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# Nietzsche and *The Antichrist*

Religion, Politics, and Culture in Late Modernity

Edited by  
Daniel Conway

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# Reading Dostoevsky in Turin: The Antichrist's Accelerationism

Gary Shapiro

## 1 Nietzsche's accelerationism

Nietzsche aimed at splitting time into two great parts, before and after himself (EH Destiny 8). Just after finishing *The Antichrist*, he says that this happens through uncovering the truth of Christian morality “an event without parallel.” During his last two years of frantic writing, Nietzsche was avidly reading Dostoevsky. One of the Russian novelist's most “philosophical” characters and psychological studies is Kirillov, who plans a suicide that will divide history into two parts: “From the gorilla to the destruction of God, and from the destruction of God to . . . the physical changing of the earth and man” (Dostoevsky 1995 115). Kirillov's program derives from a militant atheism. His will be an absolutely free suicide affirming human freedom and defying all superstitious belief in God. Kirillov sees history until himself as the time of the “God-Man” Christ; the coming era will be that of the “Man-God” (who may resemble Nietzsche's *Übermensch* or his Antichrist). His theorizing seems to be heavily indebted to Feuerbach, whose materialistic reduction of Christianity made a strong impression on the atheists in Dostoevsky's youthful radical circle. Dostoevsky thought Kirillov's reasoning was demonic, and there's no reason to think that Nietzsche endorsed this idea of history-changing suicide. However, the coincidence with Kirillov's thesis, combined with the claim that the great change can be accelerated and associated with the act of an individual, opens up a window on the ideas of time and history structuring Nietzsche's *Antichrist*. In a late letter to Georg Brandes announcing the completion of *Ecce Homo*, he praises Dostoevsky for having given him “the most valuable psychological material known to me” (Nietzsche 1986 8.483).<sup>1</sup> After describing how Nietzsche

drew on the complex of acceleration and retardation central to the Christian theological complex connected with the Antichrist, I will indicate some ways in which he deployed the incomparable “psychological material” he gleaned from Dostoevsky in formulating his still insufficiently explored “philosophy of the Antichrist.”

Many believe Nietzsche had some success in provoking a great historical schism and marking it with his name. They see him as pointing the way toward an acceleration of time increasingly at work in modernity or late capitalism. The political theory known as accelerationism typically invokes his example, frequently citing these lines from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972):

Which is the revolutionary path? Is there one?—To withdraw from the world market, as Samir Amin advises Third World countries to do, in a curious revival of the fascist “economic solution”? Or might it be to go in the opposite direction? To go still further, that is, in the movement of the market of decoding and deterritorialization? For perhaps the codes are not deterritorialized enough, not decoded enough, from the viewpoint of a theory and a practice of a highly schizophrenic character. Not to withdraw from the process, but to go further, to “accelerate the process,” as Nietzsche put it: in this matter, the truth is that we haven’t seen anything yet. (Deleuze and Guattari, first publication 1972 239–40)

This quotation bears the marks of its time, referring to controversies about whether and how to impede totalizing global capitalism. Acceleration is a crucial dimension of both Nietzsche’s book *The Antichrist* and the religious theologeme from which it takes its name. In the last two years of his writing Nietzsche was increasingly preoccupied with issues of speed and acceleration, on the one hand, and of tendencies to slow and delay on the other. Deleuze and Guattari may be referring to this passage from Nietzsche’s fall 1887 notes: “The equalization of European humans is the great process, which cannot be delayed: rather, it should be accelerated [*beschleunigen*]” (Nietzsche 1980 12.425). The context could make neo-Marxist accelerationists uncomfortable, for it occurs in a *Nachlass* fragment entitled “The Future Strong Ones.” It suggests that the equalizing of Europeans will open up a space for a new sovereign affirmative race or species; in relation to those hegemonic rulers the homogenized will serve as a useful underclass. In GM Nietzsche imagines a “freethinker” (not a “free spirit”) who responds to the picture he has drawn of the accelerating predominance of the herd or mob:

The progress of this poisoning throughout the entire body of humankind seems unstoppable, its tempo and pace from now on can be ever slower, more

subtle, less audible, more thoughtful—one has time after all. . . . It appears that [the church] sooner hinders and retards than accelerates that progress? Well, that in itself could be its usefulness. (GM I.9)

The contrast between Nietzsche's accelerationism and the freethinker's hope that the church can slow things down reproduces a classic antinomy concerning time that is central to the traditional Antichrist theme, Nietzsche's version of it, and Dostoevsky's psychology of nihilism. Indeed, in one strand of church doctrine it is the church itself which both hastens and slows the eschatological process by participating in the "mystery of iniquity" (Agamben 2017).

Accelerationism names a tendency of political thought that originated in the 1990s. Its most prominent theorists and exponents are a group of current and former academics in the UK, many associated with Warwick University. The tendency arises from distress with the growing dominance of neoliberal social and economic organization and disappointment at the ineffectiveness of conventional political resistance.<sup>2</sup> The authors of a 2017 manifesto argue that an oppositional politics of demonstrations, direct action, and localism does nothing more than establish "small and temporary spaces of non-capitalist social relations, eschewing the real problems entailed in facing foes which are intrinsically non-local, abstract, and rooted deep in our everyday infrastructure." Accelerationist politics would be explicitly oriented toward "a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology" (Williams and Srnicek 2017, 354). From the accelerationist perspective, capitalism demonstrates a capacity for rapid change and innovation, as noted already in the *Communist Manifesto*: "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones" (Marx 1994, 161). However, despite the continuing appearance of novelty in such areas as consumer electronics, we are now experiencing a period of relative stagnation. The only real alternative for an oppositional politics is to endorse and contribute to the system's potential for acceleration, which would push it to a breaking point, as anticipated by Marx or Nietzsche. Benjamin Noys formulates this program in a thoughtful critique: "Our immersion in immanence is required to speed the process to the moment of transcendence as threshold. In this way immanence is paired with a (deferred) transcendence and defeat is turned into victory" (Noys 2014, 7–8).

From this perspective, accelerationism exemplifies a recurring type of political thought that finds both religious and nonreligious expression. Speed and acceleration are understood as primary provocations of massive change which

must be furthered or resisted, depending on whether the anticipated change is envisioned with fear or hope. The accelerationists correctly see Nietzsche as a crucial forerunner of 1970s theorists who turned his “accelerate the process” to their own purposes. These include Deleuze and Guattari (especially *Anti-Oedipus*), Jean-François Lyotard (*Libidinal Economy*), and Jean Baudrillard. Nietzsche belatedly became the tendency’s paradigmatic philosophical proponent a century after placing “a philosophy of the Antichrist” on the agenda in BGE (256). In developing that philosophy he drew both on older theological discussions and on Dostoevsky’s writings about the drama of atheist nihilism.

Everything about *The Antichrist* is rushed. The writer moves quickly, breathlessly, from one charge against Christianity to another. He imagines scrawling his condemnations on walls, in inscriptions so powerful even the blind would read them (A 62). He not only hastens to give voice to a new persona, the Antichrist; he also cannot wait to alter the fundamental terms in which human time is reckoned and recorded. True to his word, he declares that the first day of the new calendar replaces September 30, 1888, the date (in the “false time scheme”) on which his screed was completed and his avatar, the Antichrist, signed its concluding “Decree Against Christianity.” Nietzsche’s impatience is palpable throughout, as in his exasperated exclamation “Almost two millennia and not a single new god!” (A 19). He is bored, disgusted, and appalled by the long reign of “Christian monotono-theism.” Although the book’s Foreword acknowledges that a time besotted with “the wretched ephemeral chatter of politics and national egoism” is not ready for his performative intervention, and while conceding that his message will reach only a few, by book’s end he issues his take-no-prisoners “Decree,” signed in the Antichrist’s name. This accelerationist book has its own internal rhythm of acceleration, not unlike a Dostoevsky novel. Earlier, Nietzsche himself gave proleptic indications of the need to focus on the tempo of his writings (BGE 28, 246–47).

As we know from the publications, letters, and notes of his last productive year, Nietzsche’s program was on a constantly accelerating trajectory; he projected completion of a great project, “The Transvaluation of All Values,” and anticipated an immediate widespread impact. His earlier plans called for a four-volume system of “The Transvaluation.” Even though he’d written that he distrusted all systematizers and that “the will to a system is a lack of integrity” (TI “Maxims” 26), Nietzsche was finally tempted to compete, at least on the level of book structure and publication, with contemporary thinkers like Herbert Spencer, Eduard von Hartmann, and August Comte who offered

multivolume systems of philosophy, including their purported political and social implications for Western modernity. Within a few months the larger project congealed into one brief book in a feverish spasm of writing and revision. This was the same Nietzsche (yet what does “same” mean here?) who had ridiculed the haste of modern life and allowed that his work would be truly understood only in the centuries after his death. Yet, now he imagined that *The Antichrist* would appear simultaneously in large editions in seven languages.

Nietzsche’s project draws on concepts taken from the traditional theologico-political complex surrounding the Antichrist figure. He transforms them in developing his own thought concerning time and timing. *The Antichrist* can be best understood by articulating Nietzsche’s response to two bodies of critical thought and literary imagination, represented by two figures of sharply contrasting tendency and temperament, Franz Overbeck and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Nietzsche’s friend Overbeck was on the cutting edge of nineteenth-century critical and scholarly research on the history of Christianity; he provided an acute analysis of the earliest Christian community and critically explored the genesis of Christian political theology without attempting to placate any church.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche excitedly records his discovery of Dostoevsky in a letter of February 23, 1887, to Overbeck:

In a bookshop my hand just happened to come to rest on *L’Esprit souterraine* [*Notes from Underground*], a recent French translation (the same kind of chance made me light on Schopenhauer when I was twenty-one, and on Stendhal when I was thirty-five!) The instinct or affinity (or what should I call it?) spoke to me instantaneously—my joy was beyond bounds; not since my first encounter with Stendhal’s *Rouge et noir* have I known such joy. (Nietzsche 1986 8.27–28)

In triangulating between cool skeptical critique and the novelist’s feverish drama, Nietzsche constructed his own outrageous atheological-political treatise. It opposes a thoroughgoing accelerationism to his contemporaries’ prevailing gradualism and evolutionism.

## 2 Restraining and accelerating

In *The Antichrist* Nietzsche tackles the question of time immediately. He appeals straightaway to a select community of “Hyperboreans” who live outside and beyond modernity (A 1). This modernity, Nietzsche explains in his polemics against Hegelian-style “world-history,” takes historical time to be progressive,

as in its belief in the increasing growth of enlightenment, civilization, and the gradual improvement of the human race. “Progress is merely a modern idea, that is to say a false idea” (A 4). A passage on the *Übermensch* explains that he is not talking about a new species that would replace the human in the regular, Darwinian course of evolution. Extraordinary human beings may be “lucky accidents” (*Glücksfälle*) or deliberately bred. In either case, Nietzsche is (perhaps unwittingly) closer to Cuvier’s catastrophism than to Darwin’s evolutionary gradualism (A 4).

Articulating his rejection of modernity, Nietzsche insists that the present is a time of “*décadence*” rather than progress (A 6). Life is growth, but the contemporary world is depraved, having lost its growth-oriented instincts. Nihilism, acceding to this loss, substitutes pity directed to the suffering and weak for affirmative increase of power. Modernity is slow descent, not evolution to higher forms. Rather than congratulating ourselves for modern progress, we should be calling on cultural physicians to diagnose our maladies (A 7).

In this rapidly unfolding argument, Nietzsche the cultural physician turns his clinical gaze on theologians and “all that has theologian blood in its veins...—our entire philosophy” (A 8). Theology, he explains in *The Antichrist*, is an ideological construct—a complex of lies—designed to insure priestly power (A 52–55). In that sense, all theology is political theology. Although he paints with a very broad brush Nietzsche’s criticism is grounded in the careful researches of scholars like Overbeck and Julius Wellhausen (Overbeck 1875; Wellhausen 1891).

How better to turn the tables on the theologians than to adopt the persona of their arch-bogeyman? Here is a schematic account of traditional theological thought concerning the Antichrist, specifically with respect to questions of temporality and history.<sup>4</sup> As the decades following the crucifixion passed, it became difficult for Jesus’s followers to believe they were living in his kingdom. Within two or three generations texts indicating the character and timing of a great transformation were incorporated into the practices of the growing community. Most prominently, Apocalypse (Revelation) presents a detailed scenario of the rapture of the elect, the rise of worldwide tyranny under an evil leader (eventually identified as Antichrist), the spectacular battle of good and evil, Christ’s earthly reign, and the last judgment, after which time will be no more, with the damned and the saved now in their eternal places. Also circulating was the Second Letter to the Thessalonians, attributed (now uncertainly) to Paul. The writer warns that although extreme changes will come, we must be wary of expecting them anytime soon. The letter helps to constitute the Christian philosophy of history that took shape in the next two



or three centuries and which, especially in its later Hegelian form, is Nietzsche's constant target:

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth [*katechon*] that he might be revealed in his time [*kairo*]. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. (2 Thess. 2:3-7)

This lawless (*anomos*) man is identified as Antichrist (1 Jn 2:18-22; cf. 2 Jn 7). These scraps and hints were later bolstered by speculative interpretations of prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures, especially Daniel.

As early as the second century Tertullian explicitly identified the Roman Empire as the restraining force (*katechon*) that held back the lawless man or Antichrist; this view gained traction as the church crystallized. Overbeck notes that even the relatively early Acts of the Apostles already stressed the importance of Paul's Roman citizenship, a consideration eventually contributing to Constantine's "donation" of empire to church.

Nietzsche would have known that his housemate Overbeck's doctoral thesis concerned the church father Hippolytus's treatise *On Christ and Antichrist*. Hippolytus provided a checklist of features by which the lawless man could be identified; more importantly he offered a hermeneutic argument to show that his coming was hundreds of years in the future. The restraining force (*katechon*) was active; a succession of various kingdoms would rise and fall before the Antichrist appeared (McGinn 2000).

The theological complex centered on apocalypse and Antichrist generated (at least) two distinct approaches to time and history. In so far as the Christian mainstream followed Hippolytus in deferring the events, it opened a space for a philosophy of history, occupied by thinkers from Augustine to Hegel. Even post-Hegelian philosophies of history with no explicit commitment to Christianity typically work with patterns and questions established in this tradition. Alternatively, the apocalypse and Antichrist themes present ideas of radical breaks, ruptures, and accelerations, the end of the world, and of a condition in which "time is no more." It's a question of speed and acceleration.

Nietzsche was never a gradualist. In 1874, well before he animated the Antichrist figure, with Germany still basking in victory over France and

Bismarck's declaration of the Reich, Nietzsche declared that catastrophe or collapse were inevitable.

For a century we have been preparing for absolutely fundamental convulsions:

And if there have recently been attempts to oppose this deepest of modern inclinations, to collapse or to explode, with the constitutive power of the so-called nation-state, the latter too will for a long time serve only to augment the universal insecurity and atmosphere of menace. (UM III.4)

Nietzsche saw the old order crumbling, and began to discern on the horizon the imminent arrival of "free spirits," "good Europeans," "philosophers of the future," and of course, the *Übermensch*. This catastrophist dimension of Nietzsche's thought became one of its main appeals for thinkers like Heidegger, Foucault, and Deleuze.

The Antichrist theme is closely intertwined with Nietzsche's development of a phenomenology of time, emphasizing a spectrum of modalities: speed, acceleration, continuous growth, stagnation, and delay. The concluding section of "Peoples and Fatherlands" in BGE enigmatically introduces the idea of "a philosophy of the Antichrist." Reviewing the significance of a series of distinguished nineteenth-century writers, artists, and political figures Nietzsche praises these "higher human beings" for transcending narrow cultural or national identities. Yet, they failed to fulfill their promise. Nietzsche claims that they all finally made peace with Christianity (as in Wagner's *Parsifal*), and that "none would have been capable of a philosophy of the Antichrist" (BGE 256).

What is to be done? In spring 1886, when he completed *Beyond* with its anticipation of a philosophy of the Antichrist, Nietzsche added a new Preface to HH that speaks of accelerating the arrival of the "free spirits" invented for that book: "I see them already coming, slowly, slowly; and perhaps I shall do something to accelerate (*beschleunigen*) their coming if I describe in advance under what vicissitudes, upon what paths, I see them coming?--" (HH P2). Nietzsche is asking how to evoke and think acceleration, both in the register of the "free spirits" and in the *Kirchensprache* of the Antichrist complex, a theologeme articulated in terms of temporal modalities such as slowing, accelerating, rhythm.

### 3 Timing is everything

Throughout Nietzsche's late works there's a sense that modern life is torn between rhythms of acceleration and retardation. Two images of temporality

are pitted against one another. On the one hand, the strange specter of nihilism is at the door *now* (Nietzsche 1980 12.125). Europeans are quickly losing the bonds of national identity and traditional religion. Many are becoming nomadic workers (recently dubbed the precariat) and no longer live within a monocultural framework. Americanization speeds up daily life, eliminating time for reflection with a constant round of work, activities, and appointments (GS 392). Europeans have entered what Nietzsche calls “the century of the multitude [*Menge*],” a time in which a diverse, media-sensitive public is swayed by waves of enthusiasm, opinion, and rumor (BGE 256).

However, powerful forces are set against these accelerations, most obviously church and state. Either separately or in alliance they maintain borders, traditions, and customs. The church’s “monotontheism” is matched by the state’s insistence on absolute sovereignty. Modern humans not only are subject to the waning power of the church and the “cold monster” of the state (Z I.11), but also are entangled in a system of financial and psychological debt. Priests become this economy’s financial officers and debt collectors, where the mortgage is always due. So-called secular society may substitute bankers for priests, and credit ratings for one’s standing with the church, but the effect is similar: accumulated debt steers its subjects into long-term behaviors calculated to maintain their ability to pay and assume additional debt. The greater the collective debt, so it seems, the greater is the system’s stability. Living time has been amortized. Debt and guilt become the equivalent of political theology’s *katechon*.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4 Dostoevsky, apocalypse, and acceleration

While the accelerationism that arose in the 1990s is devoid of explicit theological implications, it can be read as welcoming the capitalist world’s end by pushing it to its explosive conclusion, casting aside any katechonic restraint (social democratic or welfare state safety nets). Accelerationists who invoke Nietzsche are touching unwittingly on more deeply rooted traditional themes than they suspect. Nietzsche already anticipated rapid change. As Zarathustra intones: “O my brothers, am I then cruel? But I say: to what is falling one should give a further push!” (Z III.12.20). Dostoevsky also saw collapse coming and his work gave Nietzsche a push in formulating his accelerationist manifesto, *The Antichrist*.

Nietzsche “discovered” Dostoevsky sometime around January 1887. Traces of Dostoevsky’s apocalyptic sensibility are evident in Nietzsche’s last two years of writing. As he wrote to Brandes in November 1888:

I prize his work . . . as the most valuable psychological material known to me—I am grateful to him in a remarkable way, however much he goes against my deepest instincts. (Nietzsche 1986 8.483)

In 1887–88 Nietzsche read two of Dostoevsky’s major novels, *The Idiot* and *Demons*, as well as some shorter works. These feature several characters obsessed with religious questions involving apocalypse and Antichrist, including one who purports to be a student of the Apocalypse of John of Patmos. The Eastern Orthodox Church, Dostoevsky’s religious anchor, had long nurtured the belief that Moscow was the third and final “Rome,” following the corruption of the papacy and the fall of Constantinople (Benz 1963, 175–83). Just a decade before Dostoevsky’s birth, Napoleon was widely seen as the Antichrist in Russia, a belief heightened by his threat to Moscow. In *Demons*, the character Shatov, provoked toward a “holy Russia” form of Orthodoxy by the devilish Stavrogin, reminds his erstwhile companion that he had earlier accused the Catholic Church of having surrendered to the devil’s third temptation, worldly power, and consequently proclaiming the Antichrist (Dostoevsky 1995 249). The “idiot” Prince Myshkin feverishly announces the same charge at the disastrous party where he breaks a prized Chinese vase while wildly gesturing, and falls into an epileptic fit (Dostoevsky 2003 543).

Advocates of the Eastern Orthodox cause harbored memories of the Crusades, in which Catholic forces looted and occupied Byzantium, contributing to the weakness that later allowed its loss to the Ottomans. Nietzsche’s contempt for Crusaders is constant throughout his work, reaching fever pitch in *The Antichrist*. He specifically charges the Crusaders with the devastation of a high Islamic culture, describing them as engaging in “higher piracy” seeking “booty” from the Eastern world, which included Byzantium (AC 60; Shapiro, 2007). Dostoevsky’s resentment of the Germans can perhaps be traced back to the ravages inflicted by the Teutonic Order in the Baltic and northern Russia (cf. Benz 1963, 193–94).

Both *Demons* and *The Idiot* have sharply accelerating rhythms. Rapid changes of mood, alliance, and enmity, explosive confrontations and gatherings, all convey the sense that everything is hurtling feverishly toward a terrible epiphany. This sense of speed and acceleration is surely prominent in “the most valuable psychological material” Nietzsche cites.<sup>6</sup> Acceleration then is both an explicit

theme and a stylistic, formal feature of Dostoevsky's novels. Characters—both readers of the Bible and nihilists—see things moving ever more quickly toward catastrophe, while the texture and rhythm of unfolding events produces a vertiginous sense of acceleration.

In both *The Idiot* and *Demons* Dostoevsky portrays destructive nihilists, figures radicalized by European science and enlightenment. In so far as they are inspired by those sources, their nihilism exemplifies Nietzsche's lapidary definition: "The highest values devalue themselves" (Nietzsche 1980 12.350) and the *Genealogy's* conclusion that "humans still prefer to *will nothingness*, than *not will*" (GM III.28). Rejecting most traditional religious, social, and political institutions, they are bent on doing whatever they can to disrupt and shatter the world into which they were born—as quickly as possible. Much of this is inspired by contemporary Russian political ferment, crime, and scandal, notably the anarchist Nechaev's 1869 notorious murder of the student Ivanov. The title of *Demons* (Russian, *Besi*), it's been plausibly suggested, refers not to personified supernatural beings, but to demonic ideas—such as secularism, socialism, and egalitarianism—which can possess the minds of living men and women, driving them headlong to destruction and self-destruction. The villainous Pyotr Verkovensky has organized a cell of five revolutionaries in the provincial town where *Demons* takes place. Pyotr is the neglected son of Stepan Verkovensky, an ineffective liberal who imagines himself an internal exile under surveillance. Stepan was also tutor to Nikolai Stavrogin, a wealthy young man who claims to be beyond good and evil. Stavrogin has provoked local dignitaries by outrageous acts, pulling the nose of a local member of the gentry and biting the governor's ear. He reveals his shocking marriage to a lame, mentally disabled woman, while gossip swirls about his compromising relations with two other women. Stavrogin has inspired both renewed religious belief and nihilistic revolutionary fervor (Nietzsche was unaware of the chapter "At Tikhon's" which was censored in early editions. There Stavrogin acknowledges his abuse of a young girl—which provoked her suicide—to the holy monk Tikhon). Stepan's vague and hypocritical liberalism, it's implied, is responsible for the nihilism of his son and student. To solidify his clandestine cell, Pyotr pushes them to murder a supposedly untrustworthy former comrade, binding them together in mutual guilt (this parallels Nechaev's orchestrated killing).

The splitting of history must happen soon; perhaps the break will bear the name of a singular individual (Kirillov, Nietzsche, Zarathustra, Dionysus?) just as history until now takes the name of Christ. What better name than Antichrist to indicate the coming era? The Antichrist is the great accelerator. He accelerates

change, surprising the world with dramatic gestures. Dostoevsky's nihilists differ sharply. Kirillov pursues a history-changing suicide; Pyotr delights in chaos, destruction, and violation, cynically using revolutionary ideas simply to seduce followers. Stavrogin aspires to be coolly beyond good and evil; he deliberately provokes crime and scandal. In addition to rejecting established values and practices, all are accelerationists who see confirmation of their tendency in Russia's rapid social changes, and take pride in accelerating them. Nietzsche, I suggest, found such rhythms stimulating.

Nietzsche's notes on *Demons* do not suggest that he found this version of the idea of going beyond humanity attractive. I believe what he found most compelling in Kirillov was his project of *accelerating* a great event he hoped to initiate. Dostoevsky shows Kirillov as a character possessed by a demon of an idea. Nietzsche had already written of such demonic ideas in the signature announcements of the death of God and eternal recurrence (GS 125, 341), so he likely found confirmation of this demonic psychology in Dostoevsky. In BGE, written before he knew Dostoevsky's work, he speculates that the strength of will building up in Russia will, in the next century, provoke "the struggle for hegemony over the earth (*Erd-Herrschaft*)—the *compulsion* to great politics" (BGE 208). Nietzsche had unknowingly prepared the ground for his discovery of Dostoevsky.

The novelist shows the treacherously demonic nature of Kirillov's idea; he writes a false confession to murder and other crimes in support of Pyotr's nihilist conspiracy, although Pyotr's fivesome has no great sympathy for his project. In dialogue with Stavrogin, Kirillov says that there are moments when time stops, becoming "not future eternal but here eternal," apparently thinking he can produce such a moment through his suicide. Stavrogin responds "without any irony, slowly and as if thoughtfully. 'In the Apocalypse the angel swears that time will be no more'" (Dostoevsky 1995 236; Apocalypse 10:6). Myshkin also explores this extreme of temporality. As an "idiot" he lives outside of ordinary historical and social time, providing Nietzsche with a contemporary clue to the life of that other "idiot," Jesus. Stavrogin, the devilish Byronic figure who inspires both religious fervor and extreme nihilism in others, is torn between acceleration and delay. He approaches repentance, but draws back; he throws himself into shocking activity that speeds up the descent to chaos; as the novel proceeds he seems to regret his earlier excesses and to seek redemption. The novel concludes with his suicide.

Both *Demons* and *The Idiot* feature extended scenes in which swelling gatherings of passionate, often antagonistic people become increasingly chaotic,

and occasionally violent. Misfortune, accident, scandal, and humiliation follow upon one another in dizzying succession.<sup>7</sup> In *Demons*, events cascade into psychic and social abysses. I give an abbreviated account of one extended emblematic sequence, a great *fête* arranged by the governor's wife and its fiery aftermath. Before it begins, the event is beset by scandalous rumors that unsettle the guests. The "literary salon" that initiated the day's festivities is first kidnapped by drunk and clownish vulgarians. Then the distinguished literary man (a stand-in for Dostoevsky's *bête noire* Turgenev) bores and confuses his audience for an hour, in a supposed final goodbye to his readers. Next, the ineffective old liberal provokes the crowd's derision with an aesthetic discourse; he breaks down in sobs during his own speech. A final "maniac" speaker raves and gesticulates so wildly, polemicizing against Russia, that he's finally dragged off the stage before the agitated audience. Some of the crowd reassemble later for a farcical "literary quadrille" and a ball, where there is little dancing but much drinking, and nervous anticipation of unknown but suspected further scandal. The gathering is galvanized by reports of fire in part of the town and more chaos ensues there. The governor is hit by a falling beam; he recovers bodily but remains permanently disturbed in his mind. After raging for hours, the fire dies down, but then shocking reports are heard of the murder of Stavrogin's odd wife and her roguish brother. Meanwhile, Stavrogin had run off with Liza, a wealthy, upper-class young woman, another student of the older Verkovhensky. Against his warnings she hurries to the scene of the murder, where some of the drunk and angry crowd, recognizing Liza as "Stavrogin's woman," beat her to death.

In his treatment of these characters and others in *Demons*, Dostoevsky makes it clear that all are struggling with the consequences of the conflict of religious belief and atheism. The inner turmoil expresses itself in crime, cruelty, betrayal, murder, and suicide. A pervasive atmosphere of scandal and dread mounts by startling increments as the story proceeds. As noted, Nietzsche praises Dostoevsky's psychological acuity, and claims to have learned much of importance from him. I suggest that what he learned from *Demons* reinforced and gave vital color to his own perception that the "uncanny guest" of nihilism was at the doors of the West. Dostoevsky provided a thick psychological and social panorama of a multitude shaken by—possessed—by ideas generated in the wake of God's death. More specifically, he depicted the *accelerating* rhythm he saw transforming Russian life, perhaps moving even more quickly than in Western Europe.

Nietzsche took extensive notes on *Demons*, although it is not explicitly cited in his finished works. On the other hand, he clearly alludes to *The Idiot* in *The*

*Antichrist's* portrait of Jesus. He ridicules Ernest Renan's popular *Life of Jesus* saying

that buffoon in *psychologis* has appropriated for his explication of the type Jesus the two *most inapplicable* concepts possible in this case: the concept of the *genius* and the concept of the *hero* . . . . Our whole concept, our cultural concept "spirit," had no meaning whatever in the world Jesus lived in. To speak with the precision of the physiologist a quite different word would rather be in place here: the word idiot. (A 29)

Writing exultantly to Overbeck in February 1887 about his discovery of Dostoevsky, Nietzsche contrasts him with Renan: "This winter I have also read Renan's *Origines* [of Christianity], with much spite—and little profit. This whole history of conditions and *sentiments* [in French] in Asia Minor seems to me to hang comically in the air. At root, my distrust goes so far as to question if history is really possible" (Nietzsche 1986 8.27–28). Nietzsche accuses Renan of having in effect written a sentimental nineteenth-century novel (Shapiro 1982). In this case the professed novelist has greater psychological insight than the would-be historian, a point made explicitly in *The Antichrist*: "One has to regret that no Dostoevsky lived in the neighborhood of this most interesting decadent; I mean someone who could feel the thrilling combination of such a combination of the sublime, the sick, and the childish" (A 31).

Nietzsche's distinctive thesis about Jesus is that he is best understood outside the traditional conventions of narrative (Shapiro 1989, 124–41). Renan tells a story of Jesus's development and so (reflectively or not) adapts some patterns of the nineteenth-century novel. In contrast Dostoevsky's "idiot" prince Myshkin is meant to be the story of what the author called "a perfectly beautiful man." Myshkin is humble and compassionate; he does not harbor common resentments or nurse grudges. In biblical terms he does not resist evil. In a sense he lives outside time. While those around him become enraged, despairing, or mad, he retains a childlike simplicity. A victim of chronic epilepsy (like Dostoevsky) he sought a cure in Switzerland, where he established peaceful, harmonious relations with the local children. That kind of community became his general model for personal and social relations, a model others in the novel tend to find hopelessly naïve.

In 1888 Nietzsche also read Tolstoy's *My Religion* and took extensive notes. He seems especially impressed by Tolstoy's attempt to free Jesus's original teachings from their later distortions by the church. Tolstoy's Jesus is much like Nietzsche's "idiot" Jesus. He does not teach anything concerning immortality



or a world beyond. His commands are simply these: resist not evil, do not commit adultery or divorce, take no oaths, love your enemy. Tolstoy's Jesus is an "idiot" in so far as he is indifferent to the state, uninterested in progress, and simply encourages a peaceful life in this world. It is a peculiar fact of Nietzsche-reception that the editors of WP deliberately obscured the source of a good number of passages that are simply loose translations or paraphrases of Tolstoy's *My Religion*.<sup>8</sup>

Nietzsche's Jesus, then, could be said to be a compound of Dostoevsky's Myshkin and the late Tolstoy's radically immanentist interpretation. Myshkin's naiveté, illness, and general failure to adapt to the egoism and competitive conventions of society lead to his categorization as an idiot. An "idiot," etymologically considered, lives in his own world (his idiom or idiosyncrasy) rather than the common, larger world. Nietzsche sees Jesus as such a *naif*, preaching love and humility without thought for the morrow. It was the church, led by Paul, that attributed doctrines of reward and punishment to this simple soul.

Among the diverse characters in Myshkin's orbit—driven variously by greed, revenge, passion, and honor—several speak of ultimate religious questions. One of the novel's leitmotifs focuses on Holbein's painting *Christ in the Tomb* (Kristeva 1989). The painting was housed in a Basel museum, so it would be surprising if Nietzsche did not see it. Dostoevsky traveled to Basel expressly to see the image. Jesus's body is stretched out, as if a side of his narrow horizontal tomb had been removed. The body is putrefying; wounds are obvious; greenish tones discolor the flesh. It offers a shocking visual equivalent of the declaration "God is dead" pronounced by GS's madman who gives this graphic description of the dead God: "Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we still smell nothing of the divine decomposition (*Verwesung*)?—Gods too decompose! God is dead! God remains dead!" (GS 125). Myshkin's antithesis and odd double in *The Idiot* is the violent and ruthless merchant Rogozhin; like others in this feverish world he is obsessed with the question of God's existence. In a visit to Rogozhin, Myshkin sees his excellent copy of *Christ in the Tomb*. Myshkin remarks that he'd seen this unforgettable painting while abroad. Now it becomes the focus of the pair's dialogue on religious belief:

"But I've long wanted to ask you something, Lev Nikolaich [Myshkin]: do you believe in God or not?" Rogozhin *suddenly* began speaking again, after going several steps.

"How strangely you ask that and . . . stare!" the Prince observed *involuntarily*.

"But I like looking at that painting," Rogozhin muttered after a silence, as if again forgetting his question.

"At that painting!" the prince *suddenly* cried out, under the impression of an *unexpected* thought. "At that painting! A man could even lose his faith from that painting!"

"Lose it he does," Rogozhin *suddenly* agreed unexpectedly. (Dostoevsky 2003 218 [my emphases])

In this conversation, as frequently throughout *The Idiot*, a great deal is sudden and unexpected.

In the Dostoevskian world of psychic convulsions that Nietzsche found so richly insightful, the threat of sudden atheism is matched by fervid Christian speculation about whether the prophesied end is at hand. The most prominent interpretation of the signs of the times supposedly pointing to the apocalypse is voiced by the drunken, buffoonish Lebedev. He holds forth at one of those crowded, prolonged, intense, and chaotic gatherings, dominated by the sense of acceleration toward an impending but unknown crisis. This autodidact student of the Apocalypse is reputed to believe that Russia's new and growing railway network is a plague threatening the "waters of life" (as in Apocalypse 11:6-7). Lebedev replies that it's not simply the railways as such, but "all this mood of our last few centuries, as a general whole, scientific and practical, is maybe indeed cursed" (Dostoevsky 2003 373). He goes on to explain that the railroads are emblems of a greater acceleration. He refers to "that whole tendency, of which railways may serve as an image, so to speak, an artistic expression. Hurrying, clanging, banging, and speeding, they say, for the happiness of mankind!" (Dostoevsky 2003 375). The acceleration of life endangers its vital waters and indicates that catastrophic change is on the near horizon. In perceiving the colonization of human life by the machine, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Marx share a certain common ground.

*The Idiot* is suffused with trepidation about money and machinery and their speedy transformation of Russian life. Myshkin was especially impressed by the "machine" of the guillotine in Europe. He believes that even legal execution violates the command "do not kill." The guillotine is particularly cruel, he says, despite the claims that its swift efficiency makes it humane. The condemned knows with certainty that the moment of his death is coming, that all possibility of hope is extinguished, and so is thrown into a state of extreme anxiety

(Dostoevsky 2003 22–23). He offers Aglaya, one of the women with whom he'll become emotionally involved, a lengthy description of a guillotine execution. Myshkin imagines that the condemned hears the sound of the falling blade and may even remain conscious for an instant when decapitated (Dostoevsky 2003 63–65). Lebedev, the buffoonish student of Apocalypse, relates another such story about Madame DuBarry (Dostoevsky 2003 197). In Ippolit's description of the grotesque Holbein painting, he explains the battered and corrupt body of Jesus as if it were the remains of a terrible machinic process:

Nature appears to the viewer of this painting in the shape of some enormous, implacable, and dumb beast, or, to put it more correctly, strange though it is—in the shape of some huge machine of the most modern construction, which has senselessly seized, crushed, and swallowed up, blankly and unfeelingly, a great and priceless being. (Dostoevsky 2003 408)

In Nietzsche's 1888 notes and texts the malignancy of the machine appears in aphorisms relating to German education and to Kant. It is not the termination of biological life that is at stake, but the imposition of a kind of living death, a deadening of impulse and adventurous spirit. An aphorism in *TI* parodies a doctoral examination:

"What is the task of all higher education?"—To turn a man into a machine (*Maschine*).—"By what means?"—He has to learn how to feel bored. . . . "Who is the perfect man?"—The civil servant [*Staats-Beamte*]. "Which philosophy provides the best formula for the civil servant?"—Kant's: the civil servant as thing in itself set as judge over the civil servant as appearance. (*TI* "Skirmishes" 29)

The connection between Kant's philosophy and a living death—or an automated life—is drawn even more tightly in *The Antichrist*. It's as if Dostoevsky's specter of a machine-driven world has expanded to the realms of philosophy and morality, for the categorical imperative is charged with stifling one's own distinctive virtue. The categorical imperative is "*morally dangerous*." We may hear a Dostoevskian echo here: "What destroys more quickly than to work, to think, to feel without inner necessity, without a deep personal choice, without joy? as an automaton (*Automat*) of 'duty'? It is virtually a *recipe* for *décadence*, even for idiocy. . . . Kant became an idiot" (A 11). Nietzsche goes on to imply that Kant erred egregiously in taking the French Revolution to be a transition from an inorganic form of society to an organic one—in other words, to mistake the dead for the living and the living for the dead. Kant accelerates dehumanization.

Contemporary accelerationists frequently cite Marx's texts on machinery in their attempts to construct a Marxian-Nietzschean analysis of capitalist temporality. The *Grundrisse* claims that in contrast to the traditional instrument skillfully deployed by the worker, the modern machine "possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it" (Marx 1994 53). Or "What was the living worker's activity becomes the activity of the machine" (Marx 1994 61). On this reading Marx lays the groundwork for Deleuze and Guattari's machinic analysis of desire. Accelerationists also point out that today's capitalism involves its subjects in a comprehensive mesh of machinic relations, such as the apparatus of financialization with its credit cards, ATMs, and algorithmic calculations that place people with respect to the life-defining parameters of credit and debt. Additionally, we can note the ubiquity of cellphones and computers, along with the expectation that most people will be more or less permanently linked to networks for work, consumption, and news (or propaganda); more algorithms target them in consumer groups on social media.

*The Idiot*, as Dostoevsky suggests, is meant to display the conflict between a truly good, Christian, and innocent man and contemporary life. He is abused, misunderstood, and insulted in this accelerating world. The novel depicts this destructive acceleration on multiple levels. It begins with a fateful railway journey in which Myshkin, Rogozhin, and Lebedev meet on a speeding train to Petersburg. Rogozhin is a cynical millionaire who gives himself over to his worst impulses, even to murder; Lebedev is a ne'er do well always alert for opportunities to get a bit of money or a boost in status. Very soon the talk turns to money, as the other two craftily attempt to discover whether Myshkin has resources they can tap.

Money is an agency of acceleration in this milieu. As Konstantin Mochulsky observes, in the world of *The Idiot* the pursuit of money or its perverse use generates much of the quickly unfolding action and mood swings (Mochulsky 1967, 352–57). This world is populated by rapacious millionaires, scheming money-grubbers, struggling debtors, and elaborate extortion attempts. Nastasya, the femme fatale, is in danger of being bought and sold but dramatically throws a small fortune into the fire to assert her power over her suitors. Money speeds everything up, eroding traditional values. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, by a universal translation of all relations into monetary ones, capitalism accelerates the decoding of social status and norms. In *Demons*, more coherently composed than its predecessor *The Idiot*, the agencies of acceleration are viral modern

ideas imported from the West and nihilists who are possessed by them, but these agencies require the ground of a rapidly moving capitalism that is shaking off feudal institutions like serfdom.

## 5 A philosophy about the Antichrist, the Antichrist's own thought, or both?

When Nietzsche first spoke of "a philosophy of the Antichrist" in BGE, he did not yet know Dostoevsky's work. He implied then that the nineteenth century was ripe for such an outrageous task, but that its leading creative and political spirits had either failed to seize the moment or remained oblivious to the opportunity (cf. BGE 274). The penultimate section of *Beyond* (295) is a tribute to Dionysus—another name for Antichrist—and a confession of faith by his "last disciple and initiate" in which Nietzsche anticipates the reader's surprise at hearing that "even gods philosophize." That runs contrary to a venerable philosophical tradition going back at least to Plato's *Symposium*. There *philo-sophia* is said to be the love of wisdom, and our love is always a desire for that which we do not possess. Yet, Plato's gods—or God in mainstream monotheism—are by definition perfectly wise, endowed with universal intellectual intuition. Philosophy would indicate an insufficiency in divine wisdom, more intelligible in a polytheistic context than a monotheistic one. What *Beyond's* paean to Dionysus/Antichrist suggests is that "a philosophy of the Antichrist" is not only about the Antichrist (objective genitive) but also one practiced by the Antichrist (subjective genitive).

What would such a philosophy be? As quest, desire, and activity (to stay with one aspect of the *Symposium's* account) it would not be a completed system but a series of inquiries, questions, problems, aporias. Perhaps most importantly, it would not be a timeless philosophy, the careful tending of "conceptual mummies" (*Twilight* Reason 1). As I've been suggesting, this means more than being timely in the sense appropriate to its age; philosophy is not merely its age comprehended in thought, the wisdom of Hegel's owl of Minerva that takes flight as the shades of night are falling. It would be a temporalistic philosophy, one that explores the modalities of time itself, its many variations such as speed, acceleration, delay, slowing, rupture, and recurrence. It could be a philosophy for the day after tomorrow. To the extent that traditional philosophy deals with time, Nietzsche says in effect, it either denies it (Parmenides, Plato) or subordinates it to a logical or teleological process (Hegel). Nietzsche's claim

that philosophy, especially German philosophy, has been monopolized by the theologians reminds us that Christian theology is indissolubly wedded to a certain philosophy of history. As Overbeck and other critical scholars had shown, that philosophy of history was generated by a series of falsifications, self-serving speculations, and political programs.

The theological complex of the Antichrist and the *katechon*, claiming a venerable authority from Paul and elaborated by Tertullian, Hippolytus, and others was a crucial component of Christian thought concerning time and history. Although liberal Protestantism had tried to dull the myth's sharper edges, it remained there in "the language of the church" (as Nietzsche writes to von Meysenbug) waiting to be revived. Nietzsche, already contemplating a philosophy of the Antichrist, found "psychological material" for accelerating this accelerationist project in Dostoevsky.

Perhaps the Antichrist theme never suffered serious eclipse in Russia, where Dostoevsky drew upon the tradition.<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche and Dostoevsky employed the Antichrist idea to address what they perceived as the instability of modernity. While the enlightenment tradition had valorized the idea of history as continuous progress toward an improved human condition, albeit vaguely defined, both the Russian and the German saw an accelerated chaotic pace in the wars, industrialization, movements of peoples, and nihilism of their century. Speaking in apocalyptic terms, Nietzsche foresaw new kinds of wars, the collapse of national identities, the growing homogenization of individuals, and the deeply depressing specter of "the last humans." Dostoevsky hoped that such things could be held back by a reinvigorated Russian Orthodoxy; he was in that way an advocate of the restraining force in which Moscow is the third Rome.

The Antichrist figure was Nietzsche's last flamboyant conceptual persona, before he began his rapid metamorphosis of extreme psychic disaggregation into "all the names of history." Before reading Dostoevsky he intimated the possibility of a philosophy of the Antichrist. After reading him he declared in the GM that the Antichrist must be coming:

This human of the future who will redeem us from the previous ideal as much as from that *which had to grow out of it*, from the great disgust, from the will to nothingness; this bell-stroke of noon and of the great decision, that makes the will free again, that gives back to the earth its goal and to humans their hope; this Antichrist and anti-nihilist; this conqueror of God and nothingness—he *must one day come*. (GM II.24)

As Nietzsche wrote to Brandes, he saw Dostoevsky both as his polar opposite in terms of ultimate orientation, and as an ally in psychological exploration. Nietzsche is the great model for contemporary accelerationism. His philosophy of the Antichrist is an accelerationist philosophy, itself accelerated by his last great discovery of Dostoevsky, an oddly kindred spirit and artist of time.

A final note on the form of *The Antichrist*: The text concludes with the “Decree Against Christianity” signed by “The Antichrist.” It reads like a placard posted by an occupying army, forbidding socializing with priests and consigning churches to crumble into ruin as they serve as lairs for noxious beasts. In *Demons* Pyotr Verkhovensky and his crew distribute provocative nihilist pamphlets and declarations around their provincial town to promote anxiety and chaos. They execute their colleague at the site of a buried printing press, an instrument of their campaign of terror. In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche seems to aim at mass effects or at least to mimic them—recall his ambition of a simultaneous publication of a million copies in multiple languages—writing in his most slapdash fashion and appending the outrageous “Decree.” It is his version of the propaganda dimension of the nihilists’ war.

## Notes

I’m grateful to Dan Conway, Paulo Stellino, Petra Carlsson, Rupert Dörflinger, and Robert Oventile for helpful suggestions and provocative questions. I hope to address some of the latter as time and opportunity allow.

- 1 For discussions of Nietzsche’s reading of Dostoevsky in the last two years of his writing life—texts read, chronology, and significance—see Stellino (2015); also Benz (1956: 92–103); Miller (1973) and (1975). The articles in Love and Metzger (2016) explore diverse perspectives on the two. Sommer (2000) provides useful commentaries and references on specific passages.
- 2 For representative texts of accelerationism and its critics, see Mackay and Avanessian (2017). Noys (2014) offers an informed critical history of the movement and its forerunners, beginning with the Italian Futurists, who themselves frequently invoked Nietzsche.
- 3 For a general overview of Overbeck’s relevant work and further references, see Shapiro (2016: 188–200).
- 4 For a fuller account, see Shapiro (2016: 166–200).
- 5 On amortized temporality, see Shapiro (2016: 121–33).

- 6 As early as 1903, Lev Shestov argued that the “psychological material” that Nietzsche found so impressive in Dostoyevsky was the novelist’s ability to portray analogues of his own “regeneration of convictions” in his characters (Shestov 1969). In other words, Dostoyevsky was aware of changes and reversals—often abrupt and dramatic—in his own ideas and moods, and depicted similar affective and cognitive movements in his novels. Shestov sees Nietzsche as having undergone comparably intense reorientations (as in his shifting thoughts about Wagner). Both writers, he claims, made art or philosophy out of following and articulating their own psychic metamorphoses. Shestov anticipates in a general way Pierre Klossowski’s much more highly articulated conception of Nietzsche as engaged in an experimental attempt to learn from his own “psychological material” (Klossowski 1997).
- 7 Dostoyevsky’s acute reader Joseph Frank describes the novel’s pace: “The gradually tightening web of the plot, with its accelerating tempo and intricate network of concealed relations, conveys an almost physical sense of this gradual invasion of a long-established order by occult forces surreptitiously overtaking its destiny” (Frank 1995: 477). Translators remark on his depiction of the speed of ideas, writing that the ideas that nourished “the demystifying critiques of modern times . . . came a bit late to Russia, but developed there at an accelerated pace. That acceleration makes itself felt very strongly in *Demons*” (Dostoyevsky 1995 xv).
- 8 I thank Paolo Stellino for reminding me of the importance of Tolstoy in Nietzsche’s late portrait of Jesus. The Colli-Montinari edition exposes Nietzsche’s intensive interest in Tolstoy’s *My Religion* and the efforts of WP’s editors to disguise it (Nietzsche 1980 14.754–57). Commentators have puzzled over Nietzsche’s late reduction of a planned four-part *Transvaluation of Values* to the single relatively brief book *The Antichrist*. Could it be that, impressed with Tolstoy’s book, he envisioned writing its antithesis, in similarly compact form, and addressed to an audience with an appetite for large statements about religion and Christianity?
- 9 The “Grand Inquisitor” story in *The Brothers Karamazov* is perhaps the greatest modern adaptation of the idea of the Catholic Church as Antichrist. Nietzsche, however, did not know Dostoyevsky’s last novel.

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