and urgent demands, to be seeking confirmation of maternal love. (Letters of October 23, 1858; August 20, 1860; May 4, November 26, 1861; April 19, 1860; November 25, 1860; May–June 1859; *KSB* 1: 21, 120, 157, 186, 100, 131, 66)

In his second year at Pforta he begins to keep a journal, though he gives up after the first month. The notes and letters suggest that he is suffering more from homesickness this year than before. The first entry in the journal consists of a five-point plan developed by his tutor, Professor Robert Buddensieg, for dealing with this affliction. One point, naturally, is: "If we study hard, sad thoughts will melt away"; while the final recommendation reads: "If none of this works, then pray to God our Lord." (*KGW* I.2: 98) The homesickness seems more intense than would be expected in such a situation, which is that the now 15-year-old boy is only an hour's walk away from his family and friends, and that he often meets his mother and sister on weekends and always goes home for the holidays. Franziska finds him overly dependent on her, though she is at the same time glad to be loved by the most important man in her life. Fritz finds her emotional reserve disconcerting, yet at the same time he chafes at her possessiveness. Even after he moves away from home to university, this pattern persists in a less pronounced form.

Franziska's possessiveness was all the stronger for having a double origin. Having suffered from her husband's lack of love for her (by comparison with his loving dependence on his mother), she wanted to ensure that her one surviving son would always fully reciprocate her maternal love for him. Moreover, since she had undergone unusual pains to bring him into the world and sustain him during his infant helplessness, she would always consider him basically her own property—as Nietzsche himself eventually came to realize.

Anticipating Freud's ideas about the "mother imago" and Jung's ideas about the links between the image of the mother and the "anima," Nietzsche offers the following piece of psychological wisdom:

From the Mother.—Every man carries in him an image of woman derived from the mother: this is what determines whether he will revere women or disparage them or else be in general indifferent toward them. (*HAH* I: 380)

In his own case, he tended to be attracted by, as well as attract, women older than himself, and especially women who were already married, and thus in some sense “safe.”³⁹ He would be correspondingly awkward around women of his own age or younger. He also had a tendency, of which he was aware, to project his mother’s possessiveness onto other women in his orbit, to whom he would then not want to get too close:

The Golden Cradle.—The free spirit will always breathe more easily when he finally decides to shake off that motherly caring for and watching over that is practised by the women around him. (*HAHI*: 429)

Yet Nietzsche let himself be cared for by his mother, depending on her maternal kindness for as long as it suited him. And since he was the first son, whose genius was confirmed by his appointment as professor of classics at the age of only 24, Franziska deferred to his authority and indulged his whims.

Two events caused ruptures in their over-close relationship: first Nietzsche’s explicit repudiation of Christianity (beginning with the publication of *Human, All Too Human* in 1878), and then his brief but ardent encounter with the beautiful Lou Salomé in 1882. Since Franziska remained resolutely devout until the end of her long life, she was never able to accept or understand her son’s apostasy and regarded it as some kind of mental aberration. Despite his mother’s once calling him in a fit of rage “a disgrace to [his] father’s grave,” they would always become reconciled after such ruptures, though at a lesser degree of closeness than before.⁴⁰

In later life Nietzsche would express irritation at his mother’s narrow range of experience, but her patient support of him, especially after his mental collapse, evidences a remarkable ability on her part to bear the burdens of life with competent tolerance—a virtue for which he was not as grateful as he could have been. Shortly before his mental collapse he put it most cruelly:

If I look for the most profound opposite of myself, for a boundless commonness of instinct, I always find my mother and sister—to believe myself related to such rabble would be blasphemy against my divinity. [*EH*: “Why I Am So Wise” 3]

It turned out, of course, that in spite of the enormous drain on her energies that the task of taking care of him entailed, she prevailed in the end. A magnificent photograph from 1891 shows Franziska grasping with both hands the right arm of her debilitated son and wearing a wistful expression: “Here we are again, together, at long last.”

BROTHER AND SISTER

I must confess that the deepest objection to “eternal recurrence,” my genuinely abyssal thought, is always mother and sister. (*EH*: “Why I Am So Wise” 3)⁴¹

³⁹ For example, Sophie Ritschl, Cosima von Bülow, and Ida Overbeck.

⁴⁰ Alluded to in a letter to Franz Overbeck, September 9, 1882, *KSB* 6: 256, and explained in *KGB* III.7/1: 278.

⁴¹ The earlier English translations do not have this passage, which was suppressed by Elisabeth in earlier German editions.

Since Nietzsche's relations with his sister have been well discussed in the secondary literature in English, the treatment here can be brief.⁴² His admirers love to hate the perfidious Elisabeth, who for her own nefarious ends sold her brother out to the fascists. But although she lacked his genius, Elisabeth Nietzsche was an extremely clever, capable, and astute woman, and the circumstances do not clearly warrant moral condemnation of her betrayal of his ideas and ideals.

Born in 1846, almost two years after her brother, Elisabeth lived much of her early life in his shadow. He was the first son, strong and bright, and she was the little sister, often permitted to accompany him in a subservient role—though generally not when he was with his two best friends, Gustav and Wilhelm, both of whom were bright and capable boys too. Her devotion to her elder brother had one very happy consequence: thanks to her habit of collecting every piece of paper to which Fritz applied a pen until he went to university, we have an unusually full record of Nietzsche's thoughts and feelings from an early age. She was also in a privileged position, when older, to write a biography: in fact she wrote several, though none of them is very reliable.

While Nietzsche came to dislike his home town of Naumburg intensely because of its pretensions to good, solid virtues and pursuit of bourgeois comforts, his sister liked the place for precisely those reasons. With almost proprietary pride she describes Naumburg as “a thoroughly Christian, conservative city, loyal to the King and a pillar of the throne and the church.” (Förster-Nietzsche 1912: vol. 1, p. 22) But in fact Naumburg was fairly liberal politically at the time they were growing up there: the discrepancy points up Elisabeth's tendency to look on the conservative side and see what she wants to see.

Like her mother, Elisabeth was disappointed when Nietzsche decided to abandon the study of theology at the University of Bonn and switch to classical philology instead. By way of explanation he wrote to her, in a sentence that gives concise expression to the difference between religion and philosophy: “This is where the ways of human beings diverge: if what you want is happiness and peace of soul, then believe; if you want to be a disciple of truth, then search.” (Letter of June 11, 1865, *KSB* 2: 61) She again followed her mother in deploring Nietzsche's attacks on Christianity in *Human, All Too Human*, though perhaps her greatest concern here was not to jeopardize her friendship with Richard Wagner and Cosima, with whom she had become quite close.

But the greatest break with her brother came as a result of the Lou Salomé fiasco, and indeed Elisabeth's devious machinations behind the scenes of this affair were responsible for the deepest hurt her brother ever experienced. Underestimating the intensity of his sister's dependence on him (just as he preferred to ignore his own dependence on her), Nietzsche naively supposed that he could get Elisabeth to befriend Lou and thereby improve his chances of successfully wooing the brilliant and beautiful 20-year-old from Russia. Instead Elisabeth became an implacable enemy and misrepresented, to her mother and others, her brother's plans for a Platonic *ménage à trois* with Lou and Paul Rée as a debauched project for living in sin. Nietzsche's letters from the period show him driven dangerously close to the edge emotionally, but he came through—in part because he managed to direct his energies into composing his masterpiece, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

⁴² See Peters 1977, Macintyre 1992, and Diethelme 1996 and 2003.

A third ground of estrangement between the Nietzsche siblings was Elisabeth's choice of a husband: the anti-Semitic colonialist Bernhard Förster. Revolted by what the man stood for, Nietzsche tried his best to dissuade Elisabeth from associating with him and getting involved in his ill-conceived project for a "pure Aryan" colony in Paraguay. In 1885, around the time of their wedding, which Nietzsche declined to attend, he wrote to his sister:

It is one of the puzzles I've thought about a number of times: how can it be possible for us to be blood relatives. . . .

If I was angry with you, it was because you forced me to give up the only people with whom I could speak without hypocrisy. Now—I am alone. (Draft of letter of March 1885, KSB 7: 24–5)

Beyond Nietzsche's concern for his sister's welfare, as well as the Nietzsche family's reputation, was the desire to retain some of the emotional closeness he and his sister had enjoyed. But Elisabeth was not to be deterred, and so Nietzsche eventually had to make the break: "Everything has deserted me in the meantime: even [my sister] has jumped away and gone off to join the anti-Semites (which is about the most radical way of 'finishing' with me that there is)." (Letter to Elisabeth, June 5, 1887, KSB 8: 83)

Bernhard Förster became embroiled in a scandal concerning the colony in Paraguay, went bankrupt, and committed suicide in a hotel room in June 1889. By this time Nietzsche had already undergone the mental collapse from which he would never recover. Elisabeth returned to Germany and began the project of making "the mad philosopher" famous. In her ruthless determination to turn her brother's legacy to her own financial advantage, she created a bogus book by Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, that gave the impression that his philosophy was moving toward reactionary ideas that were close to her own. She lived long enough—to the age of 94—to become acquainted with Mussolini, whose politics were close to her own, and she even presented her brother's walking stick to Hitler when he visited the Nietzsche Archive that she had established in Weimar.

These acts of perfidy were no doubt motivated by a desire for revenge: this would pay him back for his lack of gratitude for all the sacrifices she had made for him over the decades. Harsh justice, but Elisabeth did sacrifice much of the first part of her life for his sake, and Nietzsche could certainly have expressed more thanks to her for that. She turned out to be (like the rest of us) human, all too human, and her example demonstrates the power of one sibling to injure another—even posthumously.

One of Nietzsche's last words on his family, written shortly before his mental collapse (though in a text that's deliberately rich in hyperbole), may not be representative of his feelings about the two women closest to him, but its vehemence is striking.

The treatment I've been receiving at the hands of my mother and sister, up to this moment, fills me with unspeakable horror: here a veritable Hell-machine is at work, with unflinching certainty over the moment when I can be mortally wounded—in my highest moments. . . . for there is no energy for defending against these poisonous worms. . . . The physiological contiguity enables such a "pre-established disharmony." (EH: "Why I Am So Wise" 3)

His long-suffering mother surely doesn't deserve such harshness, for she always meant well and often did her son good. Elisabeth's case is more problematic, since she surely did mean her brother ill at times and often caused him deliberate harm.

She was especially effectual in destroying his reputation: to this day many people think they know that Nietzsche prepared the philosophical ground for Nazism, and was on top of that a misogynist. Had he expressed more gratitude for Elisabeth's care and attention early on, she might not have turned so vindictive and he could perhaps have escaped being so grossly misunderstood. It is sad that he turned out to be so inept in the familial relation that was to affect him the most, even after his death—and for at least a century.

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