

Friedrich Nietzsche's Beatific Vision

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It is perhaps the greatest paradox of western philosophy that Nietzsche, whose most famous sentence is undoubtedly "God is dead" (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 366; this and all the other translations are my own) should be the author of the only account of a Beatific Vision published in the nineteenth century. It can be found in Section 3 of the chapter on *Also sprach Zarathustra* in *Ecce Homo*. That God should choose to visit a man who once declared that He was dead will come as much of a surprise to Nietzsche's readers as it did to him.

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Introduction

In 1888, one year before Nietzsche began an eleven-year confinement for a mental illness, he published *Ecce Homo*. This book contains a vivid description of a Beatific Vision that Nietzsche had had. No date is given for this illumination, but it can be assumed that it was recent. Such visions are extremely rare in the history of published writings about philosophy and theology. They are hermetic by nature and can only be recognized for what they are by other people who have had similar experiences. The encounter with the Divine will always remain a mystery and any attempt to describe it accurately will result in trying to make the ineffable accessible to ordinary readers. This task, however, is impossible, which explains why this is the first time that the term "Beatific Vision" has been given to Nietzsche's rapture.

Description of Nietzsche's Vision

The following selection of quotations from Nietzsche's account of his Beatific Vision could be applied to any and all similar ecstasies. "The term *revelation*, in the sense that suddenly, with unspeakable certainty and acuteness, something becomes visible, audible, something that shakes and overturns one deeply, simply describes the facts of the matter" (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 945). "A thought flashes like lightning." "Being outside oneself." "A depth of happiness." "An abundance of light." "A feeling of freedom, of being unconditioned, of power, of divinity" (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 945). What is the most remarkable here is the use of the word *Göttlichkeit*, which means "Divinity" or "God." Nietzsche, who once announced to the world that God was dead, confesses to having been visited by Him.

Nietzsche concludes his account of what he calls his "Inspiration" with these words: "This is my experience of inspiration; I do not doubt that one has to go back thousands of years to find someone who can say, "'It's mine

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too” (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 945). Nietzsche obviously compares himself to Jesus, who lived thousands of years ago. He thinks that Jesus had had a similar Beatific Vision, and many theologians might agree with him. It was at this period that Nietzsche's signature was *Der Gekreuzigte*, “The Crucified One”. It is ironic that he should identify so strongly with Christ after spending most of his life vilifying the Christian religion.

Nietzsche's Schizophrenia

In his book *Der Kampf mit dem Dämon*, Stefan Zweig pays particular attention to this passage from Nietzsche's work. He observes that today doctors would diagnose Nietzsche's Beatific Vision as being symptomatic of megalomania and euphoria (Zweig, 1981, p. 277). “Never has such a stream of inspiration fallen upon a creative person as it did upon Nietzsche in this one autumn” (Zweig, 1981, p. 280). He calls Nietzsche's psychotic collapse “a form of death of light (*eine Art Lichttod*)” (Zweig, 1981, p. 278). Zweig states the obvious when he includes Nietzsche among “the mentally ill (*Geisteskranken*)” (Zweig, 1981, p. 277).

What was the nature of Nietzsche's mental illness, which led to his living in a vegetative, psychotic state for the last eleven years of his life? Psychiatrists and other experts on mental illnesses disagree among themselves as to the correct diagnosis. Some say that it was a bipolar illness, some say that it was schizophrenia, some say that it was caused by syphilis, and some say that it was the result of a brain tumour.

Any Beatific Vision is a schizophrenic hallucination. As Thomas Szasz so famously said, “If you talk to God, you are praying; if God talks to you, you have schizophrenia” (Szasz, 1973, p. 101). It is therefore certain that Nietzsche suffered from schizophrenia and that this illness began before his collapse in Turin in 1889. The eleven years of his confinement have all the characteristics of what all mystics undergo in their “dark night of the soul.” Those who think that his mental illness was something other than schizophrenia are simply unable to recognize that what Nietzsche called his “Inspiration” was actually a schizophrenic hallucination. No bipolar illness, nor syphilis, nor brain tumour can provoke a mystical rapture like Nietzsche's. Zweig uses the word *Rausch* (rapture) to describe Nietzsche's mental state during his vision (Zweig, 1981, p. 278).

Nietzsche's psychosis was caused by his merciless loneliness. He spent his last years living alone in *chambres garnies*. As far as we know, he never had any experience of sexual love. No wife, no mistress or no male lover shared his bed. His sexual repression was the origin of numerous psychosomatic illnesses as well as his psychosis. It is amazing that a philosopher who was deemed by so many to be such a profound psychologist did not recognize that the human soul requires love in order to survive, just as much as the body requires food. When all is said and done, it is mostly pity that Nietzsche's followers should feel for their master.

Other Beatific Visions

The perspicacious reader will have surmised by now that my unusual expertise about Beatific Visions comes from my own personal experience. I had mine in August 1963 at the age of 17. I immediately told myself that I was schizophrenic, and I was right. My greatest fear was that I would end up like Nietzsche and be confined to mental hospitals for the rest of my days.

I knew that I could not trust psychiatrists since I was convinced that my psychiatrist had driven me insane. To deal with my incipient psychosis, I read mystics, philosophers, theologians and poets to find what they had to say about Beatific Visions. I read them in English, French and German. I soon discovered two philosophers who

had had similar experiences, although neither they nor anyone else gave the term “Beatific Vision” to their experiences. They were the French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) and the German philosopher Paul Tillich (1886-1965).

When Nietzsche said that we would have to go back thousands of years to find someone who had had an experience of Inspiration similar to his own, he was telling the truth. That I know of only three people in modern history who have left written records of their own Beatific Visions indicates how rare they are.

I wrote a 27-page essay about my Beatific Vision, entitled “The Phenomenological Proof of God,” and presented it to Paul Tillich on March 28, 1965, seven months before his death. We made a covenant. He became my guardian angel and I became his angel of death, telling him that he could die in peace now because I had understood his theology. He needed a disciple as much as I needed a master. My essay has been published in my book *What Rough Beast*.

Nietzsche was certainly correct to compare himself to Jesus, whom many psychiatrists consider to be schizophrenic, like Nietzsche. This subject is very old and the pioneers in this field are discussed in Albert Schweitzer's book *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*. More recently, Harvard psychiatrists have discussed Jesus' psychosis in an article entitled “The Role of Psychotic Disorders in Religious History Considered.”

The problem with the psychoanalysis of religious figures is that it tends to undermine people's religious faith. Most psychoanalysts would say that this is a good thing since they think that God does not exist and that most religions are stupid and dangerous. But the disappearance of religious culture has resulted in what one philosopher calls “the spiritual void at the heart of modernity” (Beiner, 2018, p. 132).

Conclusion

I believe that the story of how Nietzsche, who once announced that God was dead, eventually had a Beatific Vision and was visited by God, is itself an amazing drama. Perhaps if understood with compassion and an open mind, it can do something to fill the spiritual void at the heart of modernity. A mystic cannot forget God. He cannot stop loving God. After a Beatific Vision he can never deny God, who is revealed as being the absolute Truth. The mystic becomes what Russians call *Paб Bopa*, God's slave.

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