



Nietzsche's *Übermensch*: A Glance behind the Mask of Hardness

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Abstract

*Nietzsche's notion of the *Übermensch* is one of his most famous. While he himself never defined or explained what he meant by it, many philosophical interpretations have been offered in secondary literature. None of these, however, has examined the significance of the notion for Nietzsche the man, and this essay therefore attempts to address this gap.*

*The idea of the *Übermensch* occurred to Nietzsche rather suddenly in the winter of 1882-1883, when his life was in turmoil after yet another deep personal setback. The early loss of his father had deprived Nietzsche of a meaningful "mirroring" and a chance to experience realistic, age appropriate disappointment. This left him with a lifelong tendency towards idealisation. It became his proverbial Achilles' heel and the source of repeated disillusionments and sorrow. The *Übermensch* may thus have been a culmination of his impulse to create altars and worlds before which he could kneel. Trying to cope with his own vulnerability, Nietzsche evoked an ideal of the *Übermensch*, a mask of hardness that was designed, if unconsciously, to ward off any future assaults on his fragile self.*

*The double aspect of Nietzsche's personality is explored in this essay. While a highly provocative, belligerent and uncompromising Nietzsche often emerges from his published works, a vulnerable, lonely and sometimes self-pitying Nietzsche lurks in his letters and the accounts of his friends and acquaintances. But could an "ideal of strength", such as the *Übermensch*, serve as a protective mask for someone with a sensitive, passionate interior? Nietzsche's descent into madness would suggest that no ideal can be a substitute for human, all too human, compassion.*

Everything profound loves a mask ...
(Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 69)

This new tablet, O my brothers, I place over you: *Become hard!*
(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 187)

Introduction

Nietzsche did not invent the term *Übermensch*. As elaborated by Kaufmann (1950/1974, pp. 307-308), the concept of *hyperanthropos* can be found in the

ancient writings of Lucian, and in German the word had been used before Nietzsche's time by H. Müller, J. G. Herder, Novalis, Heine, and, most importantly, by Goethe in relation to Faust (in *Faust*, Part I, scene 1, line 490). R. W. Emerson (1841/1979) spoke of the

Over-Soul and, perhaps with the exception of Goethe's Faust, his aristocratic, self-reliant "beyond-man" was the greatest contributor to Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche would, of course, have been familiar with all the above sources.

Problems with translating the word *Übermensch* persist. The difficulty hinges on the German prefix *über* (over, above, beyond) which has connotations of superiority, excessiveness and transcendence, depending on the word it precedes. This variation is reflected in Nietzsche's apparent penchant for *über*-words; in addition to *Übermensch*, he also used *Überreichtum* (super-richness), *Überfluß* (overflow), *Überfülle* (superabundance), *Überschuß* (surplus), and *übertoll* (overfull). In the *Oxford-Duden German Dictionary* (1997), there are approximately 600 words with this prefix in current usage. Various translators have attempted to find the most fitting English word for *Übermensch*; for example, G. B. Shaw (1903) rendered it as "Superman", while Kaufmann (1950/1974) opted for "Overman", and Parkes (2005) preferred "Overhuman". Ultimately, however, the word proves untranslatable.¹

The first time Nietzsche used the term *Übermensch* in his published writings was in the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which he composed during January and February of 1883 in Rapallo (south of Genoa, Italy). Out of 40 entries of the word *Übermensch* in the online *Nietzsche Source* (www.nietzschesource.org), 10 occur in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, one in *The Antichrist*, one in *Twilight of the Idols* and three in *Ecce Homo*, with the remaining 25 scattered throughout the unpublished notes comprising his *Nachlaß*.

Nietzsche never explained what he meant by the *Übermensch*; he only intimated:

Behold, I teach you the *Übermensch*. Let the *Übermensch* be the sense of the earth! Behold, I teach you the *Übermensch*: it is this lightning, it is this madness! ... Behold, I am a herald of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightning is called *Übermensch*.

I want to teach humans the meaning of their Being: that is the *Übermensch*, the lightning from the dark cloud of the human.
(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, pp. 12-18)

This hermeneutic vacuum provoked numerous

¹ The German word *Mensch* means "human being". Even though the *Übermensch* is therefore gender-neutral, for the sake of simplicity I shall use a masculine pronoun in its stead. I also revert to the original German word in all cited passages.

interpretations in secondary literature. Kaufmann (1950/1974, pp. 309-316) interpreted Nietzsche's *Übermensch* as a symbol of a self-overcoming man who created his own values, Jung (1934-1939/1989b, Vol. 1, p. 333) interpreted it as "a deification of ordinary man", and Hollingdale (1999, p. 102) saw it as denoting a man who had organised the chaos within. For Heidegger (1954/1984), the *Übermensch* was "a man who grounded being in the grand style of self-creation" (Vol. 1, p. 220), whilst for the Nazis it became an emblem of a master race.

Nietzsche was a confessional philosopher, who not only lived in order to write, but who wrote to stay alive. The *Übermensch*, one of his most famous ideas, is interpreted here not as a philosophical concept but as a personal symbol of a man in turmoil. It arose from the depth of Nietzsche's psyche at a time of great personal disappointment, and it was designed, if unconsciously, to protect his vulnerable, wounded self. It gave, at least temporarily, a meaning to his existence.

Overcoming Resentment

I teach you the Übermensch. The human is something that shall be overcome.

(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 11)

For that humanity might be redeemed from revenge: that is for me the bridge to the highest hope and a rainbow after lashing storms.

(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 86)

Nietzsche's worship of Wagner could be compared with that of Brutus in relation to Julius Caesar, and so could his "murderous" impulses towards the tyrant for the sake of "the independence of the soul" (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 150). In fact, Shakespeare's tragedy *Julius Caesar* was Nietzsche's most admired. In 1872, Nietzsche risked his entire academic career by publishing *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, in which he extolled Wagner as an heir to Aeschylus and a reviver of Greek Tragedy. It pleased the Master's vanity, but he expected more and persuaded his young admirer to write a devastating attack on David Strauss (whose book *The Life of Jesus* Nietzsche had previously much admired). Wagner had been involved in a public feud with Strauss and unceremoniously used Nietzsche as his hit-man. In August 1873, the essay *David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer* was published, and it later formed part of *Untimely Meditations*. Strauss died suddenly six months later. Nietzsche must have been stricken by a sense of guilt and wrote to his friend Carl von Gersdorff in February 1874: "I very much hope that I have not aggravated the end of his life" (Nietzsche to C. von Gersdorff, February 11, 1874; cited by Hayman, 1995, p. 162). Nietzsche wished that Strauss hadn't read the essay, but unfortunately

he not only had, but had regarded it as an unprovoked and unjust attack. Later, Wagner repaid Nietzsche for this sacrificial act of devotion by spreading rumours about his headaches and eye complaint being due to masturbation, and by launching an indirect, vicious assault on him in *Bayreuther Blätter*. The greatest pain for Nietzsche, however, must have been disgust with himself for having betrayed his own moral standards. One wonders whether his self-reproach of “having ruined the lives of several people”, which he expressed at the time of his admission to the Basel psychiatric clinic in January 1889 (Hayman, 1995, p. 337), was related to that episode.

When, in August of 1876, Nietzsche walked out on his eight-year friendship with Wagner, wounded and disillusioned, he plunged straight into writing *Human, All Too Human*. This marked the beginning of his struggle with deeply cherished ideals and idols – such as Christianity, morality, Schopenhauer, Wagner – and of a relentless *agon* with himself. In the Preface to that book, written a decade later in Sils-Maria, he revealed:

Lonely now and miserably self-distrustful, I took sides, not without resentment, *against* myself and *for* everything that hurt me and was hard to me. Thus I once more found the way to that courageous pessimism that is the antithesis of all romantic fraud, and as it seems to me today, the way to “myself”, to my task. (Nietzsche, 1886/1913, p. 9)

But there was more to come. In April of 1882, Nietzsche met Lou Salomé, a young, intelligent woman born in St. Petersburg of mixed German and French extraction. She seemed to have understood instantly not only the essence of Nietzsche’s philosophy, but the essence of his soul. Although their acquaintance lasted only months, she pronounced herself an expert on all things Nietzschean and later published a book, *Nietzsche: The Man in His Works* (1894/2001). Nietzsche believed that she was “as shrewd as an eagle and brave as a lion” (Nietzsche to H. Köselitz, July 13, 1882; in Middleton, 1996, p. 186) and hoped to have found a soul mate and a disciple. Not for long, however, as it soon all ended in tears. Flirting with geniuses (such as Nietzsche, Rilke, and also Freud) and enticing them into a circle of admirers seemed to have been Lou’s life’s mission. Reading their work, prior to reciting it back to them, proved very successful bait. Her favourite pastime, however, was reducing a genius to a voyeur in a ménage à trois setting. In the famous photograph entitled “The Holy Trinity”, which she later displayed in Wagnerian circles, Nietzsche and his friend Paul Rée pose as two bewildered horses while Lou brandishes a whip over their heads. Lou was no Cosima whose life task was to live and die for

Wagner; instead she aimed at making a genius live and die for her. Yet again, Nietzsche found himself a victim of his own enthusiastic idealisations and had to face yet another huge disappointment. His sister’s interference made it even harder for him to cope with discordant emotions and, not surprisingly, his attitude to women changed as a result.²

At the end of that turbulent year, Nietzsche confessed to his Horatio-like friend, Franz Overbeck:

This last *morsel of life* was the hardest I have yet had to chew, and it is still possible that I shall *choke* on it. I have suffered from the humiliating and tormenting memories of this summer as from a bout of madness. ... It involves a tension between opposing passions which I cannot cope with. This is to say, I am exerting every ounce of self mastery; but I have lived in solitude too long and fed too long off my “own fat”, so I am now being broken, as no other man could be, on the wheel of my own passions. ... Unless I discover the alchemical trick of turning this muck into gold, I am lost. (Nietzsche to F. Overbeck, December 25, 1882; in Middleton, 1996, pp. 198-199)

The *Übermensch* was that gold, and Nietzsche may have been trying to overcome his own resentment by evoking this figure. In a letter to his friend Heinrich Köselitz in August 1883, he wrote:

For a whole year I have been goaded on to a class of feelings which with the best will in the world I had abjured, and which – at least in their more gross manifestations – I really thought I had mastered; I refer to the feelings of revenge and *ressentiment* [resentment]. (Nietzsche to H. Köselitz, August 26, 1883; in Levy, 1913/1985, p. 162)

On the same day, he wrote to Franz Overbeck about his deep melancholy and of being possessed by evil, black feelings. He also conceded: “I have finally become the victim of a relentless desire for vengeance, precisely when my innermost thinking has renounced all schemes of vengeance and punishment. This conflict is bringing me step by step closer to *madness*” (Nietzsche to F. Overbeck, August 26, 1883; in Middleton, 1996, p. 218).

Kaufmann (1950/1974, pp. 307-316) has persuasively argued that self-overcoming (*Selbst-überwindung*)

² Perhaps this “whip of Salomé” returned to haunt Nietzsche in his (in-)famous passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “Are you going to women? Then, don’t forget the whip!” (Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 58).

was central to Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*. He regarded it as a symbol of the repudiation of conformity and the antithesis to mediocrity and stagnation. He also saw the *Übermensch* as a creator of values and as a self-creator, who overcomes himself by sublimating his impulses and passions. Greek gods, demigods and heroes would have been the obvious personification of this idea. In this essay, I argue that Nietzsche was attempting to overcome his own passions and impulses by evoking the ideal of the *Übermensch*.

Masks and Poetics of the Self

Every profound spirit needs a mask ...

(Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 69)

He himself is really the poet who keeps creating this life.

(Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 241)

It is as difficult to define the concept of the Self as it is to define God. The Self, being rooted in the unconscious, often communicates indirectly through symbols, masks, irony and sounds. Nietzsche maintained that "every profound spirit needs a mask: more, around every profound spirit a mask is continuously growing, thanks to the continuously false, that is to say shallow interpretation of every word he speaks, every sign of life he gives" (Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 69). He also declared that one must learn to speak in order to remain silent; in what one says, one is simultaneously always concealing something: "every philosophy is a foreground philosophy ... , every philosophy also conceals philosophy: every opinion is also a hiding place, every word also a mask" (ibid., p. 216).

A mask, which Jung (1920/1989c) called a *persona*, is "how one *appears* to oneself and the world, but not what one *is*" (p. 218). The etymology derives from *per sonare*, to "sound through", and refers to masks worn by ancient actors who had to project their voices to the audience through fitted mouth tubes. A mask reveals as much as it conceals, and it can grow into the wearer's face, imperceptibly merging with the "true", silent self. The term "personality", which derives from *persona*, possibly conveys this fusion. A mask is more like a skin than a shell, so that the inner self still shows through. The choice of a mask is revealing, as it can either augment the unexpressed self or form the opposite of it. A mask can serve as defensive armour that protects against getting hurt; it can also be a weapon of attack or represent a heroic ideal to live up to. Nietzsche's many masks (for instance, that of a rebel, or a misogynist, an Antichrist, a tragic hero, an immoralist, the *Übermensch*, and so forth) may have served all these functions in turn.

Above all, a mask allows the wearer to hover at the

boundary of dilemma: to be seen or not to be seen. Winnicott (1982) postulated that "Although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true that *each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound* At the centre of each person is an incommunicado element and this is sacred and most worthy of preservation" (p. 187). He stressed that "in the artists of all kinds, one can detect an inherent dilemma, which belongs to the co-existence of the two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found" (ibid., p. 185), and in "a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek ... *it is joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found*" (ibid., p. 186). Perhaps the opposite is just as true: it is joy to be found but disaster not to be hidden. The oscillation between these positions was pivotal to Nietzsche's soul. A close friend, Ida Overbeck, observed: "Among his great uncertainties was the one that he always wanted to hear his echo but at the same time was horrified of it" (Gilman, 1987, p. 109). And she added: "He knew how to listen receptively, but never revealed his mind completely or clearly. He felt a need to remain unknown" (ibid., p. 112).

The problem of reconciling the opposites lies at the heart of mask wearing. The concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* [coincidence of the opposites] originated in Heraclitus, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher much admired by Nietzsche. The battle of the opposites, fuelled by his mood fluctuations, became a turbulent undercurrent in Nietzsche's philosophy and also in his life. The constant tension and energy of the conflict proved a source of inspiration and creativity for him; the strife led to "new and more powerful births" (Nietzsche, 1872/1993, p. 14). The discord between inner truth and the falsity of outer appearance may reach an unbearable intensity, and, if unresolved for a long time, it can lead to a crisis, even to psychosis. Jung (1951/1991) cautioned that "progressive development and differentiation of consciousness leads to an ever more menacing awareness of the conflict and involves nothing less than the crucifixion of the ego, the agonizing suspension between the irreconcilable opposites" (p. 44). The healing tendency of the self would strive towards bridging this gaping chasm (or "abyss", as Nietzsche would have called it) by uniting the opposites into *conjunctio oppositorum*. Huskinson (2004), who closely followed Jung in her interpretation, perceived the *Übermensch* as Nietzsche's failed attempt to strive towards such union of the opposites. According to her, he aimed at concealing "unconscious inferior feelings within him" and therefore it became a "one-sided inflation that ignored the 'shadow' side of his personality" (pp. 117-118). Jung, however, was not a disinterested party in his assessment of Nietzsche. Although he

avidly read Nietzsche's works and utilized his insights, he also feared that one day he would become mad like him (Jung, 1963/1983, p. 201). This fear created a chilling distance between him and Nietzsche, consequently obliterating any feelings of compassion he may have had for the philosopher. Perhaps by means of projection, Jung (1955-1956/1989a) accused Nietzsche of repressing all feelings of compassion and called his *Übermensch* "a famous example of masculine prejudice who scorns compassion" (p. 247). I find the shallowness of this interpretation disappointing. Ironically, following his break with Freud – which could be compared to Nietzsche's parting with Wagner – Jung went through a period of psychosis, as documented in his autobiographical work (Jung, 1963/1983, pp. 194-225). Hence his fear was not altogether ungrounded, and, just as Nietzsche (1883-1885/2005) once said, "the smallest cleft is the hardest to bridge" (p. 190).

It is puzzling that Nietzsche, this most eloquent of philosophers, never defined his cardinal idea. Definition would have been indispensable if the *Übermensch* had been a philosophical concept and subsequent rational discourse was to follow. But what if the *Übermensch* were a kind of fictional hero in a private drama of the author? One must remember that Nietzsche was a brilliant classical philologist and a devotee of ancient Greek tragedy, especially the tragedies of Aeschylus. Dionysian Festivals, which had more in common with religious rites than with entertainment, were a forum where the tragedies were performed. The actors wore masks which were designed to create a sense of dread, as well as being a means for an actor to play several roles. A mask was a highly ambiguous device that allowed the voice to express the innermost emotions whilst leaving space for the unknown and the unknowable; it served as an engaging projection screen for the audience. Similarly, Nietzsche's own writings are undeniably theatrical, even operatic, and he invites the audience to participate in the production. With his many masks, he created himself and stimulated the reader to create him. Perhaps the *Übermensch* was Nietzsche's *dramatis persona*, so that the concealed and the unsaid formed a part of the dramatic design that gave the randomness of his individual misfortune a universal, almost cosmic dimension. As well as serving as a mask to hide the vulnerable self, the *Übermensch* became a symbol of transfiguration.

The Birth of the *Übermensch* from the Spirit of Ecstasy

I want to teach humans the meaning of their Being: That is the *Übermensch*, the lightning from the dark cloud of the human.

(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 18)

Behold, I teach you the *Übermensch*: it is this lightning, it is this madness! (ibid., p. 13)

Nietzsche's response to overwhelming disappointment and loss was often a flight into heroic elation. As a young man in 1864, Nietzsche wrote an essay "On Moods", and one might suspect that the topic was already then close to his heart. Later, he continued on the theme:

It seems to me that most people simply do not believe in elevated moods, unless these last for moments only or at most a quarter of an hour – except for those few who know at firsthand the longer duration of elevated feelings. But to be a human being with one elevated feeling – to be a single great mood incarnate – that has hitherto been a mere dream and a delightful possibility; as yet history does not offer us any certain examples. Nevertheless history might one day give birth to such people, too – once a great many favourable preconditions have been created and determined that even the dice throws of the luckiest chance could not bring together today. What has so far entered our souls only now and then as an exception that made us shudder, might perhaps be the usual state for these future souls; a perpetual movement between high and low, the feeling of high and low, a continual ascent on stairs and at the same time a sense of resting on clouds. (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, §288, p. 231)

Luke (1978) rightly considered this fragment to be a pre-formation of the *Übermensch*. He also interpreted Nietzsche's exhilarated states as part of the manic phase of his manic-depressive temperament, both aspects of which, he believed, were later fully expressed in *Zarathustra*. Nietzsche completed the first part of *Zarathustra*, where the *Übermensch* made its forceful appearance, in only ten days. This speed of writing may well have been fuelled by his manic mood. It has been asserted that Nietzsche had a cyclothymic personality, and, as from 1881, a frank manic depressive illness with periodic psychotic features (Cybulska, 2000). As Melanie Klein (1981, p. 277) maintained, in mania there is "the utilization of the sense of omnipotence for the purpose of controlling and mastering objects and it is based on the mechanism of denial". This defence mechanism is particularly applicable to the "lost objects", and mania is often a reaction to painful loss. Shortly after completing Part I of *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche sent Franz Overbeck an undated letter:

... I feel as if the lightning had flashed – I was for a short time completely in my element and in my light. And now it has passed. I think I shall inevitably go to pieces, unless something happens – I have no idea *what*. ... This book [*Zarathustra*] seems to me like my

last will and testament. (Nietzsche to F. Overbeck, received February 11, 1883; cited in Middleton, 1996, pp. 206-207)

A man for whom all light was lightning was alone again, with his pain and with his despair. However, the deep yearning for the moments of ecstasy and transfiguration would return. Less than a year before his mental collapse, Nietzsche wrote in his private notebook the following passage inspired by Kirilov's description (similar to that of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*) in Dostoyevsky's *The Devils* (1871/1999, pp. 662-663) of the fleeting aura of unendurable ecstasy preceding an epileptic seizure:

Five, six seconds and no more: when you suddenly feel the presence of eternal harmony. Man in his mortal frame cannot endure it; he must either physically transform himself or die. ... The most dreadful thing is the horrifying certainty with which it expresses itself and the joy with which it fills one. If it lasted longer, the soul could not endure it, it would have to disappear – in these five seconds I would live the whole of human existence. I would give my life for it, the price would not be too high. (KSA 13:11[337]; cited by Marsden, 2002, p. 121)

Nietzsche, who wrote with his “blood” and his entire being, must have experienced such intense moments himself. In one such moment of manic psychotic elation, during the summer of 1881, the idea of “eternal return” suddenly assailed his consciousness and became central to his thought (Cybulska, 2013). He transfigured a deep sorrow (related to his disappointment with Wagner) into a life-redeeming formula. The intersection of pain and elation became fixed in his mind, and I argue that the *Übermensch* was a product of such intersection too. Moreover, he would crave the return of that moment – the more pain, the more *overcoming*, the more of the victorious elation. But, as he was unable to directly communicate and share this experience, his sorrow and great sense of loss remained deeply buried in silence.

How to Become What One is Not: Creating a Persona

In caring and pitying my greatest danger has always lain.

(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 160)

I am one thing, my writings are another.

(Nietzsche, 1888/1986a, p. 69)

Nietzsche was not born hard; yet hard he always wanted to become. From an early age he had a profound capacity to identify with human suffering, and he also felt deeply his own pain and loss. This

was to become his proverbial Achilles' heel. Whenever memories of his idyllic childhood (interrupted by the untimely death of his father) returned to him, he was overcome by self-pity:

We are devastated by the sight of the scenes of our childhood: the garden house, the church with its graves, the pond and the woods – we always see them again as sufferers. We are gripped by self-pity. (Nietzsche, 1878/1994, p. 168)

Several of Nietzsche's perceptive friends were able to catch a glimpse of his sensitive interior behind the mask of hardness. For instance, Meta von Salis observed: “He himself was tender, vulnerable, ready for reconciliation, shy about offending others”, whereas “his task demanded hardness, forbade compromise, and brought himself and others pain and bitterness He condemned a whole series of intense feelings not because he did *not* have them, but on the contrary because he *had* them and knew their danger” (as cited in Gilman, 1987, p. 202). Another close friend, Resa von Schirnhofer, described him thus: “so unrestrained as a thinker, Nietzsche as a person was of extreme sensitivity, tenderness, and refined courtesy in attitude and manners toward the female sex, as others who knew him personally often emphasised” (ibid., p. 148).

Writing to Franz Overbeck, Nietzsche let the mask of toughness slip:

This is the mistake that I perpetually make: that I imagine the suffering of others to be much greater than it is. From my childhood on, the proposition “my greatest danger lies in *pitying*” has confirmed itself again and again It will be enough if, through the bad experiences I have had with pitying, I am stimulated to make a theoretically interesting alteration in the esteem that pitying enjoys. (Nietzsche to F. Overbeck, September 14, 1884; cited by Parkes, 2005, p. 310)

Possibly in an attempt to overcome his own sensitivity, Nietzsche famously declared a war on pity. The German word *Mitleid* is ambiguous and can be translated into English as “compassion”, “pity”, or “sympathy”, all of which differ in etymology and connotations. The English “pity” contains an element of superiority and contempt towards the pitied, whilst “compassion” is a feeling of empathy on equal terms. For Nietzsche, however, all “compassion” was “pity”. Even though in compassion one regards another's suffering as one's own (*Mitleid*, like “com-passion”, derives from “suffer with”), by wanting to relieve the suffering of the other one wants to relieve one's own. Hence, in Nietzsche's view, even compassion is

ultimately egoistic.³

Nietzsche also believed that one is existentially alone in suffering and that the so-called “benefactors” can only misread it, rendering the suffering shallow. Thus pity can make the sufferer feel even smaller and more worthless. Deep sorrow is beyond compassion and “the path to one’s own heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one’s own hell”. Hence Nietzsche’s teaching to the preachers of pity: “share not suffering but joy!” (see *The Gay Science*, 1882/1974, pp. 269-271.) In his heroic aristocratism, Nietzsche created a *pathos of distance*, designed to rise above sorrow. He sanctified pain as some kind of purifying force, stressing that “profound suffering ennobles; it separates” (Nietzsche, 1886/1990, p. 209). In order to endure pain, one can also try to purge the inner sensitivity that makes one vulnerable to it; one can become *hard*. The *Übermensch*, I would argue, was part of such a mission.

Nietzsche was fully aware of his psychological fragility. He wrote to Ida Overbeck on 14 August 1883 that “my soul was missing its skin, so to speak, and all natural protections” (Nietzsche, 1880-1884/1986b, p. 423). The only route to convalescence was “to develop a thick skin, the sole antidote to our massive inner vulnerability and capacity for suffering” (Nietzsche to M. von Meysenbug, August 11, 1875; cited by Krell & Bates, 1997, p. 92). Several of his acquaintances commented that he looked more like “a Prussian officer in civilian clothes” than a philosopher (Gilman, 1987, p. 133). The famous bushy moustache that overshadowed his sensual lips was part of a warrior’s mask, designed to scare:

Knowing one’s individuality – We are too prone to forget that in the eyes of people who are seeing us for the first time we are something quite different from what we consider ourselves to be: usually we are nothing more than a single individual trait which leaps to the eye and determines the whole impression we make. Thus the gentlest and most reasonable of men can, if he wears a large moustache, sit as if in its shade and feel safe there – he will usually be seen as no more than the *appurtenance* of a large moustache, so that is to say a military type, easily angered and occasionally violent – and as such he will be treated. (Nietzsche, 1881/1982, p. 171)

Partially, Nietzsche succeeded in creating the impression of an “occasionally violent” warrior, but at

the cost of even more loneliness. And loneliness was a hiding place he knew well. Throughout his life, he carried within him that deep sense of being alone in the world: “I have forty-three years behind me, and am just as alone as when I was a child” (Nietzsche to E. Rohde, November 11, 1887; in Middleton, 1996, p. 275). Sometimes, he protested, as to his sister Elisabeth in mid-1886:

Was I made for solitude or for life in which there was no one to whom I could speak? The inability to communicate one’s thoughts is in very truth the most terrible of all kinds of loneliness. ... Deep man needs friends! All else failing, he has at least his god. But I have neither god nor friends! Perfect friendship is possible only *inter pares*! My health is really quite normal – but my poor soul is so sensitive to injury and so full of longing for good friends, for people who are my life. Get me a small circle of men who will listen to me and understand me – and I shall be cured! (Nietzsche to E. Förster-Nietzsche, July 8, 1886; in Levy, 1913/1985, pp. 182-183)

Nietzsche understood the dangers of his inner polarisation. The need to suppress his vulnerable interior led to an excess of hardness in his writings, which in turn alienated many of his potential supporters. On 1 February 1888, less than a year before his total mental eclipse, he confided in his friend Heinrich Köselitz:

To lack not only health, but also money, recognition, love, and protection – and *not* to become a tragic grumbler: this constitutes the paradoxical character of our present condition, its *problem*. As for myself, I have got into a state of *chronic vulnerability*, against which, when my condition is slightly improved, I take a sort of revenge which is not of the nicest description, that is to say, I adopt an attitude of excessive *hardness*. (Nietzsche to H. Köselitz, February 1, 1888; in Levy, 1913/1985, p. 215)

In attacking Schopenhauer’s “morality of pity” and Christianity as a “religion of pity” (see, for instance, *The Antichrist*, 1888/1976a, p. 572), Nietzsche vicariously attacked what was an integral and very precious part of himself. If the *Übermensch* was to be a “Roman Caesar with Christ’s soul” (Nietzsche, 1883-1888/1969, p. 513) that reconciled hardness with compassion, then, for Nietzsche the man, it failed to resolve his contrary emotions. It failed to cure his divided self. He signed his last letters of January 1889, heavily tainted with insanity, “Nietzsche Caesar” and “The Crucified” (Letters to A. Strindberg, H. Köselitz and G. Brandes; cited in

³ For a brilliant discussion on this topic see David E. Cartwright’s (1988) “Schopenhauer’s Compassion and Nietzsche’s Pity”.

Hayman, 1995, pp. 334-335). In the end, it was “The Crucified” that prevailed in the closing scene of his life drama (see below).

The Loneliest Loneliness and the Abyss of Being

Still is the bottom of my sea: who would guess
that it harbours such sportive monsters.

(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 101)

The human is a rope, fastened between beast and
Übermensch – a rope over an abyss.

(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 13)

In the normal course of development, an individual goes through a stage of being meaningfully mirrored by significant others, usually parents. Lacan (1949/1997), and after him Winnicott (1971/1996), called it “the mirror stage”. Failure at this stage may lead to a fragile ego-formation with lifelong consequences. If a person has not learned how to internalise the “mirrored self”, he might not benefit from it even if a meaningful mirroring is offered later in life. Such a person might become a kind of solitary island, beyond reach. Nietzsche once compared himself to the wounded and abandoned archer Philoctetes, and wrote to Heinrich von Stein, after his visit to Sils-Maria: “you may have come far too close to finding Philoctetes on his island” (Nietzsche to H. von Stein, September 18, 1884; in Middleton, 1996, p. 231).

The early death of his father shattered Nietzsche’s childhood, not only because of the loss of a male figure with whom he could identify, but also because his contrary emotions could not be contained. These continued to flood his conscious and unconscious self, creating mayhem. Moreover, he was not given a chance to experience realistic, age appropriate disappointment, and this left him with a persistent tendency towards idealisation. His young, widowed mother, who had to care for three young children, was not able to give this highly intelligent, sensitive boy the “mirroring” and containment that he needed. A vital part of Nietzsche’s soul seems to have died then, and he carried this sense of deadness throughout his life. “As my father I have already died”, he lamented in *Ecce Homo* (Nietzsche, 1888/1986a, p. 38). He learned how to retreat behind a barricade of lofty solitude and construct an invisible world of the ideal. As a young boy, he wrote short plays and poems, and paraded toy soldiers in honour of a small porcelain squirrel, which he called King Squirrel I (Hayman, 1995, p. 21). Whilst creating a kind of “Über-squirrel” can be seen as age appropriate in the case of a child, Nietzsche’s tendency to erect altars and worlds before which he could kneel persisted well into adulthood. I would argue that the Übermensch may be a culmination of this tendency towards idealisation. It could also have been a product of psychotic imagination, a kind of delusional idea

(Cybulska, 2008). Initially, delusional constructions may serve an apotropaic function by warding off the impending disintegration of the self. Yet, ultimately, psychotic constructions destroy the self and reality. As De Masi (2009, p. 32) has convincingly argued, they present themselves as saviours but in the end they become the inner tyrants that colonise the ego, luring it into the delirious joy of an omnipotent pseudo-paradise. These fantasies thus serve only to lead the person further into the labyrinth of the Unconscious, where the thread of reason can be irretrievably lost.

Nietzsche’s urge to idealise reached its apogee with Wagner, who, instead of containing the idealising projections and allowing them to dissipate naturally, fuelled and used them for his own narcissistic needs. This pattern recurred in the encounter with Lou Salomé who, ironically, later advised Freud on the psychopathology of narcissism. Nietzsche “created” his Wagner and Lou Salomé, at huge cost to himself. Subsequently, he withdrew from the world and lived the rest of his life in radical solitude and “off his own fat”. There was no-one who could contain his powerful, contrary emotions and refuel his self-love, and there was no-one for whom he could do the same either. He never developed any intimate relationship or shared his life with anyone, and his resignation from teaching at the age of 35 deprived him of any subsequent human interactions of a potentially rewarding kind. His life consequently became an emotional desert.

Idealisation is not about seeing the best in another person, but about constructing what is not there; in essence, it is a refusal to engage with reality. Unless deconstructed by timely devaluations, idealisations have a depleting effect on the self, which is then left with “bad internal objects” (see Klein, 1980, pp. 5-12). These can turn into monsters, either to be fiercely fought against or to be projected onto the external world. In his “transvaluation of all values”, Nietzsche claimed that an exceptional man, standing beyond good and evil, was entitled to the sacrifice of the mediocre others (see Nietzsche, 1886/1990, pp. 165-168).

In a private note of 1884, he proposed:

Destruction of the ill-bred – for that purpose
one must emancipate oneself from all
traditional morality. (Cited by Schutte, 1984,
p. 156)

And, disturbingly:

Not merely a master race whose sole task is
to rule, but a race with its own sphere of life,
with an excess of life, with an excess of

strength for beauty, bravery, culture, manners to the highest peak of the spirit ... (Nietzsche, 1883-1888/1969, p. 478)

Nietzsche's concept of the "slave morality" of the weak, as opposed to the "master morality" of the strong (see first essay in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, 1887/1994), may well have been the result of splitting and projection, so that "the ill-bred" and "the herd" became the carriers of what he resented in himself. The attempt at emancipation from traditional morality ultimately led to further alienation – both from himself and from the world. The phantasm of the *Übermensch*, instead of being a rainbow-bridge over the abyss, became the abyss itself. In *Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard (1849/1989) recognised the danger of the fantastic: "The fantastic is generally speaking what carries a person into the infinite in such a way that it only leads him away from himself and thus prevents him from coming back to himself. When emotion becomes fantastic in this way, the self is simply more and more volatilized. ... The person whose emotions have become fantastic ... in a way becomes infinitized, but not in such a way as to become more and more himself, for he loses himself more and more" (p. 61).

Human, All Too Human

Pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and a deep heart. The really great men must, I think, have great sadness on earth.

(Dostoyevsky, 1866/1991, p. 317)

There is no redemption for one who suffers from himself ...

(Nietzsche, 1883-1885/2005, p. 33)

Nietzsche lived in books and books lived in him. In his influential work *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Nehamas (1985) asserted that Nietzsche viewed the world as if it were a literary text and that his goal as an author was to create a specific literary character. However, the self-fashioning of oneself as a literary character was just as important in the life of Nietzsche the man as it was in his philosophy.

Having accidentally discovered Dostoyevsky in 1887, Nietzsche became instantly in awe of the Russian writer. He read *The Notes from Underground*, *House of the Dead*, *The Insulted and Humiliated*, *The Devils*, and probably *The Idiot* (as far as we know, all in French translation). It remains uncertain whether he read *Crime and Punishment*. If he had done, its chief protagonist, Raskolnikov, may have struck him as someone who attempted to become the *Übermensch*. In a fragment entitled *The Criminal*, Nietzsche proclaimed Dostoyevsky to be the only psychologist from whom he had something to learn. In the same

passage, he wrote: "the criminal type is the type of the strong human being under unfavourable circumstances: a strong human being made sick" (Nietzsche, 1889/1976b, p. 549).

Rodion Raskolnikov was a brilliant but impoverished former student whose family, uncannily resembling Nietzsche's, consisted of a devoted mother and sister, as well as a baby brother and a deceased father. He led a lonely existence amidst the faceless crowds in St. Petersburg. His deeply felt resentment and rage against the world's order led him to develop a theory of the extraordinary man. Such a man would stand alone, disdainful of established moral rules, and be a law unto himself. Above all, he would be hard and merciless in his attitude towards ordinary, mediocre men. But there was another side to Raskolnikov. According to his friend Razumikhin, he also had a noble nature and a kind heart, but did not like revealing his feelings and would rather do a cruel thing than open his heart; "it's as though there were two opposing characters alternating within him" (Dostoyevsky, 1866/1991, p. 265). Whilst "off guard", Raskolnikov gives his last money to the poor widow Katerina Ivanovna Marmeladov, and also risks his life by rescuing a child from a fire. Yet, to prove his own hardness, he proceeds to kill the pawnbroker Alyona, whom he considers something of a vermin. On the night before the murder, he has an extraordinary dream. He dreams of being a young boy again, who walks with his father along the road that leads to the graveyard, holding his hand. As they pass a tavern, he sees a drunken cabdriver mercilessly whipping his horse, trying to make it gallop. The beating continues even after the animal has collapsed. With tears streaming down his face, Rodion Raskolnikov approaches the dead horse, embraces its bloody head and kisses it on the eyes.

On 3 January 1889 in Turin, Nietzsche crossed the Rubicon to insanity. Having left his lodgings, he walked into the Piazza Carlo Alberto where a cabdriver was beating his horse. In tears, Nietzsche flung his arms around the animal's neck and collapsed. In the end, he had no joy to share – only pain.

The question arises: is not vulnerability, which makes a man "human, all too human", more precious than steely strength? In this may lie the enduring appeal of Christ, and perhaps even of Nietzsche himself. Raskolnikov ended up in Siberia and wasted many years of his life proving nothing. His ideal of the extraordinary man turned out to be a toxic vapour that only alienated him from himself and from those who loved him. Perhaps every lofty, uncompromising ideal, including the *Übermensch*, is doomed to failure? It is often a mask of unacknowledged weakness that parades as power.

Postscript

In the course of writing this essay, I have become even more aware of the Janus-like quality of Nietzsche's personality. While a highly provocative, belligerent and hard-hearted Nietzsche often emerges from his published works, a vulnerable, lonely and sometimes self-pitying Nietzsche lurks in his letters

and the accounts of friends and acquaintances. Which is the true Nietzsche? While for some of his readers this dilemma can be highly frustrating, for others it is engaging and stimulating. Perhaps the undying fascination he presents for writers, poets, artists and thinkers of all kinds is precisely the multifariousness of his soul, together with the compelling beauty of his writings and the tragedy of his life.

Referencing Format

Cybulska, E. (2015). Nietzsche's *Übermensch*: A glance behind the mask of hardness. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 15(1), 13 pp. doi: 10.1080/20797222.2015.1049895

Acknowledgement

I thank Professor M. Anderson for his comments on the earlier draft of this paper.

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