

DEATH OF GOD, NIHILISM, HUMAN EXISTENCE. GABRIEL MARCEL AND FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

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Abstract: In the lecture *Nietzsche: l'homme devant la mort de dieu*, Gabriel Marcel highlights the extraordinary topicality of Nietzsche's thought and figure. The French philosopher seems to say to his hearers: Nietzsche is here, among us, he does not belong to the past, but, on the contrary, he is the most contemporary of contemporaries. Nietzsche's philosophy of the death of God is a mine of ideas and insights that need to be enhanced. There is still much about him to be discovered. Nietzsche, then – and nihilism as such – is by no means outdated, precisely because, Marcel exclaims, before claiming to have left him behind, it is better to make sure we have reached him.

Keywords: Gabriel Marcel. Friedrich Nietzsche. Nihilism. Death of God. Human Existence.

MORTE DE DEUS, NIILISMO, EXISTÊNCIA HUMANA. GABRIEL MARCEL E FRIEDRICH NETZSCHE

Resumo: Na palestra *Nietzsche: l'homme devant la mort de dieu*, Gabriel Marcel destaca a extraordinária atualidade do pensamento e da figura de Nietzsche. O filósofo francês parece dizer a seus ouvintes: Nietzsche está aqui, entre nós, não pertence ao passado, mas, pelo contrário, é o mais contemporâneo dos contemporâneos. A filosofia de Nietzsche sobre a morte de Deus é uma mina de ideias e *insights* que precisam ser aprimorados. Ainda há muito a ser descoberto sobre ele. Nietzsche, então - e o niilismo como tal - não está de forma alguma ultrapassado, precisamente porque, exclama Marcel, antes de afirmar tê-lo deixado para trás, é melhor ter certeza de que o alcançamos.

Palavras-chave: Gabriel Marcel. Friedrich Nietzsche. Niilismo. Morte de Deus. Existência Humana.

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PART 1: MARCEL READS NIETZSCHE

1. Nietzsche: danger and salvation

Nietzschean thought flows like a current throughout Marcel's philosophy. Marcel is in constant dialogue with Nietzsche and wants to give homage to his greatness, making him one of the most eminent representatives of existential thought. Marcel's enthusiasm is triggered by Nietzsche's phrase: 'God is dead', the Leitmotiv that ties all the Nietzschean references scattered through Marcelina texts. The death of God is the theme that emphasises both the greatness and simultaneously the tragedy of Nietzsche. Marcel

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wants to substitute the idea ‘God is dead’ with its original meaning: a tragic-existential characteristic that imitators of Nietzsche seemed to have blurred.

In the interview released to Pierre Boutang, Marcel agrees that he has “the most profound admiration for Nietzsche in the central period of his work” (MARCEL, 2012, p. 118) – that of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. It is in fact in this book that the announcement of the death of God is expressed in the richest and most profound way. Nietzsche embodies for him a deep fracture, which both renders him a tragic witness of modernity and a contemporary prophet. On one hand, he is “a deep thinker, gifted with a power of exceptional auscultation and a very clear understanding of his times”. On the other hand, he is “a prophet” with an acute “power of foresight” (MARCEL, 1979, p. 16). There is an outdated pathos that pushes him beyond his own époque making it the obligatory crossroads for those who wish to consider modern day thought. The Nietzschean announcement of the death of God is the turning point that creates the opening between the modern and the contemporary, a window overlooking today’s civilisation, from which Marcel leans out to take an interesting look at the man who inhabits it.²

Marcel sees in this Nietzschean announcement a very powerful weapon against the contemporary mentality. He needs the dynamite thought of Nietzsche to destroy these misinterpreted ideas about the death of God and to iron out the concept of transcendence. If “the God whose death is announced by Nietzsche is the God of the traditional Aristotelian-Thomist, the God-cause, the God of the first mover” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 51-52), Marcel can be enthusiastic about it. This demise God, by now too old to obsolete to speak to contemporary man, needs to usher a novel idea of the Divine and his relationship with human existence.

An interpretation that Marcel achieves aiming at double target. On one hand, he removes the heavy metaphysical suit from Nietzsche’s aphorisms on the death of God, that his interpreters have made them wear – Heidegger especially. On the other hand, he removes a stratus of trivialisation that takes the aphorisms out of context and transforms

² Cfr. P.D. Bubbio, *La scelta del senso. Gabriel Marcel e l’attraversamento del nichilismo*, in AA.VV., *Nichilismo e questione del senso. Da Nietzsche a Derrida*, Aracne, Roma 2005, p. 128; cfr. Y. Ledure, *Gabriel Marcel et Nietzsche. Témoins de la modernité*, in «Cité. Revue de la Nouvelle Citoyenneté», 14 (1986), p. 51 ; cfr. J. Seco Pérez, *Nietzsche y Marcel, testigos de la modernidad*, in «Estudios filosóficos», 38 (1989), pp. 566-567.

them into advertising slogans – and here Sartre becomes the target. Marcel then wipes the slate clean from these two limited interpretations of the declaration of the death of God. This is much more than a metaphysical quarrel and not at all comparable to any advertising slogan. Behind the cry ‘God is dead’ there is the existence of an anguished man who experiences in his own solitude the actual death of God. A man who realises he has killed God with his own hands, haunted by the chill that from now on he will have to live in a completely different way.

And while he reads Nietzsche, Marcel thinks alongside him. Emmanuel Lévinas gathers this consonance very well when in *Entre Nous* he asserts that “among the ruins of the death of God and the end of the world, Marcel has also thought or referred to this ending” – the idea of the “dissolution”, of the “ruins”, which would not be the end but rather contain, in their decline, a new “beginning”, a “new wisdom” and a “new rationality” (LEVINAS, 2016, p. 93). The death of God is not the end. In the move from nihilism and from the Nietzschean *Übermensch* Marcel beholds the seed of something new and a new beginning. Dialoguing with Nietzsche he notices being in the presence of «a great spirit which more than any other of its time has contributed to the renewal of a spiritual horizon». Nietzsche descends to the most inaccessible depths of his thought aware that the way out is right there below in the most remote areas of existence. The “ambivalence” of Nietzsche does not scare him. Rather such a thought “contaminated with contradiction will be both infinitely dangerous and infinitely healthy” (MARCEL, 1964, p. 30).³

PART 2: MARCEL VS HEIDEGGER

2. A metaphysical Nietzsche

In the lecture *Nietzsche. L’homme devant la mort de dieu* (1957) Marcel launches himself polemically against the metaphysical interpretation that Martin Heidegger gives to the death of God. Certainly, an original hermeneutic suggestion but a little too abstract. A reading without any bite that does not pick up on the tragic-existential burden of the Nietzschean announcement. “Probably”, declares Marcel, “we are on the wrong road

³ Cfr. A. Serra, *La dialogica orfica di Gabriel Marcel. Per una saggezza neosocratica*, AlboVersorio, Milano 2009, pp. 32-33.

when – at all costs – we want to make a metaphysic out of Nietzsche – as Heidegger would” (MARCEL, 1979, p. 14).

In the text *Nietzsches Wort ‘Gott ist tot’* (1950) – contained in *Holzwege* – Heidegger moves along a double track. On one hand, he reads the philosophies that have come before him as if all the history of thought should lead to his own vision of philosophy. On the other hand – says Marcel –, accordingly he manages with Nietzsche that which he has with his own “predecessors: a sort of a mix almost inevitable in his philosophy and one which he intends to consider”. The principal preoccupation is “to bring the metaphysics of Nietzsche into the framework of his philosophy”. For this reason, he asserts that “Nietzsche marks the extreme and insurmountable point to which the western metaphysic is joined” (MARCEL, 1979, p. 12). It is his last and final gasp of the western metaphysic before its end. Nietzsche is the ultimate destination and yet he will always remain a metaphysic: the *Wille zur Macht* is still a metaphysical view of the reality.

Expressed in these terms the question of the death of God becomes for Heidegger “the reduction in importance between the sensible and the intelligible world”. This will lead straight to “the removal of the oversensible” (HEIDEGGER, 1968, p. 198). The death of the Divine is the end of the dualistic world of Plato and Christianity. It is the removal of the ultimate meaning.

Marcel endeavours in every way to be understanding of the Heideggerian attitude. Of course, he does not wish to suggest that such a grand interpretation is wrong. However, at the same time he does notice that the imposing metaphysical framework projected by Heidegger allows something of Nietzsche’s thought to be absent. According to Marcel the primary meaning, God is dead having an impact which cannot be the result of a metaphysical debate. “The way in which Heidegger presents things subtracts from the tragic and existential aspect of Nietzsche’s assertion”. The assertion that God is dead does not coincide with the simple “rejection of a doctrine” (MARCEL, 1979, p. 12). To say ‘God is dead’ does mean to destroy the oversensible. It means a whole lot more than this.

PART 3: MARCEL VS SARTRE

3. ‘Gentlemen, God is dead’

Parallel to this accusation runs one that regards Jean-Paul Sartre. He also, according to Marcel, is on the wrong track and misinterprets the importance of the event of the death of God. Sartre leans not only towards an abstract version of the event, as in Heidegger's work, but also in the direction of a theatrical show and the trivialisation of it. Also for Sartre "the assertion 'God is dead' does not depend upon the tragic human consciousness" (MARCEL, 1964, p. 115).

The polemics of Marcel are not fed by works or texts in which Sartre speaks about the death of God. The *casus belli* is triggered more by an offhand assertion that could probably have gone unnoticed by most. Not however by Marcel. In 1946, Sartre lands in Geneva airport and as journalists come to interview him, he replies 'Gentlemen, God is dead!' This exclamation is sufficient for Marcel to understand that Sartre has completely misunderstood the meaning of the death of God. This episode leaves a strong impression on him, almost like a wound that never heals, up to the point that he recalls it often – both in his works and in his lectures. Marcel does not just simply repeat what Sartre has done but each time he mentions Sartre's exclamation, he adds another layer of meaning to it.

4. *Funny and dangerous 'Nietzscheism'*

In the lecture *Nietzsche. L'homme devant la mort de dieu*, Marcel highlights the first consequence of the trivialisation of the death of God in which he calls "Nietzscheism": an "excessive and dangerous simplification" of the words of Nietzsche (MARCEL, 1979, p. 15). Marcel's reproach of Sartre's simplification of the death of God can be compared to an episode in Nietzsche's work whereby Zarathustra reproaches his animal friends for having trivialised his experience of the *Ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen* by making it seem like a "hurdy gurdy song" (NIETZSCHE, 1968).⁴

An «abusive interpretation» of the words of Nietzsche which opens into to three distorted versions of the announcement of the death of God and of the philosophy of Nietzsche tout court.

First, the sensationalising of Nietzsche's words making his philosophy as pompous as it is ridiculous. Marcel compares Sartre to a «cinema diva, whose image appears on the cover of top selling magazines». A famous Hollywood star who issues

⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, De Gruyter, Berlin 1968, III, Der Genesende, 2.

bizarre declarations perhaps ignoring the contents of them but at the same time certain of rousing sensation due to his fame. In fact, it deals with the death of God – not just an item of gossip. Sartre’s exclamation to the journalists only serves “to degrade and debase” Nietzsche’s real idea (MARCEL, 1979, p. 15).

Second, it is too abstract a reading of the event. The death of God becomes misunderstood and is viewed as “the pivot of the metaphysic” – either that of Heidegger or that of the other metaphysics – music of a ‘hurdy gurdy song’ so pleasant that you can hear it resound in your ears but so poor and sterile from an existential point of view.

Last of all, the ‘Nietzscheism’ risks sliding quickly into the politicisation of Nietzschean philosophy bringing “really disastrous consequences”. The trivialisation removes the words of Nietzsche from their context and opens the door to a dictator or a politician of the moment who “reconstructs Nietzschean thought to justify monstrous behaviour” – just as it happened during the “Nazi era” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 29-30; MARCEL, 1979, p. 17), Marcel reminds us.

5. Death of God, human places

Again, in the same lecture, Marcel adds another layer to the Sartrean deformation of the death of God – that it is not possible to separate the words that announce the end of the Divine from the subject that utters them. Here Marcel brings his audience towards an obligatory either/or: “Either the Nietzschean assertion is considered exclusively from the prospective of an exceptional being who uttered it or else it is considered a vulgarisation” (MARCEL, 1979, pp. 17-18).

In the first case there is a tragic and existential reevaluation of the episode of the death of God: ‘God is dead’ is an «expression that comes from deep» within from an anxious man whose cry explodes in these dramatic words. This cry of dismay is only something that concerns him and which “no one else can understand” (MARCEL, 1979, pp. 17-18). In the second case, the announcement of Nietzsche is not experienced subjectively but objectively almost as if spectators were watching a theatrical scene. Viewed from a detached perspective the event of the death of God “is emptied of its profound significance and becomes a cliché for Godless journalists who treat the idea like something that would be on the agenda of a meeting or a topic for a newspaper article” (MARCEL, 1979, pp. 17-18).

A few years later Marcelian argument continues in this direction in the work *La dignité humaine et ses assises existentielles* (1964). Not only can you not separate the declaration of the death of God from the person who announces it but also the place in which the individual says it is fundamental to its interpretation. Marcel seizes the opportunity here to make a dig at «traditional philosophy» which he insists «has always encouraged us to think in a different way and therefore suggests that the truth does not have to be linked to the immediate situation in which one finds him or herself». The existential meaning that Marcel sees in the philosophy of Nietzsche transcends this idea of truth – that is perhaps too abstract for the everyday human being. There is always something beyond the bare and crude assertion of truth. There is «something more than just the content of the assertion itself»: there is also a human habitat in which such a truth is articulated.

For this reason, then Marcel “reproaches Sartre”: “if you observe the content of the announcement, it is the same as that of Nietzsche but, it is not the same”. The words don’t change but “the existential context is completely different”. In the Nietzschean announcement of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* “this terrible assertion is a secret muttered in anxiety by a thinker who feels as if he is condemned to sacrilege” – in front of a square filled with people mocking him which serves to increase the tragic pathos of this scene. “Sartre’s declaration in the airport” – on the contrary – “is almost a preamble to an interview to shock the journalists. The announcement ‘God is dead’ is emptied of its existential substance to become a common headline of a well-known daily newspaper – ‘a manchette of the Paris-Pressé’” (MARCEL, 2102, p. 103; MARCEL, 2000, p. 115).

6. ‘GOD IS DEAD’. *Front-page news on crime*

Presented in these terms the announcement ‘God is dead’ deep down contains an intimate ambiguity. In being presented as news, the true meaning of the death of God is overlooked. While it is presented as an announcement of a fact, it is much more than a simple piece of information.

At first glance, the death of God could easily be considered a “notification” of a crime. It has a criminal plot, a protagonist, and a setting – all being elements that give the episode semblances of a real story – like something broadcast by a news company. The announcement from the mad man on the market square is therefore very near to being a

news item in a black story. “God seems to be likened to an empirical being whose death is announced like those of Goethe or Julius Caesar” (MARCEL, 1979, pp. 9-10).

In fact, Marcel specifies, in the announcement of Nietzsche there is something more than a mere transmission of information. There is something more distant from the death of God than “a notable fact” announced in a “contingent” way. Marcel warns about the confusing of the two things. It is necessary to be careful not to treat the death of God like the death of just any person albeit famous. The disappearance of God “cannot be considered in any way like an objectively noted fact of a story” (MARCEL, 1979, pp. 9-10; MARCEL, 1964, p. 116) because it would lose its most authentic significance.

Marcel was already alert to this ten years previous in his *Les hommes contre l'humain* (1951). When the death of God is “proposed like a newspaper advertisement heralded in front of lots of journalists” no one can ever really understand its more profound meaning. It is “not only emptied of all of its significance but instead converted into a laughable parody” (MARCEL, 1987, pp. 95-96).

Two different interpretations are revealed by two different protagonists having diverse attitudes about the event – on one hand the mad man and on the other Sartre. Both exclaim the same phrase, ‘God is dead’, however between the two announcements there is an unbridgeable gap that is laid open, a true “existential difference”. The protagonist of the Nietzschean aphorism does not speak, but “sighs” a sort of “gasp”. Sartre however bawls out an “advertising slogan”. Sartre uses this phrase as propaganda to try and “make an impact” (MARCEL, 1987, pp. 95-96). The mad man however expels a sigh without any specific goal in mind. He does not say God is dead to shock an audience but rather because he can no longer contain his anguish. He must empty this chalice that has already begun to overflow.

This Nietzsche seems to have understood when he described the reaction of the men on the market square to the mad man. The men are Atheists that no longer believe in God and do not even understand the profound meaning of his murder. Instead, they transform the announcement into a catchy slogan for the press – just as Sartre does in the airport. The mad man’s announcement emerges from the market square in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. As it does a century later from the mouth of Sartre. Its existential sense is lost, and it becomes part of local banter. It loses its feature of tragedy which bound it to the singularity of a soul lacerated by anguish and is transformed into a newsflash that the

crowd on the marketplace are happy to read on the front page of a newspaper (NIETZSCHE, 1973, p. 125).

Marcel fixes on this aspect to launch a sharp criticism to the philosophical figures of his time. Every part of the world is full of pseudo-philosophers who are trying to seduce crowded market squares by paraphrasing the words of Sartre: “Gentlemen, God has been put to one side!”. It is society that “incites us to behave in such a way” giving priority to news and clamour, and it is society that has brought these types of philosophies that have “betrayed” the true original vocation of lovers of the truth and they end up “in the hands of advertisers and entrepreneurs” – cultured men who play the game of non-conformists whose single “concern” is “the desire for scandal” perceived “as something that is revolutionary and antibourgeois” (MARCEL, 1987, pp. 95-96).

7. The last temptation. To immortalize the death of God

The last layer of comment on the trivialisation of the death of God is found in *L'homme problématique* (1955). Here Marcel suggests that to think in terms of the affirmation by Sartre leads to the event of the death of God being considered in two mistaken ways. On one hand Marcel suggests that one loses sight of the itinerary that leads man to recognise himself as being responsible for the demise of the Divine, on the other hand the «journey» experience of the event is denied. The death of God does not coincide with a simple atheism, nor can it represent the final landing point on which certainties can be reconstructed. Marcel enters the debate once more, confirming again the “absolute diversity of the existential tone” between both Sartre’s and Nietzsche’s “affirmation”. In the Sartrean declaration, the «sacred terror» with which the mad man’s announcement is loaded “disappears to be replaced by the satisfaction of a man that demands to find his own belief on the ruins of something in which he has never believed” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 25-26).

According to Marcel, this event “is only possible when man confronts the death of God and recognises his responsibility for it” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 25-26). The mad man is unsettled and in a fluster. He is looking for God desperately with a fully lit lantern in broad daylight on the market square. Prepared to keep going in his search even if in the end he will have to resign himself to the fact that God is dead and just process his struggle with it. Whoever behaves like Sartre did in the airport wants to arrive at a destination and

hypocritically skip the journey involved. He is a person who rejects God along with losing the awareness that he himself has been the assassin. The Sartrean man is static and has already arrived at the end of his journey. He does not deny God after having searched for him with anguish, but he has always known where the final stop of the journey is. The fact that he has by-passed the journey has only served to inflate his ego. Sartre could quite easily be among the atheist crowd on the market square. He can be likened to these men who do not travel the journey but manage to find in atheism a new port where they feel secure. A positivistic type of atheism of a certainty whereby one knows everything beforehand: One knows that God does not exist before going out to look for him and scoffs at those who dedicate themselves to finding the Divine (NIETZSCHE, 1973, p. 125).

To live in this way is to eternalise the death of God making an arrival point of it that justifies their own research. In opposition to Sartre and the men on the market square, Marcel wants to get back the experience of the journey which is a struggle. He tries to look beyond the event. In the philosophy of Nietzsche after all, the event of the death of God is not the end. It is not the point of arrival but the point of departure. The event “has a preliminary feature» in so much that the man who processes the struggle for the death of God is projected ahead and is already «preparing himself for the arrival of the *Übermensch*” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 25-26).

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PART 4: DEATH OF GOD AND TRAGIC EXISTENCE

8. *An existential reading*

Having explored the mistaken ideas of Heidegger and Sartre it is now important for Marcel to return to the words of Nietzsche to take the tragic meaning from them. Both readings have managed to cast a shadow on the role of the individual in the death of God. More than the heart-breaking existence of man, the gravity seems to shift to the agony of the Divine – a decayed foundation in the case of Heidegger and an advertisement on the cover of a newspaper according to Sartre. The imbalance impoverishes the role of the human being and reduces the feeling of dismay that accompanies this dramatic act.

In *L'homme problématique* Marcel highlights that man is the important figure at the centre of this event not God. The twilight of every absolute trigger a myriad of questions to modern man that, up to this, he would not have even dared to formulate. It

also takes away the last certainty remaining to him delivering him into an anguished existence without any foundation. In fact, the death of God makes a question out of man himself: “it is at the origin of the fact that man has become for himself a question without an answer” (MARCEL, 1964, p. 22) – a walking question mark.

The reading of Marcel, therefore, presents a new and singular way to interpret this event. It is an existential exegesis of the death of God. It assumes a “concrete, existential and non-logical feature” (MARCEL, 1987, p. 28). Behind the cry of the death of God there was always an existence which speaks with anguish that the God in whom he believed before “was alive, he was a person (You)” (MARCEL, 1964, p. 12). The relationship between God and man is not an ontological question but an existential relationship between two beings. These two beings establish a concrete relationship not logical-abstract but passionate and which at a certain point is interrupted by a violent divorce which leads to the death of God.⁵

9. Announcements by the anguished. Murder of God and guilt

Both in *Les hommes contre l'humain* and in *L'homme problématique*, Marcel paints Nietzsche as “the philosopher of anguish” (MARCEL, 1987, p. 27). He does so because Nietzsche underlines the main role of the man that plays out the drama of the death of God. Through his frightening narrations, he brings out the tragic side of the human existence. This therefore for Marcel is the “heart of the Nietzschean tragedy” – if human beings were really to take on the burden of this action they would live in perpetual “agony”. The anguished man is the one who let resound inside himself – the reverberation of the “Nietzschean cry” of the death of God. The anguish is the “proof” that man must «personally experience» to confront in his own “solitude” on this epic journey. It is the concrete “mark” that can be read on his face, the tangible sign that confirms that the news has touched the chords of his soul (MARCEL, 1987, p. 27). Such existential anguish reaches beyond the manner of the announcement. The “statement” of the death of God must be whispered in the consciousness of man. Almost a stabbing cry suffocated inwardly but which wants to be “muttered in anguish”. A pain that does not need to be «explicitly uttered» nor even broadcast through the streets (MARCEL, 1987, p. 27).

⁵ Cfr. J. Seco Pérez, *Nietzsche y Marcel, testigos de la modernidad*, op. cit., p. 570; cfr. Y. Ledure, *Gabriel Marcel et Nietzsche. Témoins de la modernité*, op. cit., p. 55.

The market square where the man goes to make the announcement is not the original place of the awareness of the death of God. The square is only where the announcement is made but is misinterpreted. The people on the square do not feel any anguish. Their faces do not convey any worry only apathy. The crowd are laughing at something they have already understood but they do not absorb. The men on the market square are already sure that God no longer exists but are still unaware of the tragedy of what has happened. Even if they have killed God, they have not come to realise this disastrous event has not even minimally bothered them (NIETZSCHE, 1973, p. 125).

The summit of this existential anguish is touched when man begins to feel a sense of «guilt» for what has happened because of himself. It is reached when man becomes conscious of his own total responsibility for the event of the death of God. In fact, Marcel notes that “Nietzsche does not limit himself to saying that God is dead” (MARCEL, 1964, p. 25). Announced like that it would be a declaration that’s already been heard. Perhaps two millennia ago in Plutarch that in *De defectu oraculorum* celebrated the twilight of the oracles while he listened to a voice that said: “The great Pan is dead” (PLUTARCO, 1983, 83). Or perhaps 80 years before the *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, in *Glauben und Wissen* by the young Hegel who while reflecting on “Speculative good Friday” affirms that “Christian religion of modern times lies on the sentiment that God is dead” (HEGEL, 1971, pp. 252-253). One could also find similar traces in the words of Jean-Paul or Heinrich Heine to quote some or the more famous philosophers.

Marcel however is convinced that “only in Nietzsche” the death of God “assumes all of its tragedy in full”. He does not only proclaim that ‘God is dead’. There is much more to this mad man’s statement. For Marcel “the announcement in Nietzsche is infinitely more tragic because it tells us it is us, ourselves, who have killed God» and this justifies «the sacred terror that Nietzsche expresses” (MARCEL, 1964, p. 25; MARCEL, 1979, p. 10). Marcel anticipates here what René Girard sustains ten years later – in the imbalance of the man’s anguish he finally understands and internalises that “good old God” is not dead, nor has he reached old age or been struck by a disease but he has been killed by man himself. The human being recognises that there is a knife in his hand and

the blood of God, and he shivers at the feeling of “guilt” for this terrible crime (MARCEL, 1964, p. 114; MARCEL, 1987, pp. 27-28).⁶

The man involved in this “tragedy feels dismay and horror”. A tragedy that transforms into “serenity” only when man “reconciles himself with his own action” and makes himself aware that it was in fact he who brutally assassinated his own God. Only at this point will he succeed in sailing towards that unknown sea that is unexpectedly opened to him (MARCEL, 1979, p. 12).

10. *Towards a new daybreak*

The opening of a new anthropological horizon after the death of God appears evident to Marcel putting one in front of the other the two aphorisms from *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* which contain the announcement the most famous number 125 – “*Der tolle Mensch*” – from the third book and the number 343 – “*Was es mit unserer Heiterkeit auf sich hat*” – from the fifth book, added by Nietzsche four years after the first edition of the work. Marcel brings the «multi-layered aspect» of this text to light and brings out the diversity of the «style» used by Nietzsche to narrate the end of the Divine and its anthropological consequences. In the two aphorisms in question, the action of the murder of God assumes two different meanings. He passes from the “tragic sentiment” of an “irreversible” act to a “cheerful trust” in the “future free” of the presence of God (MARCEL, 1979, p. 11).

In the first text, for Marcel, the announcement of the death of God by the mad man is a “terrifying” exclamation. It is a “dark” text with an apocalyptic scene. Nietzsche describes a market square where this desperate man searches for God in vain. He chooses to continue his search against all odds whilst being ridiculed by the crowd, around whom no longer believe themselves in any God. He looks for him but, in the end, he proclaims the death of God or in actual the murder of God by the men around him, himself included. When this man becomes aware of the assassination of God the scenery around him becomes even more disturbing, just like a tragic crescendo. The sea empties and the horizon is erased. The land detaches itself from the sun and falls into a universe that is

⁶ Cfr. R. Girard - G. Fornari, *Il caso Nietzsche. La ribellione fallita dell'anticristo*, Marietti, Genova 2002, pp. 79-88.

darker and colder – into nothing. There are knives bloodied by this murder committed by men and the corpse of God is already rotting.

In the second aphorism, however, Marcel notes that the announcement appears “completely different” – which one can also infer from the title (*Unsere Heiterkeit*). There is a more “serene” and relaxed tone – almost like a “joyful hope”. God is dead – this is now an inevitable fact. Man, then begins to get used to this new dark atmosphere and around him he notices the gravity of his action. He is no longer terrorised by what he has done but he no longer fears harmful consequences. Instead, he understands that this tragic ritual opens new roads to humanity. It is a new light in the darkness of the night. It is a calmness and a new dawn. When the old God is removed from the scene, the horizon returns and appears free. Man can begin again to lower the sails on his ships and sail with marvel towards a sea that had never seemed to him to be so vast (MARCEL, 1979, pp. 10-11; NIETZSCHE, 1973, pp. 125; 343).

11. ‘God is dead’. The final word?

Marcel has intercepted the original intent of Nietzsche. The bloody crime of God, yes, it is a tragic occurrence, but not an end. It is an action that is simultaneously blasphemous and liberating. A bloody but necessary step towards a new life and new horizon – the sea of the *Übermensch*. In *L’homme problématique*, Marcel agrees with Nietzsche that the verbal announcement ‘God is dead’ is not the end but the inception of a new and enthusiastic adventure for humanity: “this can only be a beginning, something like a trampoline for a prodigious leap, a desire for creation, without which the *Übermensch* would be unthinkable”. With the “*Wille zur Macht*” of the *Übermensch* Nietzsche “demands to overcome nihilism which would reduce or condemn us if we limit ourselves to one interpretation of the death of God and from this, we derive a feeling of perverse joy” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 26-27).

Marcel is convinced that not only does one fully understand Nietzsche, rather, “one would ignore his true and profound intent if one did not understand first the desire to move on from a nihilism which emerged from the decomposition of Christianity and of idealistic thought” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 26-27). The nihilism of the death of God is not a state of definitive things but a springboard towards a new anthropology. The awareness of the violent suppression of the Divine allows the human being to enter a new

era – “a diverse and more elevated epoch”. “With the consciousness of the death of God comes the awareness of a radical flip in values, up to now, considered the highest” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 26-27).

The existential anguish that derives from the death of God does not represent the point of arrival. It is the transition towards a new conception of man. Along with Nietzsche, Marcel suggests to modern man that only “by pushing oneself to the limits of an internal experience” – as in the case of the event of the death of God – “we can understand that desperation can be a trigger for a deeper affirmation” (MARCEL, 1943, pp. 59-60).

PART 5: NIHILISM AND TRASCENDENCE

12. *Prometheanism, pessimism, will to power*

At first glance, however, Marcel does not appreciate the death of God in the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche “would not have succeeded” all the way “beyond” the stage of nihilism, as “the doctrine of the *Übermensch* does not seem to be able to definitively satisfy a thought concerned with deepening the concrete situation of the human being” (MARCEL, 1979, p. 23).

Nietzsche’s failure takes on a double declination. Whichever way one looks at it, Nietzschean man always appears paralysed, whether he tries to overcome himself or to remain in nihilism: forwards he marches towards delusions of omnipotence, backwards he is shrouded in the mists of nothingness. On the one hand, the threat is inherent in overcoming itself, as man remains caught in the “trap of hybris, tending to glorify himself from the achievement of technology”. With God dead, a phase of unbridled “Prometheanism opens up, which claims to place man himself in the place of the dethroned God”. On the other hand, the danger is to remain imprisoned within the most “radical pessimism”. The latter is for Marcel “an even more serious threat” than the former, because it breaks man’s every yearning for hope and makes him wallow “in the certainty of failure and in the final hollowness of his undertakings, in short in nihilism itself” (MARCEL, 1979, p. 23).

The situation seems to come to a head when the concept of the will to power enters the scene, which is enough for Marcel to degenerate the all-too-positive image of Nietzsche that he has had up to now. Marcel regards Nietzsche’s will to power as an

exaggerated vitalism that transforms “the dream of the advent of the *Übermensch* into a mythological dream, linked to a certain evolutionist dogmatism” (MARCEL, 1971, p. 82). This, in his view, is the lowest point reached by Nietzsche, who becomes the spokesman of a “false and deplorable philosophy of life”, with a “totally naturalistic” vision and a “primacy of the vital” that crushes existence on immanence and reduces it to its mere biological aspects (MARCEL, 1999, p. 167; MARCEL, 1964, pp. 28-29).

In the first volume of *Le mystère de l'être*, Marcel defines the will to power as an “indistinct metaphysical entity” from which emanates a nature understood only as “force” and “pure dynamism”. An indomitable “monster of force” that leaves a devastating impression on the human spirit: man is “nothing other than this will” and his existence does not “find any expansion” outside of itself, “but crumples miserably” upon itself. “The spirit can hardly escape the vertigo of this absolute dynamism” and finds itself harnessed in this blind force without being able to free itself, with the consequent inability to “give rise to a thought capable of conceiving existence and defining its characteristics” (MARCEL, 1970, pp. 37-39; MARCEL, 2011, p. 155).

13. *Nihilism and anthropocentrism*

The theme of these ambiguities and swings to which Nietzsche’s thought can lead is addressed, in passing but very intensely, in the short communication entitled *Notre point d’interrogation*, given during the round table with Henri Birault, Karl Löwith and Jean Wahl in the context of the Seventh International Colloquium on Nietzsche at Royamount, in the section entitled *L’homme et le monde selon Nietzsche*.

Marcel comments on aphorism number 346 of the fifth book of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, entitled *Unser Fragezeichen*. The key question refers to man’s entire attitude to the world, i.e., to man as the negating principle of the world, as the measure of the value of things and, therefore, as the judge of the world. In this perspective, once man and the world are placed side by side by the sublime separation of the little word “and”, we witness the contempt of existence itself.

Faced with this rigid opposition at work in Western culture, Nietzsche then radically questions an arduous dilemma posed to succeeding generations: whether one should “either abolish your reveries, or – yourselves!”. “The latter”, he problematises, “would be nihilism; but would not the former – nihilism – also be nihilism? – That is our

question mark” (NIETZSCHE, 1973, p. 346). The tone of the final question is more than rhetorical: it is ironic. It indicates that, at the limit, both alternatives, rather than opposites, complement each other.

What Nietzsche draws attention to, Marcel notes, is “the attribution to man of a kind of transcendence with respect to the world as it is” (MARCEL, 2000, p. 107). This also calls into question the philosopher’s personal commitment. Marcel refers to a certain intellectual probity that is “the implacable and, indeed, in a certain sense entirely justifiable way in which Nietzsche denounces a kind of relief with which the professor of philosophy of his time, coming out of the impenetrable thicket of theoretical problems, believes he is clarifying moral truths”. The man of progress, pandering to the need for objectivity, which is the positivist ideal par excellence, succumbs to this moral principle. Or rather, he does so in the name of a certain “deification of himself” (MARCEL, 2000, p. 107). This is why technocratic thinking is perhaps the most complete embodiment of this anthropocentrism.

There is an insurmountable pessimism in this escalation, a deflagrating nihilism. As Marcel notes meditating on the passage from Nietzsche’s text: “it is absurd to separate man from the world by establishing between them nothing but such an external conjunction”. What Nietzsche denounces is precisely this dualistic error in which the «and» becomes, in fact, an “against” (MARCEL, 2000, p. 109). To insist on this point is to fall into a tempting illusion, “open the door to an asceticism that denies the will to live. Indeed, it is enough to say that this denial is a lie and risks hiding or triggering a vital abandonment, through which the way is paved for passive nihilism” (MARCEL, 2000, p. 107). Therefore, for Nietzsche, “nihilism is no longer the cause, but the very logic of decadence” (MARCEL, 2000, p. 111): a decadence that would even be clothed in a biology of values, values that are irreparably superimposed on existence, on life.

14. *Beyond nihilism? Nietzsche master of transcendence*

However, Marcel does not want to completely reject Nietzsche’s “conception” of the *Übermensch* and the will to power, trying to recover “a point of view from which perhaps to accept them” without fear or reticence. He first makes a sharp turn and rehabilitates the concept of the will to power, realising that it carries within it a structural ambiguity that makes it explode. Just as it heavily crushes existence on the mere

biological datum, this same will simultaneously open the “idea of overcoming”. It would therefore be a “grave error to interpret it in a purely biological sense”, since it is “the innermost essence of being, which seeks to implement on a higher plane what is already found in life”. A clear and unexpected opening to transcendence: the will to power speaks of a “life that continually surpasses itself, always ready to abandon itself for true being” (MARCEL, 1964, pp. 28-29).

Having gained this surprising result, Marcel tries to apply the fruits of the vital impetus of the will to power to the figure of the *Übermensch*, thereby realising that the most fascinating aspect that the *Übermensch* brings with him is precisely his will to transcend. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* is the one who struggles with himself to give life to something new; he is a human being who is “first and foremost hard on himself, the man of difficulties and danger”. Marcel always keeps in the background of his movement of thought the famous passage from the *Prologue* to *Zarathustra* in which the market crowd is intent on watching the performance of a tightrope walker, and he agrees with *Zarathustra* when he takes his cue from the tightrope walker to describe the transient nature of human existence. Man is always on the move and “must” continually “overcome himself”, living on a tightrope above an abyss and pushing his tragic existence towards a beyond⁷. This genuine movement of surpassing embodied by the Nietzschean *Übermensch* is highly appreciated by Marcel, because for him too “transcendence means surpassing” and, together with Nietzsche, he considers “man as something to be surpassed”: not an aim or a goal, but a bridge and a passage (MARCEL, 1971, pp. 81-82; MARCEL, 2011, p. 155).

In the wake of these insights, Marcel delivers a fleeting but stinging dig at those he calls “false prophets of transcendence”. Perhaps surprisingly, Nietzsche is not on this list. Not so much because his thought is an expression of immanence, but because, paradoxically, “the term transcendence takes on a much more precise meaning in him than in most of his contemporaries” (MARCEL, 1971, pp. 80-82). Yes, in Marcel’s eyes, Nietzsche is a true master of transcendence.

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⁷ Cfr. F. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, op. cit., Vorrede.

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