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I

1844–1869

We are . . . *good Europeans*, the heirs of . . . millennia of the European spirit: as such we have outgrown Christianity, and precisely because we have grown out of it, because our forefathers were Christians of the ruthless integrity of Christianity, who for the sake of their faith gladly sacrificed their goods and their blood, their station and their country. We—do the same. (FW 377)

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1

The Child

The Protestant pastor is the grandfather of German philosophy. (A 10)

1

Nietzsche's views have always seemed so strikingly different from the background of opinion against which he grew up that they have often been thought to owe their origin to a violent reaction against his upbringing. His entire philosophy even has been seen as no more than a calculated antithesis to the tradition in which he was raised. He was the heir of a line of Lutheran pastors going back to the beginning of the seventeenth century, his father and both grandfathers were Lutheran ministers, and he lived the first five and a half years of his life in a parsonage and later in an equally pious home; and it has been argued that his subsequent irreligion is to be explained by reference to these facts. There are two main reasons for rejecting this view as an adequate explanation of the genesis of Nietzsche's thought. In the first place, no serious student today would be inclined to exaggerate the differences between his outlook and that of Christianity: the tendency today—a justified tendency, as I think—is to emphasize the conventional elements in his philosophy and its connection with that 'Protestant' tradition of inquiry of which the whole of German philosophy may be said to be a part. Secondly, the need to account for the irrationality supposed to characterize Nietzsche's thought is disappearing with the growing recognition that it is not irrational at all. The notion that his philosophy was a reaction to his environment presupposed it was founded on emotion rather than on reason: the background of emotional rebellion was called on to account for the irrationalism, the irrationalism held responsible for the violence and radical nature of the rebellion. Here again the conventional picture has had to be modified, and the temptation now is to ignore

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rather than emphasize the element of rebellion which is undoubtedly present in his work and to emphasize rather than ignore its strong links with the past.

The more closely one studies Nietzsche's work, the less inclined one is to look outside it for an elucidation of its meaning or an explanation of its origin. The need is no longer felt to psychologize it away or to find in an oppressively orthodox home the ground from which it sprang; and when this need is no longer felt it becomes possible to take a more realistic view of what that home was like. It then becomes clear that the conventional picture is founded on a misconception here, too. The Nietzsche home was certainly an orthodox one; but the quality of that orthodoxy has been rather misunderstood. To an outsider, the Lutheran Church resembles the Anglican more than any other: it is not fundamentalist or fanatical, and not puritan. It holds a special place in the history of German culture and education: the *Pfarrhaustradition*, as it is called—the preservation and advancement of cultural enlightenment in the Lutheran parsonage—is one of the few unbroken threads in the fabric of German historical development over the past three hundred years. Those brought up in that tradition, whether they entered the church themselves or not, have played a disproportionately large part in the cultural and intellectual life of Germany, and when Nietzsche wrote that the Protestant (i.e. Lutheran) pastor was the grandfather of German philosophy he was telling the strict truth. His own home was constructed on the conventional Lutheran pattern. There is no question but that he was happy there, and he never said he had 'rebelled' against an environment which he found insupportable. Apart from his father and mother the most influential figure of his childhood and youth was his maternal grandfather, Pastor David Oehler, with whom he and his sister spent many holidays. Grandfather Oehler was a hunting parson of the old type; he possessed a large library and was musically gifted; his parsonage resembled a farm and for most of his working week he was more of a farmer than a clergyman. He was a very robust gentleman, had eleven children, died in harness at 72, and strikes one as being about as devout and other-worldly as Laurence Sterne. Like the Anglican Church, the Lutheran offered the lower orders one of the few routes to social and cultural betterment: the fact that Nietzsche's forebears took it is not evidence of exceptional piety (or necessarily of any piety at all). If the English-speaking reader thinks of the Anglican Church of the eighteenth century, in which a Swift could become dean of a cathedral, a Berkeley a bishop and even a Sterne not lose his living, he will have a fair idea of the climate of tolerant orthodoxy in which Nietzsche grew up.

Nietzsche's ancestry has been traced back to the sixteenth century. Over 200 forebears are known, all of them Germans. Few were peasants or farmers

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(none were aristocrats); mostly they were small tradesmen: hatters, carpenters, butchers and the like. But by the eighteenth century the families that finally converged in the philosopher were all in the Lutheran Church.

The earliest Nietzsche to enter the church was the philosopher's grandfather Friedrich August Ludwig (1756–1826), who rose to the rank of superintendent, the equivalent of a bishop. Friedrich August's mother's family were Lutheran pastors for five generations (1600–1725) and his wife's father and great-grandfather had also been in the church. He was the author of two polemical defences of Christianity in the French Revolutionary period, one of which advanced in its subtitle the belief that Christianity would endure forever. This difference of opinion notwithstanding, there is something about the grandfather that reminds us of the grandson: the extreme assertion of a threatened tradition is common to both, and there is some similarity of polemical style in their writings, although the grandfather has little of the grandson's wit and rhetorical brilliance.[1]

Friedrich August's son, the philosopher's father, Karl Ludwig Nietzsche, was born in 1813. He was destined for the church from the first and became pastor of the village of Röcken, near Lützen, and of the neighbouring hamlets of Michlitz and Bothfeld, in 1842. The following year he married one of the daughters of the pastor of Pobles, a village an hour's journey away. Franziska Oehler, the philosopher's mother, was the sixth of Pastor Oehler's eleven children. Born in 1826, she was 17 when she married Pastor Nietzsche; her education is said to have been faulty, but there is plenty of testimony to her gaiety and good sense. These may sound prosaic virtues, but they were not very much in evidence at the Röcken parsonage before she went there. Pastor Nietzsche's establishment was a quieter one than that of the farming and hunting Pastor Oehler. It was dominated by the incumbent's widowed mother, and also in residence were his two step-sisters, Augusta and Rosalie, a pair of elderly oddities, amiable, well-meaning, unmarried and mildly neurotic: they achieved posthumous fame as 'Nietzsche's aunts', the embodiment of the provincial stuffiness against which the whole Nietzschean philosophy is supposed by some commentators to be a reaction.

The new Frau Pastor was so much younger than the other members of the household it must have seemed to her she was moving from one parental home to another less agreeable, of which, far from being the mistress, she was the most junior member; when her children came along they were more her

[1]Friedrich August Nietzsche's books are: *Gamaliel, oder die immerwährende Dauer des Christentums* (1796), and *Beiträge zur Beförderung einer vernünftigen Denkensart über Religion, Erziehung, Untertanenpflicht und Menschenliebe* (1804). They afford us the only glimpse we have of an intellectual quality out of the ordinary in the Nietzsche family before the birth of the philosopher.

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contemporaries than anyone else in the house. All that we know of her shows Franziska Nietzsche to have been a notably gentle and humane person. She inherited a deal of her father's love of living, and her faith, which was profound, was of that instinctive sort that expresses itself in actions rather than sermons. She was the type of Christian who cannot conceive that anyone who has been taught the gospel can ever seriously doubt its truth, and who therefore views with an indulgent eye heresies merely written in books: the only time she really quarrelled with her son was on the one occasion she thought he intended to translate his theoretical paganism into action.

A wholly unnecessary confusion has been introduced into the straightforward tale of Nietzsche's ancestry by the story that the Nietzsches were really descended from Polish nobility. According to a 'family legend', these aristocratic forebears were Protestants who fled to Germany from Catholic persecution in their homeland. Nietzsche subscribed to this story to the end of his life; as late as 1888 he wrote to Georg Brandes: 'My ancestors were Polish noblemen (Nietzky); the type seems to have been well preserved despite three generations of German mothers', and he repeated the claim elsewhere, notably in *Ecce Homo.* Brandes, who knew of Nietzsche's history only what Nietzsche had told him, gave it wide currency by repeating it in his obituary of him. The researches of Max Oehler, sometime curator of the Nietzsche Archive at Weimar, have proved—what Nietzsche's contemporaries suspected—that there is no truth in it. It was Oehler who traced the 200 ancestors referred to, and who established that they all bore German names, even the wives' families. According to Richard Blunck,[1] Nietzky is not a Polish name, while Nietzsche is an exceptionally common one throughout central Germany, in this and cognate forms (e.g. Nitsche, Nitzke). Like many common surnames, it derives from a common forename, in this case Nikolaus (Nicholas), which, abbreviated to Nick and assimilated with the Slavic Nitz (pronounced Nitsch) became Nitsche and then Nietzsche. It is obvious that Nietzsche made no investigation of his ancestry, and his reference to 'three generations of German mothers' seems a piece of pure invention. Why he wished to believe that a family of Lutheran parsons had Polish noblemen for their forebears cannot be determined with certainty, but my own feeling is that he wanted not so much to be thought aristocratic as to be thought Polish: that is, his propagation of the legend was part of his campaign against Germany, 'Europe's flatland', the nation with 'every great crime against culture for the last four centuries . . . on their conscience' (EH—W 2), and who, moreover, had bought only 170 copies

[1]Richard Blunck: *Friedrich Nietzsche. Kindheit und Jugend* (Basel, 1953), p. 16.

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of *Human, All Too Human* during its first year of publication and whose reaction to the first three volumes of *Zarathustra* had been so cool that no publisher would risk handling the fourth. He had spent the ten years up to 1888 in producing a succession of works which should in all reason have established him as the leading figure in German literature and philosophy of his time; but nothing of the sort had happened; he had encountered silence and indifference; and his just anger at this treatment toppled over in his last year of sanity into blind, unreasoning hatred. He would now allow the Germans nothing but their crimes. No one, he said, had ever written the German language as well as Heine and Nietzsche, and Heine was a Jew and Nietzsche—was a Pole.

2

Nietzsche was born on the 15th October 1844, at Röcken. His birthday was also that of the reigning king of Prussia, of whom Pastor Nietzsche was a great admirer, and he was named Friedrich Wilhelm after the king. Pastor and Franziska Nietzsche had two further children: a daughter, Elizabeth, who was born on the 10th July 1846, and a second son, Joseph, who was born in February 1848 and died in infancy.

The parsonage in which the young Fritz spent the first five years of his life was in the heart of the countryside. Surrounded by farms, it was itself a farm of a kind, with an orchard behind and a farmyard in front. Beyond the farmyard was a flower garden, and separated from this by a hedge was what seemed to the child a paradisean spot: four ponds, full of fish and surrounded by willow trees. It was here he spent most of his time during the summer. The nearest town, Lützen, half an hour away, was a very sleepy place that woke up only for the annual fair, a visit to which provided the only occasion many of the inhabitants of Röcken had for leaving the village from one year's end to the other. The town, which lies in Saxony-Anhalt in what was formerly East Germany, is still only a small place; in Nietzsche's day it stood in a completely rural area, surrounded by villages for which it provided a market and 'capital'.

It is perhaps unnecessary to say that the revolutionary outbreaks of 1848 and 1849 made little mark on Röcken. Nietzsche records in *Aus meinem Leben*[1] that he saw wagonloads of cheering men, whom he took to be rebels, careering

[1]This document was written between the 18th August and the 1st September 1858, just before Nietzsche left home to become a boarder at Landesschule Pforta. He wanted to set down all he could remember of his childhood before leaving it behind.

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with banners flying along the road past the parsonage. Pastor Nietzsche is known to have deplored the uprisings as acts of base ingratitude towards his beloved king, and it may be recalled that the gravamen of Wagner's offence in participating in the Dresden revolt of May 1849 was held to lie in the ingratitude it displayed towards the king of Saxony, who had rescued him from poverty by making him a conductor at the royal opera house.

But all this was of no concern to the infant Fritz. The uneventful life, the changeless progression of days in which all that varies is the weather, the secure home apparently destined to endure forever, is the element of infancy, and it was the element in which Nietzsche passed his first four years. The idyll was shattered when Pastor Nietzsche became ill and died at the age of 36. It may be that this was the decisive event of Nietzsche's life: we have record of no other so likely to have been the cause of his inability in later years ever to settle down in his own or anyone else's home. Nothing strikes one so forcibly when trying to see his life as a whole as the dichotomy between the utterly settled, domestic and localized existence of his immediate and more remote forebears and his own chronic footlooseness. The son of an intensely nationalistic and rooted family, he became a rootless cosmopolitan. The ill-health which plagued him in these later years can hardly be held to account for it, as it sometimes has been; on the contrary, a sick man would be more likely to avoid travel and domestic uncertainty than a fit one. But Nietzsche avoided as if by instinct every commitment which might have fastened him to a particular place. He never married and never became a father himself, and he eluded involvement with those institutions which provide most men, even the most brilliant, with a stable background to their lives: is it fanciful to see in the sudden and, as it must have seemed to him, catastrophic collapse of his earliest home an explanation of this fact?

He was passionately attached to his father, and the shock of losing him was profound. *Aus meinem Leben* provides us with the picture he retained of him, and with a record of the feelings that accompanied the son's anxious witness of his illness and death. Pastor Nietzsche, we read, was 'the perfect picture of a country parson'.

> Gifted with spirit and a warm heart [*Geist und Gemüt*], adorned with all the virtues of a Christian, he lived a peaceful, simple and happy life and was loved and admired by all who knew him. His good manners and cheerful disposition were an embellishment to the many social gatherings to which he was invited . . . He occupied his leisure hours with good reading and with music, and he achieved notable skill as a pianist, especially in the execution of free variations (i.e. improvisation; this was also true of Nietzsche himself).

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An equally laudatory description is given us in *Mein Lebenslauf,* another autobiographical sketch, written during 1861:

> I still retain in my soul a vivid image of him: a tall, slim figure with delicate features and of a kind and pleasing demeanour. Liked and welcomed everywhere, as much for his witty conversation as for his kindly sympathy, honoured and loved by the peasants as a parson whose words and deeds were alike beneficial, the most fond husband and loving father, he was the perfect model of a country parson.

Nietzsche's most famous recollection of his father, written in 1888, has been scoffed at as an obvious idealization:

> . . . he was delicate, lovable and morbid, like a being destined to pay this world only a passing visit—a gracious reminder of life rather than life itself. (EH–I 1)

This seems, however, to be less the idealized picture of an in fact forgotten father than a portrait of a sick and dying man: Pastor Nietzsche as he was for the last nine months of his life and as he was remembered most vividly by his 44-year-old son. The effect of those last months is best conveyed in the language of *Aus meinem Leben:*

> Up to then we had experienced only joy and happiness, our life had flowed smoothly by like a bright summer's day; but now black clouds towered up, lightning flashed and bolts from heaven came crashing down. In September 1848 my beloved father suddenly became mentally ill [*gemütskrank*]. Both we and he hoped for a speedy recovery. Whenever there came a day on which he seemed better he asked us to let him preach again and resume his confirmation lessons; for his active spirit could not bear to be idle. Several doctors tried to discover the nature of the illness, but in vain. Then we brought to Röcken the famous doctor Opolcer, who was then in Leipzig. This admirable man knew at once where to look for the seat of the illness. To the horror of all of us he diagnosed a softening of the brain; although the case was not hopeless it was certainly very grave. My dear father had to endure terrible pain, but the complaint refused to improve, but grew worse from day to day. He lay on his sickbed until July 1849; then the day of his release approached. On the 26th July he sank into a deep slumber and only now and then did he awake again . . . Died the 27th July 1849. When I awoke that morning I heard weeping and sobbing all around me. My dear mother entered in tears and wailed: 'Oh God! My dear Ludwig is dead!' Although I was still very young and inexperienced I had an idea of what death was: the thought that I was forever parted from my beloved father seized hold on me and I wept bitterly. The days that followed were filled with tears and with preparations for the funeral. Oh God! I had become a

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> fatherless orphan, my dear mother had become a widow!—On the 2nd August the earthly remains of my dear father were entrusted to the bosom of the earth . . . The ceremony began at one o'clock, accompanied by the tolling of the bells. Oh, I shall always have the hollow clangour of those bells in my ears, I shall never forget the gloomy melody of the hymn 'Jesu meine Zuversicht'.

These events occurred when the boy was 4 and were recorded when he was 14; the feeling of deprivation and the sense that the world had collapsed seem to have increased rather than diminished during the intervening ten years.[1]

The nature of Pastor Nietzsche's illness and its cause have been hotly debated in the Nietzsche literature since Nietzsche himself became insane; there is indeed no more powerful witness to the shock his works from *Human, All Too Human* onwards produced in readers of the 1880s and 1890s than the evident desire many of them had to prove the author mad. That this view is untenable I hope to show when we come to discuss what was probably the actual cause of Nietzsche's breakdown. On the immediate question of whether it is likely he inherited a mental weakness of any kind from his father, the answer must be a firm No. Evidence as to what precisely Pastor Nietzsche was suffering from when he died is scanty. All that can be said with definiteness is that he was subject to very minor epileptic attacks from time to time which he did not recognize as such and which were not considered sufficiently serious to warrant treatment or surveillance; about nine months before his death he fell victim to some nervous or brain affliction which proved fatal. Franziska maintained much later (in a statement to the clinic at Basel) that he had died from 'softening of the brain caused by a fall from a flight of steps' but was never in any sense 'mad'. The term *gemütskrank*, which Nietzsche used at the age of 14 to describe the condition into which his father declined, means mentally disordered or melancholy; it is a very imprecise term and need not (strictly speaking, should not) imply insanity in the clinical sense; certainly Nietzsche himself was never *gemütskrank* but *geisteskrank*, not mentally disordered but insane. Moreover, it cannot be considered likely that the 4-year-old

[1]The quotation from *Aus meinem Leben* is an extract only: the funeral is recorded in considerable detail, with the names of the officiating clergy. Nietzsche seems to have remembered the scene with great exactitude. In *Mein Lebenslauf* the death of his father is again described, this time with a commemorative verse:

> 'Ach sie haben
> Einen guten Mann begraben,
> Und mir war er mehr!'

All this thirteen years after the death of a father he had known only in infancy!

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boy would have been allowed much contact with his father while the latter was 'mentally disordered', or that if he had he could have gained much more than an instinctive sense that something was not well.

Elizabeth's notorious unreliability and dishonesty in matters of biography make it impossible to quote her evidence in support of any contention where a difference of opinion is involved. In her biographies of her brother she does everything possible to fend off the suspicion that their father had been deranged, but she does it in such a way as to make that suspicion begin to seem well founded: she falsifies, for instance, the passage in *Aus meinem Leben* in which Nietzsche had written that 'my beloved father suddenly became *gemütskrank';* when she quoted it in the first volume of her biography of 1895 she made it read: 'my beloved father suddenly became seriously ill as the result of a fall'. This example is typical of Elizabeth's method of working. The honest and most sensible course would have been to have quoted Nietzsche's words and then denied they were true, bringing forward their mother's statement as expressing the truth of the matter and attributing Nietzsche's error to his youthful inability to understand what had happened to their father. Not only did she not do this but, having misquoted Nietzsche's manuscript, she failed to destroy it, leaving it in the Archive to be published in its correct form later.

The evidence that Pastor Nietzsche was ever 'insane' at all must be called at the best inconclusive; but there is no evidence whatever that he handed on this problematical insanity to his son. It is a pure supposition: knowing that Nietzsche had suffered a mental collapse and was insane beyond question, and learning that his father had died from 'softening of the brain', certain persons formed the convenient but baseless conclusion that the two events were connected. The obvious inference to be drawn if Nietzsche had in fact inherited a streak of insanity from his father was indeed drawn by Rohde who, writing to Overbeck on the 4th August 1889 (i.e. eight months after Nietzsche had become insane), charitably suggests that Elizabeth too must have 'the seeds of insanity' in her and adds: 'There was always something not quite right about her.' (Rohde knew that Pastor Nietzsche was supposed to have suffered from some kind of mental disorder.) Happily, his fears for Elizabeth's sanity proved unfounded: however much one may disapprove of her behaviour, dislike her opinions or question her judgment, it is impossible to attribute any of them to insanity.

But even if it be granted that the collapse of the last months of 1888 must have thrown its shadow before it, there is still no justification for thinking any of Nietzsche's works tainted. The development of his thought is quite consistent from *Human, All Too Human* onwards and gains rather than loses in

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