

The ‘Aristocratic Anarchism’ of the Female Character in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

In his seminal *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell describes the outlook of Friedrich Nietzsche as one of “aristocratic anarchism, like Byron’s”.¹ This essay seeks to explore Russell’s attribution to Nietzsche in particular relation to his writings on women and argue, contrary to the general perception, that the feminine- in this context, specifically the pro(creative) faculties- is in fact vital to the philosophical outlook of Nietzsche.

At a fundamental level, the term employed by Russell stems from three words: ἀρετῆς (‘the best’), κράτος (‘power’) and ἀναρχία (‘without power’). Thus, the term is understandably somewhat confusing and contradictory in that withholding power from the best in an aristocratic system, as a system like anarchism would stipulate, is to render the very term ‘aristocrat’ meaningless. According to Russell, Nietzsche’s ‘aristocratic anarchism’ derived from his attempts “to combine two sets of values which are not easily harmonised: on the one hand he likes ruthlessness, war, and aristocratic pride; on the other he likes philosophy and literature and the arts.”² In this, Russell encapsulates the struggle between the Dionysian and Apollonian that is all-pervasive of Nietzsche’s œuvre- the Dionysian ferocity of the *sparagmos* of Euripides’ Bacchantes is represented by ruthlessness, while the Apollonian is manifest in the nineteenth century conception of *humanität*. Therefore, ‘aristocratic anarchism’ is to tow a precarious tightrope, to employ a Nietzschean metaphor, between “the analytical, formal, rational... and the ecstatic, enthusiastic, instinctual.”³ Therefore the female character can be judged in relation to aristocratic anarchism depending where she might fall in the Apollonian-Dionysian paradigm.

¹ Russell, B. *History of Western Philosophy*. p. 789

² Russell, B. *History of Western Philosophy*. p. 688

³ Grayling, A. C. *What is Good?* p. 182

Nietzsche is often criticised when writing about women for his outright and seemingly unapologetic misogyny, which is perhaps nowhere more prevalent than in his discourse with the elderly women whereupon Zarathustra finds the solution to the enigma of women in their reduction to bearing children.⁴ This first part in which the section appears was completed in 1883, mere months after Nietzsche's third marriage proposal to Louise Salomé, by whose intellect he was clearly impressed, was rejected.⁵ While it doesn't excuse his reactionary views, it does suggest to some extent that their roots are fleeting and emotional, and therefore not initially representative of Nietzsche. This is reinforced by Young who points out that, even from 1883, most of the friendships formed by Nietzsche in Sils Maria and Nice were with female feminist thinkers.⁶ It is also worth noting, that the elderly woman to whom Zarathustra speaks in this section, does inevitably best him. Moreover, the misogynistic overtones strongly contrast the positive description of Zarathustra's four lovers-Wisdom, Life, Eternity and his ' stillest hour'- as women. While the first three are objects of Zarathustra's love, it is his Stillest Hour- his 'terrible mistress'- that Nietzsche has confront Zarathustra about his weakness and challenge him to be more childlike.⁷ As well as showing that a female character is not only aware of the 'truths' that Zarathustra is promoting, but also that she is capable of challenging him on them, signifies female characters are imbued with significant power over the protagonist.

Nietzsche further postulates on the topic of women that "at the base of their soul they are wild,"⁸ yet in the narrative of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* seems to complain about the propensity for men to be entrapped by 'civilisation' (born an Apollonian reasoning for comfort). Therefore his opposition to the emancipation of women could equally be seen as an attempt to endow them with the Apollonian trait of orderliness. Similarly, from a male perspective, which he cannot escape writing from, it is exactly this feminine wildness that he sees as paramount to liberating the male from the aforementioned entrapment by civilisation. Elements of this can be seen in the

⁴ Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* I, XVIII. p. 91

⁵ Safranski, R. *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. p. 250-4

⁶ Young, J. *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. p. 398

⁷ Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* II, XXII. p. 166-9

⁸ Young, J. *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. p. 400

Dance Song where Nietzsche, taking on the voice of Life, says that she is merely changeable and untamed and in everything a woman, and no virtuous one... But you men always endow us with your own virtues- ah you virtuous men.”⁹ Much like a man can, in moving from a camel to a lion, unburden himself from the societally-imposed ‘virtues’, a women too can reject the ‘virtues’ imposed upon her by a patriarchal society. So much is this the case, that Nietzsche refers to his mistress, Wisdom, as a lioness.¹⁰ Thus Nietzsche saw in women the means to overcome but nothing to overcome, whereas men had the something- the Apollonian self- to overcome but lacked the means to do so. If Nietzsche believed that man could acquire such means, then it is arguable that women could, even if only to overcome them, acquire an Apollonian self through the ‘virtues’ that Life mentions.

As Ansell-Pearson points out, “Zarathustra's quest for meaning and truth culminates in the recognition of "eternity" understood as a woman. Nietzsche uses the idea of "woman" as a metaphor for life understood as eternal pregnancy and fecundity.”¹¹ This is reinforced in the final part- the only part written separately to the previous three- in which Zarathustra, speaking to the Higher Men, urges them to be more female:

“You creators, you Higher Men! Whoever has to give birth is sick; but whoever has given birth is unclean.

Ask the women: one does not give birth for pleasure. The pain makes hens and poets cackle.

You creators, there is much in you that is unclean. That is because you have to be mothers.

A new child: oh how much new filth has also entered the world!
Go aside! And whoever has given birth should wash his soul clean!”¹²

In this section, Nietzsche draws a parallel between women- specifically mothers- and the ‘creators’ or Higher Men, writing of both as organisms with the capacity for childbearing. In

⁹ Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* II, X. p. 131-2

¹⁰ Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* II, I. p. 109

¹¹ Ansell-Pearson, K. “Who is the Übermensch? Time, Truth, and Woman in Nietzsche.” p. 327

¹² Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* IV, XIII. XXII. p. 302

either instance, he suggests both are ‘sick’ and, through the act of giving birth, will become ‘unclean’. While this can superficially be interpreted as an attack on women who become pregnant, taking Nietzsche’s stylistic tendency to satirise his own society, this could equally be understood in relation to the negative perception of pregnant women- especially those who have done so out of wedlock. In fact, where Zarathustra discourses with the old woman in the first part, he argues that, “for the woman, the man is a means: the end is always the child.... Woman understands children better than a man.”¹³ The implication of this is that the will to power in a woman, much like the *Übermensch*, is an act of creation. Though left unmentioned, considering the emphasis on individualism in Nietzschean philosophy, the idea that a woman would utilise a man in order to create suggests it is her, and not him, that is exercising control- which, in the context of the society in which Nietzsche was living- is rather contrary to the ideals of marriage in which the man exerts control. Therefore, the unwedded pregnant woman, who would have been ostracised by nineteenth century German society, is perhaps more the figure Nietzsche is attempting to invoke. The mother therefore is not just a creator, but also a lonely figure rejected by society.

In painting the woman as this lonely figure, Nietzsche’s allusion to a much deeper dichotomy- one between those who choose the pleasure, safety and happiness of society (the Last Man) and those who choose the pain of creation that ‘makes hens and poets cackle’ (the Creators or *Übermensch*)- allows him to place such a woman above the Last Men who rejected her in much the same way he previously suggested that a man is for a woman a means to an end. In doing so, the female figure is epitomising Russell’s conception of the ‘aristocratic anarchist’. The act of giving birth, as Nietzsche points out, is not for pleasure but comes with extraordinary pain which one can connect with the Dionysian ‘ruthlessness’. On the Apollonian side, there is a fundamental and rational human need for procreation in order to ensure the survival of the human species. The logic that pregnancy is the unsurpassable act of creation thus works on a literal level. On a metaphorical level too, the act of impregnating one’s own spirit with that childlike creativity is, as demonstrated by Zarathustra himself, not a pleasant or painless journey,

¹³ Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* I, XVIII. p. 91-2

but is a necessary step in man's progression (the consequence of dismissing this endeavour is a world of the 'Last Men' and eventual extinction). So although Nietzsche seems critical of pregnancy- it being 'sick' and causing the woman to be 'unclean'- he actively encourages the aspirant Overman to undertake this process and 'to be mothers'. This ties in with the Three Metamorphoses, elucidated upon in the very first section, where Nietzsche set the highest form of creation- to create new values- held only by the child.¹⁴ It is thus illustrated that the fostering of a child, that highest creative impulse, in oneself that is necessary to the Overman is a quality of the female character.

The final line, which focuses on the washing away of the 'new filth' that comes with the child, hints to some extent at the notion that "the *Übermensch* serves on one level as a consolation for Nietzsche in that the prospect of a new humanity consoles him in the face of the world-weariness of modern Mensch."¹⁵ In this way, the Creators or birth-givers can wash their soul clean- could, and is by some, interpreted as a source of optimism that the next generation. As Leiner points out, François Bizet's *Carmen*- which Nietzsche, from his own account, had seen performed scores of times- would "illuminate the idea of self-overcoming" as in dance and spoken word alike, "her discipline and resolution... shows her demand for absolute freedom is not licentious license, not a *laissez aller*, but the freedom to define her own centre of gravity."¹⁶ The contrast of this with Nietzsche's rejoice of the "hot, this-worldly, 'southern' sensuality" of Célestine Galli-Marié's *Carmen*¹⁷ reveals that the female character could truly embody the Apollonian-Dionysian duality demanded by aristocratic anarchism. In fact, it is in the aria 'Habanera' (also known as '*L'amour est comme un oiseau rebelle*') that Bizet speaks of an untamable creature in much the same way Nietzsche speaks of Life. Similarly, Bizet also conjures images not dissimilar to that of Nietzsche's eagle as "l'oiseau que tu croyais surprendre battit de l'aile et s'envola." It is this recurring imagery of the eagle with a snake around its neck that is arguably most emblematic of that 'aristocratic anarchism' Russell writes of: the eagle, in

¹⁴ Nietzsche, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* I, I. p. 55

¹⁵ Ansell-Pearson, K. "Who is the *Übermensch*? Time, Truth, and Woman in Nietzsche." p. 320

¹⁶ Leiner, G. H. "To Overcome One's Self: Nietzsche Bizet and Wagner" p. 142

¹⁷ Young, J. *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*. p. 322

being ferocious but flying free, is the representation of the Dionysian; while the snake, a signifier of rigid discipline and sceptical wisdom, represents the Apollonian.

In conclusion, through his adoration of female characters, whether Lou Salomé or Carmen, Nietzsche illustrates that women are not necessarily in a position of inferiority in his philosophy. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, this is demonstrated by the female figure of Life who challenges Zarathustra. Nietzsche does however strongly associate the woman with pregnancy which, while being critical of, he does see as a necessity to the process of overcoming. The feminine traits, broadly represented by wildness and ruthlessness, clearly fit on the Dionysian wing, and is contrasted by the Apollonian reason and order of civilisation associated with man. This is reaffirmed in the imagery of aristocratic anarchism with the feminine being firmly embedded in the eagle and the masculine in the snake- for self-overcoming, the aristocratic anarchist is in need of both. Therefore Nietzsche's aristocratic anarchist seems to be a hermaphrodite in its embodiment of both the male and the female.

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