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## Nietzsche's Graffito: A Reading of *The Antichrist*

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Gary Shapiro

Even those writers who have good things to say about Nietzsche usually do not have good things to say about his penultimate book, *The Antichrist*. Like *Ecce Homo* it is often described as at least prefiguring Nietzsche's madness if not (as is sometimes the case) said to be part of that desperate glide itself. Those inclined to reject the book may be encouraged in this view by Nietzsche's statement to Brandes, in November 1888, that *The Antichrist* is the whole of *The Transvaluation of All Values* (originally announced as a series of four books) and that *Ecce Homo* is its necessary prelude. The reader will have already discerned my intention of retrieving this exorbitant text for the Nietzschean canon. Such operations of retrieval are standard enough moves within a certain kind of philological discourse which privileges the book as an expressive or cognitive totality. But Nietzsche, the arch philologist, is today often regarded as not only undercutting the grounds of such moves by challenging their hermeneutic presuppositions but as having exemplified in a paradigmatic fashion the discontinuous, fragmentary or porous text. The second view of Nietzsche's writings is a very traditional one; it is a commonplace with Nietzsche's earlier readers to regard all of his writing as distressingly wanting in order and style, despite their admiration for his thought. Such has continued to

be the assumption of Anglo-American readers like Walter Kaufmann and Arthur Danto, who have aimed at articulating the internal order of Nietzsche's thought which the stylistic fireworks of the texts obscure. Recent French readers, most notably Jacques Derrida, have tried to show that fragmentation and undecidability are not merely secondary features of Nietzsche's writing but constitute its very element. Derrida outrageously suggests that the jotting "I forgot my umbrella" is typical of *all* Nietzsche's writing in its ambiguity and undecidability of meaning and in its systematic evasion of all contextual explication. One might wonder whether such a strategy of reading is indebted to Nietzsche's own hermeneutic strategy in *The Antichrist*. There Nietzsche anticipates Heidegger and Derrida by relying on the figure of *erasure* to designate his own relation to Christianity, its textual traditions, and its central figure, Jesus. Following the nineteenth century philological and historical methods to their extreme and thereby overturning and transvaluing (*umkehren* and *umwerten*) both the methods and Christianity, Nietzsche tries to restore the blank page which is Jesus' life to its pristine purity of white paper, *tabula rasa*. In this respect Nietzsche's project is very much like Robert Rauschenberg's erased De Kooning and like Derrida's attempt to shatter any determinate meaning in Nietzsche himself by revealing the irreducible plurality of woman in the apparent masculine ambitions of order and control in Nietzsche's style. All of these efforts nevertheless remain marked with the *signatures* of their authors; the negation of a negation cannot be negation itself. At the end there is Rauschenberg's art, Derrida's project of deconstruction, Nietzsche's graffito scrawled on the Christian text. This, however, is to anticipate the results of my project of retrieval.

Just as erasure is always an act which leaves its own mark, so retrieval is possible but need not produce that totalizing organic unity which has been the constant phantom of aesthetic thought. If retrieval is always partial it is also easier because the excesses of Nietzsche's readers here have been egregious. Consider, for example, Eugen Fink's Heideggerean book on Nietzsche which contains only a brief analysis of *The Antichrist*, dismissing its philosophical value:

In the text *The Antichrist (Attempt at a Critique of Christianity)* Nietzsche battles against the Christian religion with an unparalleled fervor of hatred, and with a flood of invectives and accusations. Here the virtuosity of his attack, leaving no stone unturned, reverses itself. The lack of measure destroys the intended effect; one can't be convincing while foaming at the mouth. Essentially the text offers nothing new; Nietzsche collects what he has already said about the morality of pity and the psychology of the priest—but now he gives

his thoughts an exorbitant, violent edge and wants to insult, to strike the tradition in the face, to "transvalue" by valuing in an anti-Christian way.<sup>1</sup>

Fink's comment suggests that his reasons for thinking that "the text offers nothing new" may be just the stylistic excesses and rhetorical failings of which he accuses it. Certainly his judgment on the book follows well-established opinion about its place in the Nietzsche canon. Even when the book is regarded as a culminating work (applying a dubious schema of linear development), it is usually employed to demonstrate the tragedy of Nietzsche's career as author and thinker. Karl Löwith calls it the "logical conclusion" of the critique of Christianity begun in the untimely meditation on D. F. Strauss, author of the nineteenth century's first great life of Jesus. Yet according to Löwith even this late work shows that Nietzsche has not escaped his obsession with Christianity. From this perspective we would have to say that Nietzsche the philosopher is not free of the bad blood of German theology which he denounces so vehemently:

Among Germans one will understand immediately when I say that philosophy has been corrupted by theologian blood. The Protestant pastor is the grandfather of German philosophy, Protestantism itself is *peccatum originale*. (A 10)<sup>2</sup>

It could then be argued that the growth and intensity of the obsession is part of the madness which prevented Nietzsche from seeing the book through to publication and which led him to consider it, alternatively as the first part of the *Transvaluation*, as the entire *Transvaluation*, and then as the *Curse on Christendom* which required *Ecce Homo* as a balance.<sup>3</sup> Yet even the last self-interpretation permits another construction: *Ecce Homo* balances *The Antichrist* by showing that the great curser and destroyer is one who lives in the halcyon element of the "perfect day, when everything is ripening and not only the grape turns brown" and asks "How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life?"<sup>4</sup>

What Arthur Danto calls the "unrelievedly vituperative" tone of the book is everywhere evident. At the conclusion of the book Nietzsche says of the Christian church that "to me, it is the extremest thinkable form of corruption, it has had the will to the ultimate corruption conceivably possible. The Christian church has left nothing untouched by its depravity . . ." (A 62). And Nietzsche pushes the rhetorical contrast to the extreme by defending the Roman Empire against Christianity, inverting the usual belief in the civilizing virtue or necessity of the latter's conversion of the former:

Christianity was the vampire of the *Imperium Romanum* . . . this most admirable of all works of art in the grand style was a beginning, its structure was calculated to *prove* itself by millennia. . . . But it was not firm enough to endure the *corruptest* form of corruption, to endure the *Christian*. . . . These stealthy vermin which, shrouded in night, fog and ambiguity crept up to every individual and sucked seriousness for *real* things, the instinct for *realities* of any kind, out of him, this cowardly, womanish and honeyed crew gradually alienated the "souls" of this tremendous structure . . . (A 58)

It is this tone which might be taken to justify the reduction of Nietzsche's thought to the first-liner of a graffito sometimes found in modern cells and catacombs:

God is dead—Nietzsche  
Nietzsche is dead—God

This reduction could appear to be the creative interpretation of a masterful will to power—if Nietzsche's thought and style are as uncontrolled as the critics suggest. Yet there are some signs at the beginning and end of the book which might lead us to pause. Nietzsche himself anticipates the strife of revengeful graffiti at the conclusion of his text:

Wherever there are walls I shall inscribe this eternal accusation against Christianity upon them—I can write in letters which make even the blind see . . . (A 62)

At the same time Nietzsche says in his preface that his readers must have a

"predestination for the labyrinth" and "new ears for new music" if they are to understand this difficult writing. So like all of Nietzsche's books, *The Antichrist* is self-referential. It is concerned with those very questions of how it is to be read and how it exists as a piece of writing which we are disposed to think of as derivative and external interests of the critic and historian. The words which can be written on the wall are also directed by a powerful thought and a complex rhetorical strategy.

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche imagines "a perfect reader" who would be "a monster of courage and curiosity; moreover, supple, cunning, cautious; a born adventurer and discoverer" (EH 3). *The Antichrist* is in need of such readers and its need is compounded and complicated by the fact that it offers a Nietzschean account of what might variously be called

interpretation, hermeneutics, or semiotics. To see this point it is necessary to contest an expressivist or emotivist reading of the text. That is we must question the assumption that because of the emotional intensity of its utterance we must read the book primarily as an outburst of rage or hostility. The rage and hostility are there in abundance; but we should not assume that their very presence excludes a significant structure of thought or that a writing with such a tone could not possibly contain any new thoughts of its own.

As both the inscription and the quotation from Nietzsche suggest, a graffito, whatever its peculiarly individual and private aspects, is inscribed in a public space, often in reply to others and inviting its own challenges and defacements. Like other texts, but in a self-conscious way, *The Antichrist* makes sense only in relation to other texts. It is a book which recalls a number of a similar genre (lives of Christ, polemical histories of religion) which were an important part of nineteenth century thought. Even its title is one which had been used, for somewhat different purposes (in 1873) by Ernest Renan, in a book which Nietzsche read a year before writing his own *Antichrist*. It is worth pointing out that Renan is a frequent antagonist both in *The Antichrist* and in other texts of the same period. In Renan's *Antichrist*, the Antichrist is Nero; not Nero merely as a savage persecutor but as the anxious parodic artist whose terrible and genuine aesthetic accomplishment is the theater of cruelty. Renan credits Nero with the discovery of a new form of beauty in which the defenseless virgin torn by the wild beast replaces the classic beauty of the integral and well-formed sculpture. Did Nietzsche, whose juxtaposition of Rome and Christianity is a constant theme of *The Antichrist* and *The Genealogy of Morals* identify himself with Nero? Perhaps only later when, mad, he entertains fantasies of imperial or divine power and writes "I am all the names of history"; Renan notes that Nero's histrionic ambitions led him to imitate or parody all of the great poetry of the classical world.<sup>5</sup>

These resonances are meant to suggest that *The Antichrist* is not immediate expression but a book which refers us back to other books and that the processes of writing, interpreting, reading, censoring and defacing are so far from being taken for granted that they form the chief means of elucidating Nietzsche's attack on Christianity. Nietzsche's *Antichrist* is full of references to the texts of the Old and New Testaments, to their textual histories, to the priestly fraudulence which produced them, to the texts of the liberal apologists for religion of the nineteenth century, to the textual sophistication of philologists and to the possible text, better and more accurate than all the others, which Dostoyevsky or his like would have written if alive at the time of Jesus. Within this context *The Antichrist* offers, at its heart, one more narrative of the life of Jesus and one of the choicest examples of what Paul Ricoeur has called the hermeneutics of suspicion.

All of the book either leads up to or proceeds from Nietzsche's

concern with the textual politics of Judaism and Christianity. That Nietzsche should focus so much of his attention on the way in which the Bible was successively produced, edited, re-edited, interpreted and criticized could be justified simply in terms of the Jewish and Christian claims to be religions of the book. But Nietzsche has more specific reasons for this concern. All morality is a semiotic interpretation of the body and society; if there is to be a transvaluation of values it must proceed by offering a new reading of that which has been misread. So we find, as in *The Genealogy of Morals*, that the great hermeneutical conflict in *The Antichrist* is between the priest and the philologist. Nietzsche's great enemy is Paul, whom he credits with a genius for lying which was immediately taken up by the church; in doing so he and they declare war on the philologists:

Paul *wants* to confound the "wisdom of the world": his enemies are the *good* philologists and physicians of the Alexandrian School—upon them he makes war. In fact, one is not philologist and physician without also being at the same time *anti-Christian*. For as philologist one sees *behind* the "sacred books", as physician *behind* the physiological depravity of the typical Christian. The physician says "incurable", the philologist "fraud"...  
(A 47)

The paradigm of priestly misreading and fraud is to be found in the editing of the Old Testament. Nietzsche accepts the general results of the higher criticism here, although his tone is completely different from the scholarly objectivity at which the professional philologists aimed. Just ten years before the writing of *The Antichrist*, Julius Wellhausen had written his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* in which he argued that the Law could not be the basis of the histories and prophetic writings but must have been composed at a later date.<sup>6</sup> More specifically he attempted to show that it was only during the exile, following the Assyrian victory in the sixth century, that the shift occurred from Israel—a land of warriors, kings, and prophets—to Judaism, a religion of extensive law and ritual reserving a special place of power for the priests. It was the priests who attempted to preserve the life of their people even at the cost of exchanging a vital life for ritualistic constraint; and part of the price to be paid for this change would be a tremendous enhancement of the power of the priest within Judaism. In order to consolidate their power they edited the sacred writings which already existed and added new ones of their own which radically displaced priestly law and the political supremacy of the priest much further back into the past, providing them with divine and traditional sanction. The work of Wellhausen and others like him is not at all Nietzschean in tone; it is not only firmly grounded in

contemporary philology but offers a brilliant example of how that philology could be employed with methodical precision in order to produce works of the greatest scope. Nietzsche alludes to this scholarly tradition although he never explicitly mentions Wellhausen. Certainly the five stage history which Nietzsche offers of Judaism and which he declares to be "invaluable as a typical history of the *denaturalizing* of natural values" is a radicalization of Wellhausen's segmentation of that history (A 25-7). Wellhausen's method of distinguishing exilic and pre-exilic Judaism is here filtered through the opposition of "good and bad," "good and evil" and the psychology of the priest. This capsule history may bear some comparison with that which Nietzsche had written concerning ontological inversion in his last book, *The Twilight of the Idols*: "How the True World Became An Error." According to Nietzsche the strata of Jewish history are: (1) "in the period of the Kingdom, Israel too stood in a *correct*, that is to say natural relationship to all things. Their Yahweh was the expression of their consciousness of power, of their delight in themselves, their hopes of themselves"; (2) After internal anarchy and external oppression have destroyed this natural state, it remains as an ideal—expressed by the prophets; (3) when the ideal fails as an ideal, Yahweh becomes *only* a god of justice "in the hands of priestly agitators" who establish that most mendacious mode of interpretation of a supposed "moral world-order"; (4) the priests, who have seized power within Judaism rewrite history in order to disparage the earlier great age in which the priest counted for nothing; (5) the rise of Christianity extends priestly *ressentiment* to all hierarchy and rank by attacking the conception of the Jewish people (the chosen people) as such. For Nietzsche this is not a new narrative analysis except insofar as it extends and intensifies his philological conception of history as a forceful reading and rereading of texts. When Nietzsche says that there are only interpretations he must be understood not as licensing all interpretations whatsoever but as indicating that all meaning and all change of meaning are exercises of power. To the extent that we accept this principle we are being prepared not only for the content of Nietzsche's erasure of Jesus but for an understanding of how such an operation is possible. What Nietzsche objects to in priestly reading is hardly forceful interpretation as such but that particular interpretation "the moral world-order" which is incapable of recognizing itself as interpretation.

Consider the following observation or priestly reading from Nietzsche's history of the five stages:

the "will of God" (that is to say the conditions for preserving the power of the priest) has to be *known*—to this end a "revelation" is required. In plain words a great literary forgery becomes necessary, a "sacred book" is discovered—it is made public with all hieratic pomp,

with days of repentance and with lamentation over the long years of "sinfulness" . . . the whole evil lay in the nation's having become estranged from the "sacred book". (A 26)

The passage is noteworthy for several reasons, and not the least of them is a typographical one. The extensive use of quotation marks is a philosophical device for quite literally *bracketing* the ideas and expressions with which Nietzsche is dealing. Unlike Husserlian bracketing, Nietzschean quotation is not so much designed to put the ontological status of its objects into doubt, but to suggest that we are dealing here with what has been said by specific people on specific occasions, perhaps gathering force through being repeated or reprinted. As opposed to conceptual analysis it refuses to grant that its objects are part of an impersonal world of ideas to be assessed on their own merits. Instead they are texts which issue from and are signs of power; to put them into quotation marks is to show that the method employed here is that of textual politics. In analyzing the Bible and the culture of the Bible this synthesis of philology and the hermeneutics of power finds its most important and most inexhaustible subject. That which is quoted is often provided with a translation: "sacrifice" is food for the priests, and "'God forgives him who repents'—in German: *who subjects himself to the priest*" (A 26). Transvaluation is accomplished by translation. What gives the book its fevered pitch and shrill tone is this *duality*, its constant sense of turning one extreme into another. The duality is introduced by Nietzsche's own catechism of values defining good and bad in terms of power and weakness (A 2), is continued through a declaration of war on theology (A 9), and concludes with the antithetical translations of Biblical language and an anti-narrative of the life of Jesus. Within the Christian tradition itself the church has been constructed "out of the antithesis to the Gospel" (A 36) and Paul "embodied the antithetical type to the 'bringer of glad tidings'" (A 42). What seems at first like stylistic excess is simply a consistent carrying through of the polarity announced by the book's title. In a letter to Georg Brandes, Nietzsche himself indicates that such an analysis is appropriate when he calls the *Umwertung* a trope.<sup>7</sup> It is not just a deflection from the imagined normal path of thought but a movement of inversion and upending.

In this sharp play of oppositions there are also some surprising continuities. Christianity is simply a continuation of Judaism and the New Testament employs a falsification similar to that of the Old. At the same time things which seemed to belong together turn out to be opposed: the real contrast is not Judaism and Christianity but early Israel, with its heroism and passion, and the later development of both religions; Jesus is not the origin of the church but its opposite. More radically Jesus is the antithesis of Christianity because the real "'glad tidings' are precisely that

there are not more opposites" (A 32), while Christianity is committed to the antithetical "good and evil" mode of valuation which Nietzsche analyzed in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

Jesus is the center of *The Antichrist*, but it is possible to reach him only by decoding and restoring the false oppositions of the gospels and the Church. The Church led by Paul is said to have practiced the same falsification on the life of Jesus as the priests of Judaism did on the early history of Israel. The more modern and more secular quest for the historical Jesus (Nietzsche refers explicitly to the work of D. F. Strauss and Renan and shows a familiarity with other toilers in this philological vineyard) does not arrive at its object for it is vitiated by the same assumption which structured the earliest accounts. That assumption is that the truth about Jesus must take the form of a story or narrative. Whether the principles are the miraculous history which begins with a remarkable birth and is punctuated by incursions of the supernatural or whether we are presented with a demythologized Jesus, there is a common presupposition that there is a significant temporal sequence of events which will illuminate the life of Jesus. Nietzsche proposes an ahistorical and non-narrative psychology of the redeemer, according to which Jesus was, in our everyday language "blissed out." Nietzsche's Jesus does not develop from a theological perspective because he is not a supernatural figure; no divine interventions mark off the different stages of his career. But neither does he develop in the secular and biographical sense because his whole life and teachings consist in the notion that the kingdom of heaven is a present condition of the heart to which we can all have instant access by becoming as children. All which seems to be fixed is melted down into its experiential import. "If I understand anything of this great symbolist," Nietzsche says, "it is that he took for realities, for 'truths,' only *inner* realities—that he understood the rest, everything pertaining to nature, time, space, history, only as signs, as occasion for metaphor" (A 39). In calling Jesus "a symbolist *par excellence*" Nietzsche suggests that Jesus is both the origin of the many interpretations which have accrued to him (or, more accurately, which have been *imposed* on him) and that he is also the refutation of all these interpretations. Jesus is a symbolist in the late nineteenth century sense of an artist who seeks to reveal a single great timeless insight through a variety of devices; like Jesus' parables none of these will be perfectly adequate to its subject matter, yet taken collectively they will all point to the ineffable experience which generates them. Symbolism is a non-narrative and nonrepresentational style; if it uses narrative or representational elements, as Jesus sometimes does, they are employed metaphorically in order to point beyond themselves. A true symbolist such as the one under analysis "stands outside of all religion, all conceptions of divine worship, all history, all natural science, all experience of the world, all acquirements, all psychology, all books, all art—his 'knowledge' is precisely the *pure folly* of

the fact *that* anything of this kind exists" (A 32).

The history of Christianity is that of a complex series of signs and interpretations in which each sign points back to an earlier one and is susceptible of interpretation by later ones. Now Christian hermeneutics, from its beginnings in Paul to its sophisticated secular forms, supposes that this sign chain, if followed backwards, is not an infinite regress but terminates in an ultimate meaning which is the life of Jesus. Nietzsche perceives the chain of signs but sees them finally leading back to an absence rather than a fullness of meaning. Bruno Bauer, a young Hegelian whom Nietzsche referred to as one of his few genuine readers, had suggested the same view in a somewhat crude and material way by arguing that Jesus never lived and that the literature of the early church was all fabrication or delusion.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche accepts a historical Jesus who is historically relevant only because his actual presence was that of a radically ambiguous sign capable of indefinite interpretation. As a philologist Nietzsche seems to have asked himself the Kantian question "how is a Christian semiotics possible?" and to have answered it by the transcendental deduction of a man who stands so far outside the usual processes of signification that everything is metaphor and symbol for him. Whereas later Christian semiotics assumes that there is some proper relationship between signs and their referents (or between signified and signifier), the semiotics of Jesus consists in a radical refusal of any such relationship. For Nietzsche, Jesus is an anti-sign or "floating signifier" who, if he incarnated anything, embodied the absence of meaning. The signs that Jesus uses are always *mere* signs or *only* signs: "Blessedness is not promised, it is not tied to any conditions: it is the only reality—the rest is signs for speaking of it" (A 33). In the beginning, then, there is not the word, but the enigmatic indication of the insufficiency of the word. The difference between Jesus and the Church is that Jesus' signs are used with a consciousness of their inadequacy to their subject while the Church believes that the gospels are divinely inspired and hence adequate signs. The growth of allegorical methods of interpretation within Christianity should not be cited as a counter-instance because its practitioners still tend to believe in a literal level along with the non-literal modes and because they suppose that the non-literal methods of interpretation are capable of elucidating their subject matter. Nietzsche's Jesus could be thought of as the metaphorical or symbolic principle itself; for him there is always such a large discrepancy between experience and its representation that he fails to establish any determinacy of meanings. It is just this indeterminateness which allows Paul and the Church to impose their own meanings on Jesus.

The same result follows from Jesus' lack of a history. If Jesus had a history then the tradition of text and commentary would have been under some constraint, such that even falsifications of Jesus' career would have contained internal evidence pointing back to their original. This is the case in the Old Testament, "that miracle of falsification the

documentation of which lies before us in a good part of the Bible" (A 26). It is because there are historical narratives of a sort, based on the history of Israel, in the Old Testament, that scholars like Wellhausen are able to detect internal inconsistencies in the whole and reconstruct a *critical* history of Israel in which the formation of different historical accounts itself plays a role. In dealing with the Christian records philology has no such role to play because of the radical indeterminacy of its beginnings. Nietzsche throws up his arms in distress at the prospect of a philological study of the gospels. Here D. F. Strauss and others had expended enormous energy. But what was the point of it?

I confess there are few books which present me with so many difficulties as the Gospels do. These difficulties are quite other than those which the learned curiosity of the German mind celebrated one of its most unforgettable triumphs in pointing out. The time is far distant when I too, like every young scholar and with the clever dullness of a refined philologist, savored the work of the incomparable Strauss. I was then twenty years old: now I am too serious for that. What do I care for the contradictions of "tradition?" How can legends of saints be called "tradition" at all! The stories of saints are the most ambiguous literature in existence: to apply to them scientific procedures *when no other records are extant* seems to me wrong in principle—mere learned idling (A 28).

The same holds for the more imaginative attempts to reconstruct the life of Jesus, such as the immensely popular and influential *Life of Jesus* by Ernest Renan; that book serves as a foil for Nietzsche to exhibit the more radical accomplishment of his own anti-biography. Renan was himself a philologist specializing in the Semitic languages. His *Life of Jesus* walks a thin line between the philological concerns of Strauss and the Germans and a tendency toward imaginative biography (incipient psychobiography) with a heavy dose of religious liberalism. Aware of the discrepancies in the sources, Renan explains the gospel narratives as the result of confusion, wishful thinking, and the tendency of the disciples and others to read their own idiosyncracies into Jesus' life. The gospels are neither biographies nor legends but "legendary biographies."<sup>9</sup> Renan's basic hermeneutic principle is borrowed, more or less consciously, from the well formed nineteenth century novel with its omniscient narrator:

The essential condition of the creations of art is, that they shall form a living system of which all the parts are mutually dependent and related. In histories such as this,

the great test that we have got the truth is, to have succeeded in combining the texts in such a manner that they shall constitute a logical, probable narrative, harmonious throughout. . . . Each trait which departs from the rules of classic narrative ought to warn us to be careful.<sup>10</sup>

The disordered paratactic form of the gospels is to be overcome for the sake of both art and history.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly Renan constructs a biography of Jesus as a child of nature who lived blissfully but briefly ("for some months, perhaps a year") with the consciousness that the Kingdom of God was within. Soon he becomes involved with John the Baptist and begins to preach a moral revolution to be produced by men. Meeting with opposition Jesus proclaims himself the son of God, alienates himself from nature, and preaches that the kingdom of heaven is at hand although it will be brought about through a divine rather than human agency. Yet this extreme tone, involving as it did a confrontation with established society and religion, could be maintained only briefly; at this point Jesus' death was a necessity, and Renan seems to mean that it was an aesthetic and narrative necessity.

It is worth noting that Renan encapsulates into Jesus' life that same distinction between a blissful inwardness and the spirit of opposition and revenge which is, from Nietzsche's perspective, the difference between Jesus and the early church. By this move Renan makes Jesus' more or less unconscious barbarization of his own message the pattern and the basis for the rancorous element within the whole Christian tradition. A continuous life serves as the model of an intelligible history. In this respect Renan, despite the Church's opposition to his book, is a reformer rather than a revolutionary; he just wants to purge the intelligible history of Jesus and the Church of legendary and supernatural elements. This motive of Renan's work appears even more clearly when it is realized that the *Life* is only one of seven parts of his comprehensive series, *The Origins of Christianity*. Nietzsche was acquainted with this ambitious historical project. A year before writing *The Antichrist* he wrote in a letter to Overbeck, himself a church historian:

This winter I have also read Renan's *Origines*, with much spite and—little profit. . . . At root, my distrust goes so far as to question whether history is really *possible*. What is it that people want to establish—something which was not itself established at the moment it occurred? <sup>12</sup>

For Nietzsche, Renan represents the modern attempt to salvage the values of religion by means of history and science. He must have been

particularly angered by Renan's use of his philological credentials to interpolate a continuity into discontinuous materials. In *The Antichrist*, Renan is mentioned repeatedly, and always as another example of one who has constructed a false narrative. There is too great a "contradiction between the mountain, lake and field preacher, whose appearance strikes one as that of a Buddha on a soil very little like that of India, and the aggressive fanatic, the mortal enemy of theologian and priest, which Renan has wickedly glorified as '*le grande maitre en ironie*' " (A 31). Given this discontinuity, Nietzsche argues that it more plausible to see it as the radical break between Jesus and those who invoke his name. This is also a critique of Renan in his own terms; for the attempt to impose a narrative form on his materials causes him to violate his own canons of organic unity.

Renan also errs in importing the narrative and character types of the hero and the genius into his story. But "to speak with the precision of the physiologist a quite different word would rather be in place here: the word idiot" (A 29). Such a character ought not to be portrayed as if he were the hero of a narrative; rather "one has to regret that no Dostoyevsky lived in the neighborhood of this most interesting *décadent*; I mean someone who could feel the thrilling fascination of such a combination of the sublime, the sick and the childish" (A 31). Nietzsche may very well have had *The Idiot* in mind as a literary model for his own analysis of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> That book exemplifies and solves the narrative problem which is essential to Nietzsche's account of Jesus. It has long been thought that the portrayal of a thoroughly good main character in the novel must be problematic, for one who is thoroughly good will not exhibit the tensions and contradictions which lend themselves to action and development. The problem goes back to Plato who objected to the traditional stories of the gods on the grounds that they represented that which was perfect as changing; such change was, strictly speaking, impossible, but to imagine it as occurring is to imagine the perfect becoming worse, or as having a defect which must be repaired through growth. Now Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin is the still point of a narrative which is constituted by the feverishly spiralling reactions of those around him to such a mixture of "the sublime, the sick and the childish." Just because he does not act and does not desire, he exists as a kind of empty space upon which the other characters can impose their own acts, desires, and fantasies. In citing these parallels and contrasts with the work of Renan and Dostoyevsky I mean to indicate more than influences and thematic correspondences. Nietzsche's polemic against Christianity is concerned with the falsifications of Christian narrative. Only by considering a variety of literary models can we begin to work our way back to the event at the heart of Christian semiotics. There is a kind of Platonic correspondence for Nietzsche between the large texts which are the body and the instincts and the smaller ones which are actual written documents; unlike Plato, however,

he will use the smaller in order to read the larger. An even more striking difference, however, is that both texts stand in need of extensive emendation; like graffiti they do not have the permanent existence of the forms, but are always in danger of corruption and effacement by any who are powerful enough to wield an actual or a metaphorical pen.

To understand Christianity is to understand the blank wall which must be presupposed as the support of all of the inscriptions of history. In this respect Nietzsche's view of semiotic history, or at least of this portion of it, more closely resembles that of C. S. Peirce than it does that of Jacques Derrida. Derrida frequently cites Nietzsche in behalf of his idea that all writing refers back to an earlier writing and so on *ad infinitum*; he believes that an infinite regress of writings implies that in following back the chain of texts and interpretations we will never reach a point prior to the writing process itself.<sup>14</sup> Peirce on the other hand makes a crucial distinction between the continuity of the sign-process and its indefinite or infinite extension. According to him the sign process is continuous in that it has no absolute first or last term. But there are many cases of continuous series which are not indefinitely or infinitely extended—such as a line segment. We can consistently conceive of a sign-process beginning (or ending) at some point in time, even though it makes no sense to talk of the absolutely first (or last) sign in the series.<sup>15</sup>

The difference between Peirce and Derrida here is like that between Aristotle and Zeno on the possibility of motion. Aristotle showed that the infinite density and intensive continuity of the interval, however short, between Achilles and the tortoise ought not to be mistaken for the infinity of extensions. Motion is impossible, argues Zeno, because movement across any given interval requires an infinite number of steps, each taking a finite bit of time. Therefore, not even the first step is possible. But motion is a continuous process in which there is no unique first step or movement. Yet motion has a beginning despite its lack of a unique first or final term. Derrida is a skeptic about meaning who thinks that if there were any meaning it would require the inclusion of an infinite number of moments at the "beginning" and the "end" of the process of meaning. But all intervals here are too dense to be traversed, and all presumed ends or beginnings dissolve into endless ranges of prior and posterior nodes of meaning. Anything with such indeterminate boundaries can hardly be that full, present and defined thing which we are wont to think of as meaning. Therefore there is no meaning, although there is, in its place, an ultimately plural and diffuse web of *écriture*. From a Peircean point of view this is to confuse intensive and extensive infinity. It is to suppose that that which has an internal complexity of the highest degree must necessarily lack all definition and boundary. What Nietzsche adds to this account is an explanation of the setting and dissolution of bounds by acts of force. What is variously designated as will to power by Nietzsche, as Secondness by Peirce and as simply power by Foucault is what gives a

contour and integrity to meaning. Such power is exercised variously in the different modes of writing, interpreting, rewriting, censoring, defacing, and erasing. Both Peirce and Derrida see the impossibility of a Cartesian account of meaning which would found all meaning on the intuitive presence of clear and distinct ideas, a first sign. Every sign is also an interpretation, as Nietzsche and Peirce would agree. But it does not follow that the process is without beginnings, ends, or limits.<sup>16</sup>

For Nietzsche, Jesus is not the first sign in the series (corresponding to a Cartesian intuition), as he is for Christian tradition, but neither is he caught up, as he would be on Derrida's reading, in a chain of signs which extends back indefinitely behind him. He is rather a break or rupture in semiotic history which is the ground of a new branch of that history; like the *tabula rasa* he is the empty presupposition of a history of signs, or like the wall on which the graffiti are inscribed he is the now invisible background of all that is visible. The significant difference between Nietzsche and Peirce here is that Nietzsche rejects the Peircean eschatology of the last sign as well as the first sign of Christianity. Peirce's vision of the "ultimate interpretant" has posed a major problem for his commentators, who should have noted earlier than they did that the "ultimate interpretant" can only be attained by the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity.<sup>17</sup>

At this point there may appear to be a tension between Nietzsche's psychological reconstruction of Jesus and his semiotic use of him. According to the latter the entire quest for the historical Jesus is misguided, whether carried out along orthodox, philological or Hegelian-aesthetic lines (the last being Renan's case). Yet Nietzsche does seem at times in *The Antichrist* to be writing one more life of Jesus to add to the pile he is simultaneously rejecting in principle. If Jesus is properly a blank page in semiotic history then why does Nietzsche provide us with his vivid sketch of a blissful naïf? The case may appear even more difficult when it is noticed that despite Nietzsche's polemic against Renan, the two, read from a certain modern perspective and juxtaposed either with orthodox Christian predecessors, thorough philologists (such as Strauss and Wellhausen) or with the form criticism of the last fifty years, appear to share a number of distinctive theses concerning Jesus' life. Yet this would be a truncated reading of Nietzsche's argument. It is the semiotic rather than the biographical thematic which takes priority in *The Antichrist*. The blankness of the semiotic account, the project of erasure, is not one which can be accomplished by a simple pronouncement that "Jesus had no meaning, no life, no history"; the biographical obsession, the urge to find intelligible development and character, is not easily suppressed. In order to approximate a sense of semiotic blankness, erasure is an activity to be ever renewed. So to write of the blighted Palestinian is to approximate such blankness within the framework of the biographical project. Like Socrates attempting to give his young men a sense of that

which is “beyond Being” by a series of analogies, Nietzsche suggests the series formed by accounts of the orthodox, the philologists, the historical aesthetes, his own reconstruction—all suggesting the erasure, the break, the unmotivated but powerfully instituted boundary.<sup>18</sup> When Nietzsche speaks of Jesus he is careful to suggest the many *different* narratives which *might* be written to replace the standard ones. The wish to have a Dostoyevskian novel of Jesus must not be understood on the assumption that *The Idiot* (or any narrative, in Nietzsche’s view) is to be seen as mimetic or referential. This becomes clear when Nietzsche invokes the Amphitryon Story, the philologists and the aestheticians. Such methodological reflexivity distinguishes Nietzsche’s approach from Renan’s: Renan shows no awareness of the possible divergence between the demands of the *Bildungsroman* and those of historical truth.

Nietzsche undertakes to tell “the real history of Christianity” (A 39), by showing how the church’s narrative distortions of Jesus are intertwined with the untold narrative of its own depredations of culture. Even where Jesus may plausibly be believed to have used narrative expressions himself, they must be construed in terms of his timeless experience; yet the church has not only misconstrued them as narrative but has written a poor and hackneyed story. Jesus speaks of himself as the Son in relation to the Father. What is the semiotic analysis of these expressions?

it is patently obvious what is alluded to in the signs (*Zeichen*), “Father” and “Son”—not patently obvious to everyone, I grant: in the word “Son” is expressed the *entry* into the collective feeling of the transfiguration of all things (blessedness), in the word “Father” *this feeling itself*, the feeling of perfection and eternity. I am ashamed to recall what the church has made of this symbolism: has it not set an Amphitryon story at the threshold of Christian faith? (A 34)

As Giraudoux’s title for his modern version of that story, *Amphitryon 38*, indicates, the story has been told many times of a god (Zeus), having impregnated a mortal woman (Alcmene) who then gives birth to an extraordinary son (Herakles). Surely one could have discovered a better model than this which is more suitable for comedy than sacred narrative; this is the sort of thing that Nietzsche may have intended in the remark that it was very strange of God to write Greek and then to write it so badly (BGE 121). “Dionysus vs. the crucified” (the last words of *Ecce Homo*) can refer to the opposition between the true and false gods of tragedy and comedy—among other things. Yet what is most appalling is not the generation of such stories, whose early believers, if not their fabricators, may be presumed to have been naive (“I take care not to make

mankind responsible for its insanities”), but the modern man and the modern church who *know* the falsity of the tradition while continuing to reaffirm it. Now these signs are used and “recognized for what they are: the most malicious false-coinage there is for the purpose of devaluing nature and natural values” (A 38). Like Hegel, Nietzsche believes that history has produced a self-consciousness about the irrelevance of the narrative and mythological forms in which religious doctrines are presented; but this self-consciousness has the effect of keeping the spirit entangled in ever more hypocritical deceptions rather than liberating it. To tell the “real history of Christianity” then is to tell it *critically* (in the sense of critical history developed in *The Use and Abuse of History*) in order to explode the ruling falsities of the day.

The plan of Nietzsche’s critical history of Christianity has three stages. He begins *The Antichrist* by reiterating those theses about power and the distinction between a morality of self-affirmation and one of *ressentiment* which are familiar from his earlier writings. He proceeds to show how, in the case of Judaism, the priest’s distortion of texts is both the product of *ressentiment* and a philological clue to its reconstruction. Given this general understanding of the politics of misreading and miswriting, Nietzsche analyzes the central case of Jesus himself, a man so opposed to the narrative mode that he had no defenses against those who would inscribe their own messages on his body. The final part of Nietzsche’s book traces the history of these wicked writers whose imaginary narratives mask the real story of their own envy of the healthy and their subterranean pursuit of power. To reconstruct what they have done we need to know not only their own motives, instinct, and bodily condition, but something of the more or less instinctive hermeneutics and semiotics which such people will employ in constructing their narratives. Now an intelligible narrative will have as its skeleton a sequence of causes and effects. Because of its hostility to the healthy body, however, Christianity refuses to recognize the natural, physiological causes of human experience. Therefore it constructs a world of imaginary causes and effects (such as the soul and redemption) which is also populated by imaginary beings; consequently “this entire fictional world has its roots in hatred of the natural” (A 15, cf. A 49). Much of Nietzsche’s semiotics, like Freud’s, is based on the dream; it is a natural part of the dream-work to construct an imaginary narrative to explain some experience after the fact, as when being on the verge of awaking because of a loud noise we invent some dream story which culminates in a cannon-shot.<sup>19</sup> We do the same thing in waking life, however, in seeking reasons for feeling well or poorly; never satisfied with experiences by themselves we feel compelled to produce some narrative account of them. Ordinary narrative thus tends to be confused enough, but this confusion will be heightened immeasurably when the typical terms of the narrative are Christianity’s sin and repentance, the flesh and the spirit, and so on.

Nietzsche's account of the history of the church after Jesus can be encapsulated rather briefly. Jesus' followers were in revolt against the Jewish establishment and so naturally sought even greater revenge upon that order; thus the early church shows itself to be a continuation of Judaism by other means, extending the Jewish attack on the "world" to institutional Judaism itself. Yet God permitted Jesus' death, so that must be interpreted as a sacrifice for the sake of sins. Paul, who sought power above all things, employed the instincts of *ressentiment* to shift attention away from this life by the fiction of the resurrected Christ. Only then are the Gospels written with their willful distortions and their "seduction by means of morality" (A 44). The text itself is dirty: "one does well to put gloves on when reading the New Testament" (A 46). These dirty graffiti are also symptoms of the defacing or rewriting of some of mankind's cleaner texts, the ancient world, Islam and the Renaissance (A 59-61). Nietzsche's account of these naughtiest writings on the cultural wall is always bound up with his analysis of the book which justifies them and reveals their psychological principles. The New Testament is a bad dream constructed on the principle of *ressentiment*. After giving an extensive account of its alleged falsifications of Jesus' sayings (A 45) Nietzsche says that "every book becomes clean if one has just read the New Testament: to give an example . . . Petronius" (A 46). This *Umwertung* of the idea of the dirty book is a characteristic strategy in *The Antichrist*. I suggest that we read the admittedly feverish imagery of dirt and cleanliness, body, blood and poison which becomes more and more pronounced as one reaches the end of the book as signs of deliberate authorship rather than as evidence of a loss of control. Nietzsche's transvaluation is meant to be an affirmation of the body in opposition to its denial in Christianity. Therefore it must openly be a text of the body and must describe its anti-text as a desecration of the body.

It is striking that Nietzsche invokes Zarathustra in the midst of this narrative (A 53-54), for what unites Zarathustra and Nietzsche's Jesus is a non-narrative view of the world. For both, the totality of experience is sufficient unto itself and stands in no need of external explanations. Jesus' opposition to narrative is instinctive and naive while Zarathustra's living of the eternal return is post-narrative and achieved only with great difficulty. The eternal recurrence is an anti-narrative thought because it knows no isolated agents in the sequence of events, but only the interconnection of all events; it knows no beginning, middle and end of the narrative but simply the continuous circle of becoming; and it tends to dissolve the mainstay of all narrative, the individual agent, into the ring of becoming. In carefully distinguishing himself from Zarathustra, Nietzsche indicates that he has not attained this anti-narrative stance himself, or if he did experience the eternal recurrence he also forgot it from time to time. In constructing his own narratives such as *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche attempts to incorporate an awareness of the

fallibility and perspectival character of all narrative which is rejected by dogmatic priestly narrative. We might think of the distinction between these two narratives as somewhat like the distinction which Marx would make between ideology and science. Ideological accounts of history are dogmatic and uncritical of their own principles of interpretation while scientific accounts are distinguished not only by knowing where to look for causes (in the relations of production or in the condition of the body) but by their knowledge that they too are products of these causes and therefore subject to explanation and correction from a more comprehensive standpoint. So it would be in the spirit of Marxism to regard Marxist science as itself tied to the material conditions of capitalism and subject to revision when capitalism is overcome. Of course Marx does not envision a non-historical science; Nietzsche's narratives are even more provisional in that they anticipate the abolition of the narrative principle itself. Or one might point out that just as the eternal recurrence will bring back the last man, so it will, even though opposed to the narrative principle, bring back that principle as well.

Nietzsche recalls Zarathustra in *The Antichrist* both for his opposition to priestly writing in blood and for his skepticism. As in the passage chosen for *Auslegung* in *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche chooses a section which explicitly has to do with reading and writing. Zarathustra speaks twice of the connection between blood and writing, once to announce "I love only that which is written in blood" (Z 67) and then, in the passage quoted in *The Antichrist* to criticize the priests for writing in blood:

They wrote letters of blood on the path they followed,  
and their folly taught that truth is proved by blood.  
But blood is the worst witness of truth. (Z 116)

Both passages seem to apply to the *Antichrist* but only one of them is quoted. In part their difference has to do with the polyphonic or polytropic character of *Zarathustra*. But beyond that there is still the problem of the bloody tone of *The Antichrist* in addition to its bloody subject matter. In fact the conclusion of the passage makes a distinction between two sorts of bloody writing:

And if someone goes through fire for his teaching—what  
does that prove? Truly, it is more when one's own  
teaching comes out of one's burning.

One kind of writing in blood is that of the ascetic; he deliberately spills his blood and then imagines that whatever he writes with it must be true. He has too much of an investment, through self-sacrifice, to allow him to question his own writing. The other sort is that which flows out of

powerful and healthy impulses which cannot be suppressed; it is thus that Nietzsche describes his own composition of *Zarathustra*. The *Antichrist* is, presumably, bloody in the second sense, not the first. Only this second kind of bloodiness is compatible with the skepticism which Nietzsche here attributes to Zarathustra and to Pilate, whose "What is truth?" makes him the "one solitary figure one is obliged to respect" in the New Testament (A 46). Writing in blood, like that in *The Antichrist* or *Zarathustra*, can be skeptical if it combines intensity with an awareness of the perspectival character of all discourse emanating from the body. The antithesis to the Christian set of sacred writings, beliefs, and values is not a new sacred text and alternative beliefs to be held with the same force; it is the genuine *Umwertung* of all those things, not simply a change in their content. *The Antichrist* aims at being the antithesis of Christian graffiti by opening up a space for playful writings like Nietzsche's own; it is meant to clear the walls for an exuberant position of inscriptions which will break out of the narrow circle of revenge in which writing under the sway of Christianity and morality has moved.<sup>20</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Eugen Fink, *Nietzsches Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960), p. 34.
- 2 References are to *The Antichrist* by numbered section, usually following the translation of R. J. Hollingdale in *Twilight of the Idols and Antichrist* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961).
- 3 *Antichrist* and *Ecce Homo* are often treated together in this respect. According to Kaufmann "The ending of *The Antichrist* and much of *Ecce Homo* show so strange a lack of inhibition and contain such extraordinary claims concerning Nietzsche's own importance that, knowing of his later insanity, one cannot help finding here the first signs of it." Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche*, 4th ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), p. 66. Arthur Danto's judgment is a measured one: "The *Antichrist* is unrelievedly vituperative and would indeed sound insane were it not informed in its polemic by a structure of analysis and a theory of morality and religion worked out elsewhere and accessible even here to the informed reader." Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 182. Even in Danto's view the structure of thought which saves the *Antichrist* is one worked out elsewhere; he would apparently agree with Fink that the book offers nothing new.
- 4 *Ecce Homo*, page following Preface.
- 5 Nietzsche calls Renan his "antipodes" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 48); the sense of opposition made more precise a year later in a polemic on modern historiography in *The Genealogy of Morals* (III, 26): "I know of nothing that excites such disgust as this kind of 'objective' armchair scholar, this kind of scented voluptuary of history, half person, half satyr, perfume by Renan, who

betrays immediately with the high falsetto of his applause what he lacks, *where* he lacks it, *where* in this case the Fates have applied their cruel shears with, also, such surgical skill! " Renan, then, is Nietzsche's anti-historian; it is notable that both *The Genealogy of Morals* and Renan's *Origins of Christianity* are philosophical histories which focus on the transition from Greek and Roman culture to Christianity. Nietzsche not only narrates the events differently but does so, to speak more precisely, in a genealogical rather than a historical manner. On genealogy as the alternative to history, see Michel Foucault "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977). For an anarcho-marxist assessment by a writer sometimes considered a Nietzschean, see Georges Sorel, *Le Systeme Historique de Renan* (Paris: G. Jacques, 1905).

- 6 Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).
- 7 Georg Brandes, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Macmillan, n.d.) p. 85.
- 8 Nietzsche's admiring references to Bauer (e.g., *Ecce Homo*, V 2) indicate that he may have known Bauer's works on the history of Christianity. Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* is the most accessible account of Bauer's writing and of other nineteenth century works of this character.
- 9 Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (New York: Modern Library, 1927), pp. 45-54.
- 10 *The Life of Jesus*, pp. 62-63.
- 11 *The Life of Jesus*, p. 64.
- 12 Letter to Overbeck, February 23, 1887 in *Selected Letters to Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Christopher Middleton (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 261.
- 13 For a scholarly account of Nietzsche's knowledge of Dostoevsky, see the articles by C. A. Miller in *Nietzsche-Studien*, 1973, 1975 and 1978.
- 14 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* Trans. G. Spivak (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974), and other writings. In saying that for Derrida all writing refers back to an earlier writing, the notion of "referring back" must not be understood as implying a linear temporal sequence but as suggesting that writing always occurs within an infinitely dense texture of writing. Derrida associates his view of writing with the Nietzschean and Heideggerian critique of the linear conception of time (*Of Grammatology*, pp. 86-87).
- 15 In his classical exposition of the theory of signs in 1868 Peirce argues for the impossibility of a "first sign." See *Collected Papers*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press), vol. 5, paragraphs 213-317 and especially 263 ff.
- 16 For Derrida's celebration of undecidability see *Spurs* trans. B. Harlow (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979); for the understanding of such celebrations as sacrificial religious rites see "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve" in *Writing and Difference* trans. A. Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978). There are discussions of

*Spurs* by David Allison and David Hoy in *boundary 2*. See also my review of *Spurs* in *Man and World*, 1981. In "The Rhetoric of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*" (*boundary 2*, 1980), I have attempted to reconstruct the rhetorical strategy of a Nietzschean text. For Peirce on Zeno in a semiotic context, see *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, pars. 333-4.

- 17 For Peirce's claim that logic requires faith, hope, and charity see *Collected Papers* vol. 2, pars. 264-5 and Josiah Royce's Hegelian extension of Peirce in *The Problem of Christianity*, vol. 2.
- 18 Derrida explains the asymptotic conception of the deconstructive process in "Structure, Science and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1972). I am grateful to James Woelfel for incisive questions and comments about this and other parts of this paper.
- 19 *Human All Too Human*, par. 113.
- 20 Work on this paper was supported by the University of Kansas General Research Fund.