

## Nietzsche's Madman Parable: A Cynical Reading

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*Abstract.* Focusing on Nietzsche's madman parable from *The Gay Science*, this essay shows how the language/imagery of aphorism 125 draws on a Cynical critique of morality that has far-reaching consequences for understanding Nietzsche's notions of nihilism, transvaluation of values, and *amor fati*. My claim is that the work of Diogenes of Sinope will shape both the rhetorical structure and the philosophical thematics of *The Gay Science*. As the "Socrates gone mad," Diogenes/the madman brings his lantern to the marketplace to seek a God who has fled, the *deus absconditus*. Countering Christian-Platonic metaphysics with Diogenean satire, Nietzsche advocates the embrace of *physis* as the sphere of human creation and valuation. Against this Cynical background we can see how the madman parable's announcement of God's death has less to do with atheism or the argument about the existence of God than it does with the existential concerns of the human being.

### I.

**I**ntroduction. It comes down to us as the proclamation of all modern and postmodern proclamations: "God is dead." All too readily we take up the meaning of this proclamation even as we perhaps fail to encounter its genuine measure. But what would the measure of such a proclamation be? How to measure the immeasurability of understanding required to engage this most familiar and yet, at the same time, the hollowest of philosophical propositions. In order to try to come to some measure of this immeasurable claim, I would like to situate Nietzsche's celebrated pronouncement within a context that is unfamiliar to us—and yet one that was deeply familiar to Nietzsche himself—viz., as a commentary upon and a confrontation with the founder of Greek Cynicism, Diogenes of Sinope. Nietzsche was deeply influenced by the thought of the ancient Cynics, even declaring near the end of his career that "the highest thing one can obtain on earth [is] Cynicism." And in a letter to Georg Brandes from 1888, he writes that his book *Ecce Homo* presents "a Cynicism that will become world-historical."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 103/*Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe* (Munich: Deutscher

From his earliest philological studies in 1868 on the doxographical sources of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Nietzsche embraced many of the most fundamental Cynical tenets. Prominent among these were the renunciation of all worldly goods and possessions for a life stripped bare of attachments, as well as an existence ordered by rigorous discipline and training (*askesis*) that shunned attachments to one's city, native country, and land for a life of wandering and exile. As part of the rigorous regime of Cynic *askesis* one sought to extricate oneself from the tyrannical hold that social and moral convention (*nomos*) had upon the individual in an effort to liberate oneself from everything that ties one down—possessions, work, family, citizenship—since in the Cynic's view, each of these serves as an impediment to happiness. If human beings could but shed the shackles of conventional attachments and live as simply and self-sufficiently as birds, mice, and other animals, they would have all that they needed and more. In such a way, by living *kata physin*—"according to nature"—and renouncing the sham existence of culture (*nomos*), the individual might live as richly as a king—or even as nobly as a god.<sup>2</sup> To see Cynicism from this ancient perspective is to understand it not as something negative, not as a carping, caving resentment against the excesses of culture, but as an affirmation of life—especially a life lived in harmony with *physis* (the great theme announced in the early Nietzsche's writings on Herdritus and in Zarathustra's injunction to "remain faithful to the earth").<sup>3</sup> Hence Nietzsche will claim in his Basel lectures from 1874 on "The History of Greek Literature": "it is clear that the Cynic clings to life more than the other philosophers: 'the shortest path to happiness' is nothing other than the joy in life itself and complete indifference in regard to all other goods."

Like Diogenes, Nietzsche cultivated a profound "indifference" to life's goods—what the ancient Cynics termed *adiaphoria*—through an austere *askesis* of body, mind, and spirit, and fused this with a Cynic's devotion to *autarkeia* ("self-mastery") and to the shameless pursuit of free-speech, against society's ever-present oppression. Yet what ultimately marked Nietzsche's affinity with ancient Cynicism is his rejection of philosophy as a discipline of knowledge in favor of *philosophia* as a discipline of and for *life*. Taking up the Cynics' understanding

Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999) 6: 302; *Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003) 8: 482. Hereafter, the *Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe* and *Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe* will be abbreviated "KSA" and "KSB," respectively.

<sup>2</sup>For helpful discussions of ancient Cynicism cf.: William Desmond, *Cynics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Luis Navia, *Diogenes the Cynic* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2005); *The Cynics*, ed. R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6/KSA 4: 15; *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (Chicago: Regnery, 1962), 50–62/KSA 1: 822–35.

of their craft as *therapeia*, Nietzsche defines philosophy as therapy, as "a spiritual cure" for the maladies that beset European culture.<sup>4</sup> In this way by interpreting philosophy as a therapy aimed at healing "the sicknesses of [the] soul," Nietzsche affirms the Cynics' notion of philosophy as a lived practice rather than as a scholastic mode of turning out commentary upon commentary. In taking up Diogenes' model of philosophy as an "art of living," Nietzsche likewise adopts the Cynic ideal of the "free spirit" who embraces the most radical form of intellectual honesty (*Radlichkeit*) in order to question all conventional notions of morality. Such honesty, Antisthenes proclaims, requires the strength of Heracles, a spiritual-intellectual strength that requires self-mastery, discipline, and character—all of which count for the Cynics as the highest kind of virtue (*areté*), the strength of a virtuoso or master of one's own soul.

In what follows I would like to trace the lineaments of this Cynical influence in Nietzsche's madman parable from *The Gay Science* because I see in it the expression of a Diogenean critique of morality and of the sterile school philosophy that constructs it. Nietzsche was profoundly affected by this Cynic notion of philosophy as a form of disciplined exercise or practice that has little to do with systems of reasoning or knowledge. His work engages a dialogue with a number of Cynical practices that have gone unnoticed for the most part, especially the Cynic practice of *spoudogelion* that forms the literary-rhetorical-philosophical thematics of *The Gay Science*.<sup>5</sup> *Spoudogelion* is a Greek term formed from the combination of two single words: *spoudaios* meaning "earnest" or "serious" and *gelios* which means "causing laughter," "ridicule," or "making jest." It refers to a literary style that mixes humor with earnestness in a serio-comic vein that is marked by caricature, sarcasm, mockery, sharp-witted wordplay, and multi-layered meanings fraught with a moral intensity that presses its message to the limits of obscenity—and madness. Much like the ancient Cynics' medley of styles, *The Gay Science* "is distinguished by creative experiment, a plurality of voices and personas (or 'masks') and a variety of rhetorical styles, including anecdotes, aphorisms, riddles, pointed questions, witty answers and polemical 'diatribes,' as well as paragraphs that trail off like ancient fragments, unfinished but enigmatically suggestive."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in

<sup>4</sup>Horst Hurter, *Shaping the Future* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006); Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Michael Ure, *Nietzsche's Care: Self-Cultivation in the Middle Works* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2008); Luis Navia, *Classical Cynicism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996).

<sup>5</sup>Horst Hurter, "With the Nightraveller of Greek Philosophy," *Nietzsche and the Rhetoric of Nihilism*, ed. Tom Darby et al. (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989), 117–32; Heinrich Nietzsche, *Der kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus* (Munich: Fink, 1979), 250–78; R. Bracht Branham, "Nietzsche's Cynicism," *Nietzsche and Antiquity*, ed. Paul Bishop (Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2004), 170–81; Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, "Cynicism," *Greek Thought*, ed. J. Brunschwig and G. E. R. Lloyd (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 843–57.

<sup>6</sup>Desmond, *Cynic 779*, for Nietzsche's own formulation, cf. *ibid.*, 12.

the very first aphorism of *The Gay Science* Nietzsche mocks the ethical "teachers of the purpose of existence" who still live "in the age of moralities and religions" by underscoring what he calls "the eternal comedy of existence."<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche then opines that if there were a time when "laughter will . . . have formed an alliance with wisdom; perhaps [then] only 'gay science' will remain." It is precisely in such a time, Nietzsche believes, that there remains the possibility of a philosophical Cynicism where the philosopher can speak as a "buffoon without shame" since "Cynicism is the only form in which base souls touch upon that which is genuine honesty (*Redlichkeit*)."<sup>8</sup>

Nietzsche's narrative pose in *The Gay Science* is marked by this Cynic form of shamelessness (*amaideia*) and buffoonery tinged with the great-hearted virtue that Diogenes calls "humankind's most beautiful thing": *parthesia*, an unadulterated "freedom of speech" pushed to the limits of blasphemy, obscenity, and subversion. Like the Cynic "watch-dogs" who barked and snapped at the smug, self-satisfied citizenry of the ancient polis, Nietzsche unleashes his satiric scorn and shameless honesty on the complacent burghers of German middle-class culture. Taking up the strategies of the theatrical performer who dons various masks to unsettle his audience, Nietzsche dares imagine that "perhaps even laughter still has a future!"<sup>9</sup> Against this background of Cynical laughter and satiric jocundity we can perhaps better understand Nietzsche's own seemingly contradictory remarks in *The Gay Science* about his masterwork *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The original version of *The Gay Science* (which was composed in 1882) ended with an aphorism entitled "Incipit Tragoedia" that provided a virtual model for the opening section of "Zarathustra's Prologue" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, written in 1883. There Zarathustra's down-going serves as a kind of philosophical jesting of the earnest metaphysics laid out in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." In deeply ironic fashion, Zarathustra's *Untergang* reverses the Platonic descent into the land of the dead by portraying Zarathustra's return to the earth as a Dionysian affirmation of corporeal life. We can detect a self-conscious awareness of this jester's mentality in the "Preface" to the second edition of *The Gay Science* composed in 1886 where Nietzsche writes:

*Incipit tragoedia* we read at the end of this scrupulously unscrupulous book. Beware! Something utterly wicked and mischievous is being announced here: *Incipit parodia*, no doubt.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27-9/KSA 3: 370-2.

<sup>8</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 28/KSA 5: 44.

<sup>9</sup>*The Gay Science*, 271/KSA 3: 370; cf. also *Beyond Good and Evil*, 114/KSA 5: 157.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 4/KSA 3: 346.

Parodying not only Plato, St. Matthew, Luther, and German classicism, Nietzsche pillories the whole tradition of earnest moralizing that constitutes the ideal of nineteenth-century German education. The stylistic strangeness of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* needs to be understood against this Cynic background. Moreover, it is this same tragic-parodic interplay of the Cynic style of *spoudogeloion* that announces itself in the structural composition of *The Gay Science*. The work opens with a "Prelude" of playful and humorous poems entitled "Joke, Cunning, and Revenge" followed up in the main text by aphorisms of various length that play off the Cynic genre of the *chreia*—a short philosophical apothegm pregnant with meaning, rife with ambiguity and contradiction, and laced with wit and jest. This is then capped by a postlude, carrying the heading "Songs of Prince Vogelfrei," a collection of fourteen poems that blends the Provençal troubadour's exuberant balladizing with the Cynic's crude animality, punning on the archaic German term *Vogelfrei* which means "as free as a bird" and yet also an "outlaw" who may be shot on sight.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely this kind of Cynic irreverence that provides the background for grasping the stylistic peculiarities of the madman parable.

## II.

*Zarathustra as "Madman."* In Nietzsche's original draft of the madman aphorism from the notebooks of 1881 the first sentence reads:

One day Zarathustra lit a lantern in the bright morning, ran around the marketplace and cried: "I seek God! I seek God!"<sup>12</sup>

In this version it is Zarathustra who cries "Where is God?" and who responds: "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—I and you. All of us are his murderers"; moreover, it is Zarathustra who throws down his lantern on the ground, smashes it into pieces, and tells the crowd "I have come too early." Indeed, in this notebook passage, all the activities of the madman are carried out by Zarathustra. But why this later substitution? How are we to understand Nietzsche's decision to replace Zarathustra with the madman—and what does this decision tell us about the affinity between *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? Before proceeding with a fuller reading of the madman text I would like to cite it in full:

*THE MADMAN*—Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"—As many of those who did not believe

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 249/KSA 3: 639.

<sup>12</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *KSA* 14: 256.

in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: "What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"<sup>13</sup>

The language of this parable is unusual. It is one of the most dramatic pieces of writing in Nietzsche's entire corpus. The text offers rich poetic imagery with allegorical allusions and it does so in a narrative voice that is difficult to identify. Who is the narrator? Who is the madman? What is their relation to Nietzsche? Questions abound—as they should since the language of the text itself is marked by persistent questioning. All told, in an aphorism extending just over one page there are thirty-one questions posed. Given this predominantly interrogative mode of writing, it is hardly surprising that the voice of the narrator—and of the madman—are both marked by an unrelenting ambiguity. Nothing remains certain except the fact that God is dead. Everything can be questioned; everything remains ambiguous. Perhaps most ambiguous of all is the identity of the narrator. He speaks not in the authoritative tone of the scientist/scholar who lays out propositions or assertions, but rather *directly* at his listeners in a familiar voice employing the second person plural in the German: "Habt ihr nicht . . . gehört?" ("Have y'all not heard . . .?"). Much like the madman, his question makes both a claim and a demand upon his audience. As for the madman, he too walks a tightrope of ambiguity cloaked in allusion and mask. Is the narrator too a madman? I think it is clear that he is not. Rather, he coolly and soberly recounts in almost reportorial fashion the movements, actions, and pronouncements of the madman—"der tolle Mensch." "Toll" in German means "mad" but also "frantic," "frenzied," "raving," and "rabid," as in our expression a "mad dog" with rabies. This madman is rabid in his search for God and in his pronouncements to the pampered, self-satisfied group of bystanders to whom he delivers his message. But the madness of the madman can also be traced back within the history of philosophy to another mad *persona*—Diogenes of Sinope—who so defies convention that he too brings a lantern to the marketplace in midday sunshine to underscore the rabidity of his "search." Nietzsche himself provides a clue to this link in his early work. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he alludes to the story told by Diogenes Laertius about a bystander who posed the question to Plato: "What sort of man do you consider Diogenes to be?" Plato replied: "A Socrates gone mad."<sup>14</sup> This is the same Diogenes who in the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* is described as having "lit a lantern in broad daylight and gone about the marketplace crying: 'I seek man.'" This ancient tale of Diogenes' search has been reconfigured by legend so that what has come down to us through the palimpsest of cultural memory is the story that Diogenes takes up his lantern in broad daylight to search for "an honest man." Yet the Greek source claims only that he "seeks man" (*anthropon zeto*), not an *honest* man. The philosophical

<sup>13</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Random House, 1974), 178–80/KSA 3: 480–2.

<sup>14</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 69/KSA I: 93; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Bk. VII, ch. 10.

implications here are quite at variance. On the popular reading, heavily influenced by the weight of Christian morality, what predominates is the virtue of honesty. When read from the vantage point of Cynical philosophy, however, Diogenes' search for the human being takes the form of a radical philosophical anthropology, one directed at a reevaluation of the possibilities for human self-understanding that Nietzsche crystallized in his expression *der Übermensch*. In "The Wanderer and His Shadow," composed less than two years before the madman parable, Nietzsche writes:

*The modern Diogenes*—Before one seeks man one must have found the lantern. Will it have to be the lantern of the Cynic?<sup>15</sup>

The parallels between Nietzsche's madman and Diogenes of Sinope are unmistakable. But we still need to pursue the question of why Nietzsche chose as his madman a modern Diogenes to light a lantern in broad daylight in order to seek God. One of the characteristics of the Cynics was to philosophize in the *agora*, the marketplace; the site of economic activity where things of value were exchanged. As the crossroads between convention itself (*nomos*) and the practices of the household (*oikos*) the marketplace served as the bastion of economic values, the place where values themselves were established and contested. Diogenes Laertius relates the story of how the young Diogenes devalued the established coinage (*nomisma*) of Sinope by counterfeiting it and was then sent into exile. One of the primary aims of archaic coinage is to establish the appearance of a common measure between commodities that are intrinsically different. By sanctioning a form of exchange-value abstracted from the concrete goods or services exchanged, monetary currency affirms the power of *nomos* over *physis* in a way that radically alters the foundation of ancient Greek values. Yet Diogenes' "defacing of the currency" (*pankharaiten to nomisma*, in the words of Diogenes Laertius) aimed at "allowing convention or *nomos* no such authority as that which he allowed to the principles of *physis*." The original Greek phrase he uses, however, *to nomisma* can also be translated as "established custom, opinion or belief"; etymologically related to *nomis* which designates "belief about the deity."<sup>16</sup> Diogenes was known in antiquity as a philosopher skilled in the art of subversion, a thinker who would provoke established opinion by challenging its underlying presuppositions. Nietzsche takes up this monetary metaphor from Diogenes as a way of undermining the validity of metaphysical and moral values that sustain the belief in the Christian God. For him, "in the world of

historical values, counterfeit *rules*." Here Nietzsche deconstructs *nomos* as "law" or "convention" back to its life-roots in *physis*—what Nietzsche would later term "will to power." But apart from the link between the history of morality and the counterfeiting of the currency there were other vital ties beyond Diogenes' values and Nietzsche's. Again, from the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* we know that Diogenes was both a "homeless exile" and "wanderer" who considered himself a *kosmopolites* (a "cosmopolitan" individual or a "citizen of the world"), someone at home in the cosmos. Moreover, as a philosopher who prized freedom of thinking above all things, Diogenes was not afraid of scandalizing the public marketplace and engaging in shameful behavior as a way of radically provoking others. This art of shamelessness (*anaideia*), of extending and violating the Shiboleths of the marketplace by outrageous and sometimes lewd behavior served as a way of countering the abstractions of Platonic theory and morality by literally embodying the animal dimension in human being.<sup>17</sup> One finds traces of this privileging of animal shamelessness/*anaideia* in the very term "cynical," which derives from the Greek word *kyon* meaning "dog." As the dog-philosophers of antiquity, the Cynics resolutely pursued an antinomian course of happiness that left them free to challenge the customs of the marketplace. Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* takes up the Cynic philosophy of the "free spirit" (Diogenean anarchy), the "wanderer" and "good European" (*kosmopolites*) who, like Diogenes, is bent on "reversing the currently respected values in all realms of human activity" to the point of "shamelessness."<sup>18</sup>

Nietzsche's Diogenean madman brings his lantern into the marketplace in broad daylight not "to seek man," but to seek a God who has fled, a *deus absconditus*. In reversing Diogenes' search, however, Nietzsche's madman ironically points back to his predecessor's original search in that his pursuit of a lost God leads him to reprise Diogenes' pursuit of authentic human existence. But again the narrative logic of the search draws on the historical example of Diogenes and his attempts at counterfeiting the currency of Sinope. On this reading, the proclamation "God is dead" can be interpreted as an announcement that the theological-metaphysical currency of Western culture is counterfeit. The gold standard has lost its value; the moneylenders who ply their trade in the marketplace have been unmasked as forgers. And who is responsible for this devaluation of the highest values? None other than "you and I," as the madman declares. What is at stake here in Nietzsche's parable is a terrible will to truth that refuses to accept the false coinage of the Christian realm, an earnest and profoundly serious will that takes on the mantle of the Cynic's sharp wit. Here

<sup>15</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 311/*KSA* 2: 553. I have altered the translation somewhat.

<sup>16</sup>Lidell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940), 1178; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, VI, 20–1.

<sup>17</sup>Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), 208 alludes to the Cynics' practices of "farting, pissing, shitting, masturbating in the Athenian marketplace."

the madman adopts an ambiguous tone that provokes laughter and ridicule even as it turns such comic laughter against its listeners, implicating them in the very scandal from which their aloof derision seeks to insulate them. Against this Cynical background we can see how the madman parable's announcement of God's death has less to do with atheism or the argument about the existence of God than it does with the existential concerns of the human being. Nietzsche makes this all too clear in a late aphorism from *The Gay Science*:

Insofar as we reject Christian interpretation and condemn its "meaning" as counterfeit (*Falschmünzerei*), what comes at us immediately in a terrifying way is the Schopenhauerian question: *Does existence have any meaning at all?* A few centuries will be needed before this question can ever be heard completely and in its full depth.<sup>19</sup>

And in *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche links the countereffing of the highest values with the "History of European Nihilism" against which he undertakes an "Attempt at a Transvaluation of All Values":

Everywhere else where spirit today is at work in a rigorous, powerful way without any countereffing, it now completely lacks an ideal—the popular expression for this abstinence is "atheism"—*except for its will to truth*. . . . All great things bring about their own demise through an act of self-annulment: that is the law of life, the law of *necessary* "self-overcoming" in the essence of life. . . . In this way, Christianity as a *dogma* perished on its own morality; in the same way Christianity as *morality* must also now perish—we stand on the threshold of *this event* (*Ereignis*).<sup>20</sup>

Against this background we can now read *The Gay Science* §125 as a recuperation of Diogenean parody and satire that comes together as a polemic against the canons of Christian morality that dominate the West. Much as Diogenes donned the mask of a "mad Socrates" to caricature what he saw to be the madness of Plato's philosophy, Nietzsche apes the madman in order to expose the madness of *both* Christian morality and the Enlightenment atheism that imagines itself to be free of the metaphysical presuppositions of Christian belief. By pushing this madness to its limits, Diogenes sought to devalue the otherworldly values of Plato and revalue the world of *physis*. In attempting such a reevaluation Diogenes situated himself at the threshold of an epochal transformation—the death of the tragic, Pre-Socratic world and the birth of Platonic-Christian metaphysics. As

he brings forth his lantern into the light of the bright morning sun, Nietzsche's madman positions himself at the threshold of another epochal transvaluation: a break with Christian morality and the affirmation of a Dionysian will to life that seeks to justify all that is. In the spirit of honoring the importance of the *threshold* for his proposed transvaluation of all values, Nietzsche entitles book IV of *The Gay Science* "Sanctus Januarius"—a tribute to the Roman deity Janus, god of doors, entrances, and thresholds.<sup>21</sup> At the threshold of his epoch, Nietzsche seeks to pronounce a cosmody that justifies (*dike*) all that is, one that overthrows the traditional Christian-Leibnizian theodicy with God at its center. Yet once he proclaims the death of God, the madman realizes "I come too early . . . my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way." To effect the transvaluation will require time. Searching alone will not suffice. Rather, the very tradition of searching itself must be reversed.

In the *Republic* (618c) Plato embarks upon a "search" for justice that becomes paradigmatic for Western thought. In Greek, *zetesis* can mean "seeking," "searching for" but also "inquiry, investigation, especially of a philosophic nature," as well as "a judicial inquiry."<sup>22</sup> By bringing a lantern in midday to the *agora* to search for "man" Diogenes was both mocking Platonic *zetesis* as well as initiating a radically zetetic gesture of his own, by way of a reversal. In searching for God, Nietzsche's lantern-carrying madman not only transforms Diogenes' search, he upends the whole tradition of Platonic *zetesis* that has shaped the discipline of philosophy in the West—namely, the search for justice as the highest virtue of the soul in accordance with the transcendent Idea. Moreover, like Diogenes, the madman challenges the Platonic claim from the *Phaedo* that "the only valid currency (*nomisma*) for which things should be exchanged is wisdom" since wisdom alone functions as "true virtue" (*Phaedo* 69a-b). Much as Diogenes' strategy of countereffing undermines and devalues the Platonic currency of the highest values, so too does Nietzsche's. In effect, the madman's search for a dead God forces the complacent bystanders to confront "the whole countereffing (*Falschmünzerei*) of transcendence and the beyond."<sup>23</sup> Hence Nietzsche can declare: "My philosophy [is] an inverted Platonism."<sup>24</sup> The madman's search then, like Diogenes', needs to be understood not simply as a call for discovery or for knowledge, but as an inquiry that insists "all things are at risk":

*A new degree of culture would in a moment throw the whole system of human pursuits into an upheaval.* Now if such thinkers are dangerous it is of course

<sup>19</sup>Januarius", "Janus" in: *Der Kleine Pauly* II (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1979), 1311-4.

<sup>21</sup>Lidell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 635.

<sup>22</sup>Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo*, 256/KSA 6: 43.

<sup>23</sup>Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist, Ecce Homo*, 256/KSA 6: 43.

<sup>19</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 219 (trans. altered)/KSA 3: 600; on countereffing and God cf. KSA 5: 223-4, 409.

<sup>20</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 125-7/KSA 5: 409-10. I have altered the translation somewhat.

clear why our academic thinkers are harmless. . . . They inspire no terror; they unhinge nothing at all; and of all their bustle and endeavoring one could raise the same objection as Diogenes when someone praised the philosopher to him: "How can he be considered great since he has been a philosopher so long and has never yet *disturbed* anyone?" Indeed, that ought to be the epitaph of all university philosophy: "It never disturbed anyone."<sup>25</sup>

What the madman risks in proclaiming the death of God, besides the mockery and derision of the "enlightened" bystanders, is nothing less than the validity of the highest currency in the marketplace. This Diogenes redux brings his lantern to shed light on the scandal of Enlightenment itself. With a Cynic's ear for parody he alludes to three images that sustain the Western table of values and the validity of its currency: *the sea*—which stands for the infinitude of God; *the horizon*—which serves as the limit to human knowledge and the boundary of the knowable world, and *the sun*—whose place in Platonic philosophy stands as the symbol of the Good and in Copernican astronomy as the center of the cosmos that shapes both Western philosophy and science. But the madman finds that this conventional currency is counterfeit; its metaphysics posits a "true" world that is naught but a "fable," while its ethics underwrites values that prove injurious to life. Hence, while the bystanders can laugh and congratulate themselves for not believing in God, the madman cannot proceed so easily. He recognizes through his own anti-Platonic *zetesis* that these bystanders have not yet grasped the nihilistic consequences of the death of God—that without the Platonic Sun guiding its moral solar system what we now face is a "long, dense succession of demolition, destruction, downfall, upheaval that now stands ahead." The center collapses, "the aim is lacking; 'why' finds no answer." From the optic of this nihilistic vision we discover that "since Copernicus the human being has been rolling from the center toward X."<sup>26</sup> No longer can the human being assume its role as the measure of all things since the very standard of measure has been undermined by the death of God. And yet for these bystanders in the marketplace the consequences of such a loss have hardly been addressed. They cling to their cocksure atheism with a sense of self-satisfaction that inures them to the profound destitution of the madman's *kyrygma*. As Nietzsche underscores in his parable, the "event"-character of such an epochal happening "has not yet reached the ears" of the bystanders. The "deed" of decide, Nietzsche claims, "is still more remote to them than the remotest stars—and yet they have done it themselves!"

<sup>25</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 193/KSA 1: 426–7. I have altered the translation somewhat.

<sup>26</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Random House, 1968), 8–9/*Der Wille zur Macht* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1930), 8–10: *Ges. Werke*, 120, 199/KSA 3: 482, 573.

Hence, to understand this "event"-character of the death of God requires a closer look at the text. As the madman appears in the marketplace his first words ring out—"I seek God! I seek God!" He does not proclaim the death of God until *after* his original pronouncement has been met with laughter and derision. It is only following such condescending ridicule that the madman finally declares: "whither is God? . . . I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers." In other words, in the teeth of the presumptive self-assurance of the unbelieving bystanders, the madman comes to understand the futility of his search. In a scene that condenses a centuries-long process into a single moment, the madman experiences the death of God as an *event* that lays bare the culpability of us all in this awesome murder.<sup>27</sup> For the enlightened atheists in the crowd the madman's declaration appears non-sensical; for, according to their logic, God either does or does not exist. She cannot be "killed." Yet the madman seeks to show that it is the very *idea* of God that has been felled like a dead tree in the forest of metaphysics, and that such a deed has profound consequences. Nevertheless, the doers still know nothing of their deed; they remain injured to the event-character of this happening. At the portal of a new history of humanity, one freed from the burdensome superstitions of the past, the madman still detects a foul order in the air. In the original German text Nietzsche writes of the "göttlichen Verwesung" or "divine decomposition/putrefaction" of God's rotting corpse that not all can smell; but one can also read *Verwesung* here as a pun on the German term *Wesen* meaning "being" or "essence." Within this register the parable can be read *both* as a meditation on the foul-smelling lie of otherworldly comfort that sustains Christian moral reckoning *and* as a critique of the lingering stench of Platonic ideals that pollute the healthy atmosphere of Zarathustra's high mountain air. The *Wesen* ("essence") of Christian-Platonic metaphysics *verweset* ("is rotting"). Here, as elsewhere, Nietzsche counters this Christian-Platonic legacy with a healthy dose of Diogenean satire as he seeks to challenge its reliance on metaphysical ideals by advocating the Cynical embrace of *physis*. But in his effort to combat the life-negating effects of Plato's metaphysics he also draws on another anti-Platonist from antiquity, the Greek historian Thucydides who becomes for him the exemplar for a non-moral interpretation of justice. In a notebook entry from 1888 Nietzsche remarks: "My convalescence, my predilection, my cure from all Platonism has always been Thucydides."<sup>28</sup> One of the high points of Thucydides' monumental *History of the Peloponnesian War* is the view of Athens laid out by Pericles in his "Funeral

<sup>27</sup>On the death of God as "event" cf. Martin Heidegger, "The World of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead,'" *The Question concerning Technology*, ed. and trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 53–112/GA 5: 209–67.

<sup>28</sup>Nietzsche, KSA 13: 675

Oration" in Book Two. There Pericles proudly declares that one of the fundamental tenets of the greatness of Athens is that its citizens "keep to the law": "we obey the laws themselves, especially those . . . unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break."<sup>29</sup> In embracing *nomos* (law, convention) as the heart of the Athenian polis, Pericles idealizes what he takes to be the source of Athenian values. Yet, master ironist that he is, Thucydides undermines this vision by following it immediately with a clinical diagnosis of the catastrophe to which Athens succumbs: a plague (*physis*) that leads to the breakdown of civic law and "the beginnings of a state of unprecedented lawlessness (*anomia*)."<sup>30</sup> Echoing Thucydides' response to Pericles' funeral oration as an account of the power of *physis* over convention-driven *nomos*, Nietzsche's parallel funeral oration for God in *The Gay Science* lays bare the bankruptcy of all conventional values (*nomoi*) as counterfeit currency (*nomisma*). For him, the dead God, like a counterfeit coin, simply no longer has any power to sustain its value. As the murderers of all murderers how do we face up to our deed?:

How does such a one console himself? How does he purify himself? Must he himself not become the most powerful and holiest of poets?<sup>31</sup>

The task posed by the Diogenean lantern-bearer exceeds the limits of idealized convention. Before embarking on the task of building new values, we must first dismantle and destructure the old ones. This requires a rare insight into the amoral and anomic workings of *physis*. Such wisdom requires that we must first be just to all things, affirming the justice of what *physis* brings with a Thucydidean-Cynical intensity that allows us to embrace what fate and chance (*tyche*) provide. Nietzsche coined a phrase for this most Thucydidean affirmation of *physis*: he called it *amor fati* ("love of fate").<sup>32</sup> Only that individual who can accept this love will be in a position to create new values that overturn the counterfeit metaphysics of the beyond. This is the genuine goal of the Diogenean search for "man": an attempt to find a poet-creator who seeks not only to overturn conventional values, but to transvalue them via "eine Umwertung aller Werte." Against this background we can perhaps better understand why in his original draft of the madman parable Nietzsche chose Zarathustra as the Diogenean lantern-bearer—since it is Zarathustra who fulfills Diogenes' original task of *parabhartrien*, of "striking out of circulation false standards and values of all kinds" and transvaluing them.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 145, 155.

<sup>30</sup>Nietzsche, *KS4* 9: 590.

<sup>31</sup>Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1571/*KS4* 3: 521; cf. also *KS4* 13: 492.

<sup>32</sup>Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VI: 20; and Donald Dudley, *A History of Cynicism* (London: Methuen, 1937), 22.

It is at this juncture in the history of the West that Zarathustra/Diogenes/the madman proclaim an end to the ontological frame of a world that threatens to break asunder at its seams. The proclamation "God is dead" can now be understood as referring not merely to the traditional God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but rather to Pascal's "God of the philosophers," the God who functioned as the axiological center of Western values.<sup>33</sup> Given this terrifying void in the cosmos, how are we to carry on? What remedies can we concoct for overcoming our own sense of hopelessness and despair? No longer can we avoid confronting the remorselessness of our situation since "Nihilism stands at the door." How are we to react to this epochal event? The impact of this Nietzschean diagnosis and demand upon Western thought would have profound consequences. Philosophy itself would be turned on its head and the conventional frame of philosophical questioning would be assailed with renewed fervor. Now epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, and axiology would be rethought as questions about the meaning of human existence that can no longer be reduced to mere opinions or matters of personal preference. With Diogenes' candor and wit Nietzsche would bring his lantern into the marketplace of philosophical exchange and initiate a zetetic search for *der Uebermensch*—that singular figure capable of initiating a transvaluation of all values, of shifting across (*über*) the divide between one epoch of theistic metaphysics and another of Dionysian affirmation and *amor fati*. To find this man, Nietzsche would claim, one needs to become "the modern Diogenes."<sup>34</sup>

Yet if the madman parable teaches us anything, it is to be wary of the all-too-easy cynicism that pervades modern life, the cynicism marked by disenchantment, disbelief, and the jaded self-awareness that already understands what is at stake before ever having to risk putting anything at stake. Such a cynicism winds up embracing what Peter Sloterdijk calls "enlightened false consciousness"—a consciousness that "accepts existing conditions which it doubts, to accommodate itself to them and finally even to conduct their business." Even as these cynics see through the veneer of social convention and its bankrupt ideals so that "they are not taken for suckers," they are unable to commit themselves to new ideals that might overturn them.<sup>35</sup> This modern cynic then is the one who, as Oscar Wilde phrased it, "knows the price of everything and the value of nothing." Or, in H. L. Menckens's formulation, the cynic is that person "who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin." Yet the ancient Cynic does not stop

<sup>33</sup>Pascal, "Memorial" in: *Pensées* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 178.

<sup>34</sup>Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 310/*KS4* 2: 553.

<sup>35</sup>Peter Sloterdijk, "Cynicism—The Twilight of False Consciousness," *New German Critique* 33 (1984): 190–206; at 192–4; Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works* (New York: Perennial, 1989), 418; William Desmond, *The Greek Practice of Poverty: The Origins of Ancient Cynicism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2006), vii; Andreas Urs Sommer, *Friedrich Nietzsche's "Der Antichrist": Ein biblisch-historisch-kritischer Kommentar* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 10–11.



at sneering fault-finding, but seeks to undermine convention so as to transform and revalue it. In this sense, Nietzsche's Cynical philosopher recognizes the disease of despair that plagues modern consciousness and sets out to offer therapy to heal the afflictions of modern cynicism with the anti-toxins of the ancient Cynic's cure. In *The Anti-Christ*, punning on the German term for medicinal—*medizinisch* (with an "1")—he calls his therapy for the Cynical soul *medizynisch* (with a "2"): not medicinal, but "medi-Cynical." Yet even as he acknowledges the "great drama in a hundred acts reserved for Europe in the next two centuries, the most terrible, most dubious drama"—viz., the drama of nihilism—Nietzsche can still claim that it is "perhaps also the one richest in hope."<sup>36</sup> Within such a world of faded strategizing Nietzsche's madman risks his own sanity in an effort to alter the consciousness of those who surround him. In the face of the cynical laughter that the madman confronts, he still brings the light of his lantern to the marketplace even if it brings no illumination to the crowd around him. Would that we cynical bystanders in the marketplace of the modern *agora* might declare a moratorium on our own complacent enlightenment so that we might recover some of the spirited wonder of philosophical Cynicism that buoyed the followers of Diogenes.

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*An asterisk denotes a publication by a member of the American Catholic Philosophical Association. The Editors welcome suggestions for reviews.*

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