



## Were Nietzsche's Cardinal Ideas – Delusions?

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*Even as 'a philosopher' I still did not express my essential thoughts (or 'delusions').*  
 [Nietzsche, *A Letter to Overbeck*, April 1883]

### Abstract

*Nietzsche's cardinal ideas - God is Dead, Übermensch and Eternal Return of the Same - are approached here from the perspective of psychiatric phenomenology rather than that of philosophy. A revised diagnosis of the philosopher's mental illness as manic-depressive psychosis forms the premise for discussion. Nietzsche conceived the above thoughts in close proximity to his first manic psychotic episode, in the summer of 1881, while staying in Sils-Maria (Swiss Alps). It was the anniversary of his father's death, and also of the break-up of his friendship with Wagner, the most important relationship in his life. Despite having been acquainted with these ideas from reading philosophy and literature, Nietzsche created them de novo and imbued them with very personal meaning. Surprisingly, he never defined or explained his cardinal thoughts in his published writings, perhaps because rationally he could not. A resultant hermeneutic vacuum provoked an avalanche of interpretations in secondary literature. But could these ideas be delusions? A current definition of delusion is challenged, and an attempt is made at a limited comparison between delusion, scientific/philosophical doctrine and poetic creation. It is also argued that psychosis is a way of re-living trauma, and delusions can therefore be seen as a form of reasoning that helps to make sense of the world in a state of psychotic disintegration. Far from being false beliefs, delusions are a true expression of one's innermost feelings and pain, albeit indirectly. The relationship between early parental loss and repeated trauma, psychosis and creativity is also explored.*

Recent research increasingly suggests that the original diagnosis of Nietzsche's mental illness as tertiary syphilis is untenable. Instead, it is proposed that throughout his creative life the philosopher suffered from a cyclic mood disorder, at times of psychotic intensity (Cybulska, 1998, 2000a; Rogé, 1999; Schain, 2001). This revised diagnosis may throw new light on Nietzsche's creativity and have a considerable impact on the interpretation of his philosophy. An aphoristic style, an abundance of contradictions, an extraordinary imagistic vividness

and musicality, as well as the highly compelling nature of his writings may have been rooted in his protean affective states with oscillating boundaries between what normally is, and is not, conscious, real and rational.

This is an attempt to look at Nietzsche's cardinal ideas – *God is Dead*, *Übermensch* and *Eternal Return of the Same* – from a perspective of psychiatric phenomenology rather than that of philosophy. He never defined or explained them, and a resultant

hermeneutic vacuum provoked an avalanche of interpretations in secondary literature. *God is dead* has been interpreted as an apocalyptic vision of mankind after the demise of religion (Kaufmann, 1974), a manifesto of nihilism (Danto, 1965) or a statement of existential aloneness (Heidegger, 1977). Hollingdale (1999) saw in *Übermensch* a man who had organised the chaos within, Kaufmann (1974) a symbol of man that created his own values, and Jung (1934-39/1989) saw a new 'God'. For Heidegger (1954/1984) it stood for humanity that surpassed itself, and for the Nazis it became an emblem of the master race. *Eternal Return* – which Nietzsche called his "most scientific idea" – was interpreted by Heidegger (1954/1984) as existential choice; for Deleuze (1994) it was a 'mystical game of loss and salvation' with a ring of Kantian categorical imperative; Wood (1988) read the doctrine as a deconstructive transvaluation of time. The question arises: were these ideas scientific concepts, philosophical doctrines, poetic creations or delusional phenomena?

### General Considerations

*It is the value of all morbid states that they show us under a magnifying glass certain states that are normal – but not easily visible when normal. (Nietzsche, The Will to Power)*

The current definition of delusion can be traced back to Jaspers (1913/1962) whose famous three 'criteria' – falsity, certainty and incorrigibility – form its core. In the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) it is defined as "a false personal belief based on incorrect inference about external reality and firmly sustained in spite of what almost everyone believes, and in spite of what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not one normally accepted by other members of the person's culture or subculture (e.g. religious faith)". A challenge to this definition, as well as a limited comparison between delusion, scientific enlightenment and poetic creation, is attempted below.

### Belief versus Judgement

The definition of delusion as a false belief is inaccurate. Spitzer (1990) proposed a term 'knowledge claims', and much earlier Jaspers (1913/1962) considered delusion to be a 'mistaken judgement'. Anthony Kenny (2007) has pointed out that "belief is a disposition expressed in acts of judgement". According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2006), "A belief is a feeling that something is real or true, trust, confidence" (p. 61), and, as a *feeling* is bound to be *true* (unless one is

lying), only opinion or judgement about reality can be true or false. Judgement is based on probabilities, involves weighing evidence, and implies conscious deliberation and choice, usually after a period of suspension. Belief is a statement of faith, and therefore the dichotomy of truth and falsity cannot apply. Could it be more appropriate to define delusion as a belief that parades as judgement?

### Truth versus Falsity

The most controversial is the relationship between delusion and truth. Jaspers (1913/1962) famously stated that "in the case of delusion, we may see someone irretrievably lost in untruth" (p. 411). Etymologically 'truth' derives from the Old English *trēow* (loyalty, fidelity, faith) – with the German word *wahr* having similar etymological roots – as in contrast to 'reality', which derives from the Latin *rēs* (thing, matter), that which exists independently (Partridge, 1963, p. 740). 'Reason' and 'reality' share the stem *rēs*, hence Hegel's observation that the real is the rational and the rational is the real. For Kierkegaard (1846/1968) truth was subjectivity, and it was related to existential inwardness. Perhaps delusion is best viewed not as a predicative statement about external reality, but as an uncompromising expression of the innermost self; an expression of a private passion, the intensity of which cannot be doubted. Also, to paraphrase Nietzsche, delusion expresses the truth *that otherwise would have become poisonous*. As delusion *truly* conveys the state of the inner world (the state of inwardness), is it not *truer* than a scientific judgement that only approximates reality?

### Doubt versus Certainty

Since the time of Descartes, the path to knowledge has been described as running via doubt and uncertainty. Doubt may serve as an inhibitor of an immediate response, and also as a stimulus towards refutation/verification. Popper (1935/1959) rotated a *Verification Principle* into a *Falsification Principle*, stating that the progress of science was achieved not by an effort to confirm the hypothesis, but precisely by the opposite manoeuvre – by an attempt to refute it. This mechanism of 'falsification' is certainly lacking in a delusion formation; it is of no concern to the artist/poet. An attempt at refutation/verification becomes not just a search for proof, but also a quest to retrace the trajectory of the imaginative leap.

A scientific illumination often carries a feeling of profound certainty (as described by Poincaré and quoted by Eysenck, 1994), and also (unlike delusion) it brings a sense of achievement and pleasure. It is presumably because scientific investigation is primarily curiosity-driven, and to satisfy curiosity is amongst the greatest of human pleasures.

### Perseveration or Incorrigibility?

As delusion is not a result of a conscious choice between several options, one could look at it as an involuntary thought that repeats itself, a kind of perseveration. Kraepelin (1913/1921) already observed that, in mania, delusions once formed return with a 'photographic sameness' in subsequent episodes.

Any belief or judgement, once made, tends to persevere both in the face of new data and after evidential discrediting, and rigid adherence to a paradigm is typical of scientists (Kuhn, 1970). On the other hand, some deluded persons abandon their beliefs as readily as they make them (Garety & Hemsley, 1994). Scientific/philosophical illuminations, as well as poetic creations, often undergo conscious evolution and are frequently drafted and re-drafted. Although delusion may change, it is more like a leap to another orbit than a dialectical movement of thought in a spiral-like fashion.

### Particular, Personal and Universal

Kant (1798/1978) considered that "the only general characteristic of insanity is the loss of a sense for ideas that are common to all (*sensus communis*), and its replacement with a sense for ideas peculiar to ourselves (*sensus privatus*)" (p. 117). Nearly two centuries later, a study comparing poetry written by psychotic and non-psychotic poets revealed that the theme of self-reference was the only difference on eleven dimensions between the two samples (Rhodes et al., 1995). The content of delusion is centripetal. It is an expression of a private, not shared, world-view when a new unconscious association is made between the particular and the personal (sometimes wearing a mask of the universal – as in Nietzsche's case). By contrast, a scientist builds on achievements of his predecessors and contemporaries and, while challenging the prevailing paradigm, he remains in a dialogue with the scientific community. Scientific hypothesis is world-directed and is hinged on the cognitive movement from the particular to the general, and back. There is an assumed presence of an interlocutor/opponent that necessitates symbolic communication. Although poetic (and other artistic) creations may contain all three elements, the poet communicates not by logic, but by evoking a resonating 'feeling state' in the reader/listener.

### *Wahnstimmung* versus Incubation

Delusions arise very differently from scientific enlightenments. Delusion formation is a process of creating a meaning out of a terrifying and puzzling experience of a 'delusional mood' (*Wahnstimmung*). This state is characterized by a high arousal and an alteration of consciousness, which includes a disturbed organisation of time (Lewis, 1931); to use Hamlet's metaphor, time is 'out of joint'.

Consequently, the personal narrative is broken. In mania, the internal tempo is fast but the external time seems to pass slowly, and even to come to a halt (Tysk, 1984). The all-pervading sense of unreality and the blurring of the 'self-other' boundary result in a profound 'ontological insecurity'; to adopt the perspective of Husserlian phenomenology – there is a severe weakening of the synthetic unification of mental life. The thinking in *Wahnstimmung* could be likened to an ever-changing kaleidoscope of merging, malleable categories with a widening field of associations. One modality becomes another so that Kantian categories no longer apply; to live in an 'uncategorised' world must be highly anxiety provoking – it is an 'ontological dread' *par excellence*. A feeling of extraordinary meaningfulness ensues, hence Sass's (1994) talk of an *uncanny particularity*, when "the world of random specifics appears in an uncanny light" (p. 106). One feels as if one were observing miraculous repetitions and coincidences, as if the events that occur correspond to some predetermined set of forms with prior existence and constitute a part of some purposeful consciousness. The vividness of past memories, in a moment of disturbed perception of time, acquires an almost perceptual quality, and Maher and Ross (1984) proposed that a spurious free floating sense of significance might lead, through 'mistaken attributions', to delusions of reference. According to Maher (1988), delusion is an attempt of reason (devoid of judgement) to deal with an abnormal experience, which accords with Schopenhauer's insight. Jaspers (1913/1962) pointed out that no dread was worse than that of danger unknown; reaching some definite idea must bring a sense of relief as it provides a much-needed point of reference, an anchor to one's existence. Delusion delivers relief from an unbearable *pre-symbolic dread* (Mollon's term, 2002), or *disintegration anxiety* (Kohut's term, 1984), or – as Nietzsche would have had it – it becomes that *life-saving lie*.

By contrast, scientific inquiry starts as a problem finding a question begging an answer. A genius usually requires ten years of conscious preparation (to gather information, learn a skill, and so forth) that leads to a widening of the associative field. The incubation period that follows is largely unconscious, and it involves inhibiting the immediate, well-rehearsed responses. After a period of suspension, a creative leap takes place, often when the conscious attention is diverted to other stimuli (Feldman, 1999). Creativity occurs in a state of relaxation or reverie: *Eureka* is not born out of dread. Delusion, on the other hand, is not part of a conscious quest for an answer to a particular question about the world; it delivers an answer without a question being asked. Hence delusion is an answer without a question!

### Discontinuity or Paradigm Shift?

Kant (1781/1988) revolutionised epistemology by asserting that causality and 11 other a priori categories in our cognitive process, along with space and time as forms of intuition, were necessary for ordering and making sense of reality. We construct the world of phenomena with our minds, and never gain access to things in themselves (noumena), which remain unknowable. Schopenhauer (1819/ 1969), Kant's admirer and critic, identified the will as the thing in itself, and could then simplify the Kantian system, needing only causality, space and time. A study by Andreasen and Powers (1975) has shown that manic psychotic patients, as well as creative writers, have a great tendency to 'blur, broaden, or shift conceptual boundaries'. In epistemology this is known as a paradigm-shift, whilst in psychopathology the term 'over-inclusive thinking' has been coined. Delusion, like a scientific enlightenment, is the result of a creative leap when a new connection/association is made between the previously unrelated. Both are discontinuous with previous learning as they abolish the hitherto accepted boundaries of a priori categories. A regression, if temporary, to the 'pre-categorical' mode of thinking is necessary in order to create new solutions, whether scientific, artistic or psychotic. As does a genius, a psychotic demonstrates a considerable degree of courage and determination to go against previously established conventions. Both are non-conformists! The difference lies in the form and the content of a new paradigm.

### Signification in Psychosis

Is there a meaning in psychosis? Meaning implies an existence of a referent, an existence of a signifier and a signified, and it implies symbolisation. Lacan (1968) stressed that the world of psychosis is non-symbolic; like in a dream there is a regression to *primary process thinking*. The psychotic seems to lose the ability to employ what Lévi-Strauss called *la pensée symbolique*, and he lacks the capacity to map external reality by placing it on a symbolic background. This is in effect a loss of ability to intentionalize reality. Lacan, following Freud, talked not only of loss but also of substitution of reality in psychosis. He referred to this substituted reality as *metonymic*, and this would imply the loss of the ability to distinguish the system of signifiers from the system of the signified. The 'as if' of the metaphorical expression is lost and words become things or actions. It is as if the semantic values of the discourse have regressed to phonemic and eidetic qualities, it is as if words had a life of their own. In these instances, words form an autonomous message with its own sound and visual quality; the signifiers become the signified. R. D. Laing (1965) drew attention to an almost material actuality of delusional creations that acquire a kind of *phantom concreteness*. Andreasen (1976) found that the speech of manic patients, as compared with that of those who were

depressed, contained more concrete nouns, action verbs and adjectives.

### Understanding versus Interpretation

*Ununderstandability* (*Unverständlichkeit*) was for Jaspers (1913/1962) the hallmark of psychosis. Delusions are *ununderstandable* because they arise suddenly, out of context, and it is the psychiatrist who decides whether a given belief can or cannot be linked meaningfully to the patient's life. By introducing this arbitrary criterion, Jaspers virtually closed the door to a psychological inquiry into delusion.

But does psychosis not have traceable psychological roots? An early trauma, particularly the loss of a parent, has been found to be related to an affective psychosis later in life (Brown & Harris, 1978; Klein, 1981). If such trauma occurs before the development of the logical and verbal ability to deal with it and to *categorise* the experience – it remains inarticulable. When, in later life, a constellation of circumstances reminiscent of an early trauma recurs, it may trigger an avalanche of non-chronological memories, carrying with them a physiological state of high anxiety and *Wahnstimmung*. A state of *pre-symbolic dread* overwhelms the person and the ground is laid for delusion formation. Not surprisingly, a period of severe distress preceding the formation of delusion was regularly found among deluded persons (Garety & Hemsley, 1994). Could psychosis be a form of remembering trauma, albeit an abortive one? Could it also be a way of re-living the eternally repressed, a Freudian 'repetition compassion'?

In a 'de-categorised' world of psychosis (just as in dreams) condensation, displacement and exaggeration are at work. The interconnection of ideas and images occurs through association, and a collapse of chronology and logic is accompanied by a collapse of symbolisation and syntax; 'primary process thinking' renders *everything possible*. Perhaps delusions should be viewed as oneiric thoughts that cannot be comprehended by a category-bound logical mode of thinking. Hence Freud's (1900/1955a) hermeneutical approach to dreams (*Traumdeutung*) might be more useful here than understanding (*Vernständnis*). Also, his method of free association seems particularly appropriate when it comes to finding and interpreting connections between various emotion-driven states of mind.

### The Nietzsche Case

*As my father I have already died, as my mother I still live and grow old. (Nietzsche, Ecce Homo)*

In the early August of 1881, in Sils-Maria (Swiss

Alps), Nietzsche probably experienced his first manic psychotic episode. This was superimposed on an introverted cyclothymic personality, complicated by a life-long severe recurrent migraine, and by his use of opium, marihuana and atropine. Nietzsche's mood swings, which date from his early adulthood, continued throughout his life until his final collapse in January 1889. This could be substantiated by his own descriptions, and also by the evidence of his fluctuating creativity pattern (*Arbeitskurve*), accompanied by his equally inconsistent handwriting (Cybulska, 2000a). In a letter written at the time to his friend Peter Gast, he reported that the "intensity of my feelings make me shudder and laugh ... on my hikes I wept tears of jubilation; I sang and talked nonsense, filled with a new vision that puts me ahead of men" (Middleton, 1996, p. 178). It was in proximity to that episode that the three cardinal ideas – which in general seem discontinuous with his previous thought – emerged rather suddenly, and without any conscious preparation.

Nietzsche was 36 years old at the time, the age his father died, and the age he often feared he would die too. The father's burial was in early August 1849, when Nietzsche was less than five years of age, and this was his recollection of the event a decade later:

When I woke up in the morning I heard all around me weeping and sobbing. My dear mother came to me with tears and cried out: "Oh, God! My good Ludwig is dead (*todt*)<sup>1</sup>!" ... The thought that I would be separated forever from the beloved Father (*den geliebten Vater*) seized me, and I wept bitterly ... . Our pain was horrific (*ungeheure*)<sup>2</sup>. ... On the second of August the earthly remains of my father were consigned to the womb of the earth. .... At one o'clock in the afternoon (*Mittag*) the ceremonies began, with the bells pealing their loud knell. Oh, I shall never forget the hollow clangour in my ears ... (Nietzsche, 1854-61/1994, *Jugendschriften*, pp. 4-5)

The Hamletian ghost of the father was to return again and again.

There was another severe loss, perhaps even more

<sup>1</sup> Here Nietzsche uses the word *todt* that means *killed*, but also *dead*. In English there is no word denoting *killing* that has the same stem as *death*. Characteristically, he also uses *todt* in all passages related to *Death of God*, rather than the less ambiguous word *gestorben*.

<sup>2</sup> I have translated *ungeheure* as *horrific* to convey the onomatopoeic/physiological effect of the word; the literal meaning is *monstrous*.

painful, much closer to the 'epiphany of Sils-Maria'. It gradually dawned on Nietzsche that his attachment to Richard Wagner as an idealized paternal figure and a kind of archetypal friend had been based on illusion. He walked out on their eight-year intense friendship in early August 1876 during his visit to Bayreuth, feeling betrayed and deeply wounded. Although Nietzsche eradicated Wagner from his life, he never succeeded in exorcising him from his heart and mind. Two of the six books the philosopher wrote in his last creative year of 1888 bear Wagner's name in the title (*The Wagner Case* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner*), and *Twilight of the Idols* sounds like a mocking echo of the final part of *The Ring*. By Nietzsche's own admission, Wagner was the only man he truly loved; an unrequited passion, alas! Early August was a fateful time for him, with strong personal connotations; it was a period of distress. Professor Franz Overbeck, Nietzsche's most trustworthy and reliable confidante, recalled a letter he received from the philosopher dated 8 September 1881, "written half in German, half in less-than-perfect Latin", which he took for a call of distress. Having observed Nietzsche's violent mood oscillations, and the manner in which he had tried to initiate him into his secret doctrine, Overbeck concluded that he "was no longer a master of his reason" (cited by Klossowski, 1997, p. 212).

### Nietzsche's Three Cardinal Ideas

*The unspeakable strangeness of all my problems and illuminations ... (Nietzsche, A Letter to Overbeck, September 1884)*

*God is dead* (*Gott ist todt*) is Nietzsche's most famous statement. Although he has become the best known of God's 'assassins', he was not the first. Hegel, Heine, Feuerbach and Marx had all used an image of a dying God. For Nietzsche (1882/1974), however, it acquired a special significance:

The madman. Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!" As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. ... The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers." ... Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God

is dead (*totd*). God remains dead. And we have killed him. ... This horrific (*ungeheure*) event is still on its way ... . (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 181)

Several images coalesce in this awesome phantasm. In the recollection of his father's death Nietzsche says *the* (rather than *my*) *beloved father*, a phrase that can mean equally father the man and Father our God. He uses the words *totd* (dead) and *ungeheure* (horrific, monstrous) on both occasions, rather like a musical *leitmotiv*; a particular word denotes a particular feeling state. The image of the decomposing body of Christ is central to Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot*, a book Nietzsche read several years after he had written the above fragment. Dostoyevsky visited Basel in 1867 and was said to have had an epileptic fit after seeing Holbein's painting *Dead Christ* in the *Kunstmuseum*. This experience was later re-enacted by Prince Myshkin, the chief protagonist in the novel. Nietzsche, who lived and taught in Basel for a decade, was bound to have seen it too. If he had, the image of Christ's decomposing body in the painting would have merged with that of the decomposing body of his father, thus attaining a profound personal significance. Freud (1900/1955a) in his research into dreams, dream-work and development of language noted that, in ancient languages, the order of the sounds in a word can be reversed, while keeping the same primordial meaning (which he called the *antithetical meaning of primal words*). Reversing the order of words in a sentence could still maintain the same primordial meaning – *Gott ist todt* (God is dead) may well mean *Todt ist Gott* (the Dead is God). Was it the decaying body of his father on that August day in 1849 that made an indelible impression on the mind of a young boy, an impression that could only be expressed in psychosis? Did the *dead father* turn into *dead God*? Was *dead God* also *dead Wagner* (figuratively speaking) whose alluring music was eternally returning to Nietzsche, rather like the hollow clangour of funeral bells?

Rage, guilt and despair are often present in the grief which follows the death of a loved person, particularly when the loss occurs early in life (Bowlby, 1969/1985). Nietzsche's image of dead God is imbued with precisely these feelings. They are inevitably ambivalent, and Nietzsche's longing for Father/God re-surfaces in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85/1969a, p.265):

All the streams of my tears  
Run their course to you!  
And the last flame of my heart –  
It burns up to you!  
Oh come back,

My unknown God! My pain! My last –  
happiness!

It must be remembered that Nietzsche initially studied theology, and intended to follow in his father's and grandfathers' footsteps and become a Lutheran pastor. From a Freudian point of view, Nietzsche's agonistic relationship with God could be seen as a *repetition compulsion* of his oedipal conflict: son wants to conquer father in oedipal duel, yet wishes the father to survive. But what if the real father dies? The guilt can become unbearable, yet its source remains consciously unidentifiable. In the vicious circle of *repetition compulsion*, the eternal drama replays itself again and again. Nietzsche's preoccupation with guilt and patricide (or 'theocide'?) is equal to that of Dostoyevsky, whom he read and greatly admired. His vehement attack on Christianity, which runs through most of his oeuvre, can be seen as an act of a *pale criminal*, someone who commits a crime from a sense of guilt. The term was used by Dostoevsky (in *Crime and Punishment*), by Nietzsche (in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), and later by Freud in *The Ego and the Id*. Melanie Klein (1981) suggested that "if guilt is too strong, this may lead to turning away from loved people or even rejection of them" (p. 321). She also believed the feelings of guilt to be a fundamental incentive towards creativity and work, which thus became a form of reparation.

The term *Übermensch (Overman)* was not created by Nietzsche, and the concept of *hyperanthropos* can be found in the ancient writings of Lucian. In German, the word has been used by H. Müller, J. G. Herder and, most importantly, by Goethe in *Faust*, where a spirit scorns the frightened Faust and calls him *Übermenschen*. Again, Nietzsche (1883-85/1969, pp. 43-45) never explained what he meant by *Übermensch*, only intimated:

Behold, I teach you the *Übermensch*: he is this lightning, he is this madness!

...

Behold, I am a prophet of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightning is called *Übermensch*.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue

Nietzsche had a deeply heroic streak in his soul, and it may well have been the heroism that appealed to him in the history of the ancient Greeks, in the musical dramas of Wagner, in personalities such as Napoleon, Julius Caesar, and in the military. Jung (1934-54/1990) believed that the archetype of a hero is the oldest and the most powerful, and considered religious figures such as Buddha, Christ or

Mohammed to be personifications of such an archetype. The element of transformation (or resurrection) lies at the heart of the hero's message. The great hero (*der Überheld*) overcomes himself, sublimates his impulses and passions, and owes nothing to anyone, not even to God. Nietzsche (1886/1990, p. 155) claimed that "in man, *creature* and *creator* are united", and he also urged that we should fashion our lives in the way artists fashion their work, so that we become "the poets of our life". This self-creating hero can be one of the interpretations of the *Übermensch* (Cybulska, 1997). But could it also fit Dupré and Logre's (cited by Garety & Hemsley, 1994) concept of a confabulatory delusional state where a subjective creation (akin to the poetic process) intrudes on reality? Was *Übermensch* a kind of imaginary companion that surfaced from the depth of Nietzsche's unconscious in a psychotic moment? Lonely, imaginative and sensitive children often invent imaginary companions, but such creativity in later life seems to be linked to psychosis. Schumann (one of Nietzsche's most beloved composers) invented two imaginary characters – exuberant Eusebius and broody Florestan – around the time of his first depressive psychotic breakdown. (Uncannily, they seem to have corresponded with his manic-depressive mood swings.) Was Nietzsche's evocation of *Übermensch* and also Zarathustra (an ancient Persian prophet) related to his unconscious preoccupation with the son-father dyad, a pointer to the Oedipus complex? From a Jungian perspective, *Übermensch* could be interpreted as a representation of the whole self in the union of the opposites. For Nietzsche (1883-88/1969) the greatest being is the one who unites most antagonistic traits: "I believe that from the presence of opposites and from the feelings they occasion that the great man, the *bow with the greatest tension*, develops" (p. 507). He considered such tension to be necessary for dynamic creativity, but there was a heavy price to be paid; eventually the bow snapped.

*Eternal Return of the Same (die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen)* is Nietzsche's most enigmatic idea. In the early August of 1881 in Sils-Maria, 6000 feet beyond man and time, the idea suddenly invaded Nietzsche's mind and became central to his thought. As he walked down from the woods towards the shores of the lake Silvaplana and saw a large pyramidal stone, it hit him like lightning. For Nietzsche, this Sisyphean scenery seemed to have rekindled an image of the ancient infernal hero eternally struggling with the *greatest weight* (*das grösste Schwergewicht*) of guilt and pain, of existence itself (Cybulska, 2000b).

In *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche, 1882/1974, p. 273),

written soon afterwards, we read:

*The greatest weight.* – what, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, a speck of dust!"

The cosmogonist idea of *Eternal Return* was not new to the history of human thought (Eliade, 1989), and Nietzsche – steeped in classical culture, and particularly in pre-Socratic philosophy – would have been well acquainted with it. And yet, there must have been something extraordinarily unusual, compelling, and even frightening in this *noon-time (Mittags)* experience. Indeed, just as Kaufmann (1974) intuitively pointed out: "the answer must be sought in the fact that the eternal recurrence was to Nietzsche less an idea than an experience – the supreme experience of a life unusually rich in suffering, pain, and agony. He made much of the moment when he first had this experience because to him it was the moment that redeemed his life" (p. 323).

It is puzzling why Nietzsche refers directly to his most profound idea merely in one passage of *The Gay Science*, in the two passages of *Zarathustra (Of the Vision and the Riddle and The Convalescent)*, and once in *Ecce Homo*. He offers no exposition of it in his published works, and only in the posthumous collection *The Will to Power* (1883-88/1969) we find this reflection:

If the world may be thought of as a certain definite quality of force ... it follows that, in the great dice game of existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In infinite time, every possible combination would at some time be realised; more: it would be realised an infinite number of times ... (p. 549)

This is a near verbatim quotation from *Die letzten Gedichte and Gedanken* by Heine, one of Nietzsche's most revered poets. Unlike Heine, however,

Nietzsche did not apply it as an ironic metaphor and often referred to *Eternal Return* as the “most scientific of all ideas”. Yet, he never offered any definition, explanation or refutation/verification of this doctrine. His intention to study sciences in order to prove it never materialised, wiped away by the returning waves of elation and melancholia. It is rather bizarre that Nietzsche even considered such an undertaking in view of his non-existent aptitude for mathematics.

Could it be that at the root of this idea was a disturbed perception of time in psychosis? Jaspers (1913/1962) quotes a psychotic patient: “A frightful pain shot through my head and time stood still. At the same time it was forced on me in an almost superhuman way how vitally important this moment was. Then time resumed its previous course, but the time which stood still stayed there like a gate” (p. 84). And now Nietzsche’s chillingly similar, though incomparably more poetic account:

This long lane behind us: it goes on for eternity. And that long lane ahead of us — that is another eternity. They are in opposition to one another, these paths; they abut on one another: and it is here at this gateway that they come together. The name of the gateway is written above it “Moment” (“Augenblick”). (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, III, Of the Vision and the Riddle, p. 178)

Another reference to this disturbed sense of time:

What has happened to me? Listen! Has time flown away? Do I not fall? Have I not fallen — listen! Into the well of eternity? (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, IV, At Noontide, p.288)

In the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900/1955a), Freud stressed a complete lack of sense of time both in dreams and in psychosis. Perhaps *Eternal Return*, far from being a scientific idea, was an expression of the sameness of personal pain and the menacing timelessness of psychosis? Perhaps the afternoon (*Mittags*) funeral bells of Nietzsche’s childhood returned as a *noon-time* (*Mittags*) idea/doctrine on the anniversary of his father’s death?

Klossowski (1997), in his imaginative and daring book *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, said: “The thought of the *Eternal Return of the Same* came to Nietzsche as an *abrupt awakening* in the midst of a *Stimmung* (mood), a certain tonality of the soul. Initially confused with this *Stimmung*, it gradually emerged as a thought; nonetheless, it preserved the

character of revelation - *as a sudden awakening*” (p. 56). He was in no doubt that Nietzsche had perceived the thought of *Eternal Return*, and possibly his other thoughts related to that phantasm, as his own madness, and it terrified him. Some accounts by Nietzsche’s contemporaries, among them Lou Salomé (1894/2001), seem to support this: “Unforgettable for me are those hours in which he first confided to me his secret, whose inevitable fulfilment and validation he anticipated with shudders. Only with a quiet voice and with all the signs of deepest horror did he speak about his secret” (p. 130). Another close friend, Erwin Rohde, a famous academic writer, refused to speak of Nietzsche’s doctrine as anything other than a symptom of his morbid state: “He was surrounded by an indescribable atmosphere of *strangeness*, by something that seemed to me to be completely uncanny . . . It was as though he came from the land [where] nobody lives” (from a letter to Overbeck, cited by Hollingdale, 1999, p. 172).

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1920/1955b) adapted *Eternal Return* as *repetition compulsion*, an expression of an ambivalent impulse to act out a repressed experience and at the same time to keep it away from consciousness. Could psychosis be a form of such *repetition compulsion*, an enactment of painful trauma — vivid, deeply felt, yet inarticulable? Or was *Eternal Return* perhaps for Nietzsche a kind of *mandala* that descended upon him in that ‘horrific moment’ of inner terror? Jung observed that this archetypal symbol of self frequently appeared in the dreams and fantasies of his patients at times of serious crisis or loss of orientation. It usually had a round or rectangular shape and expressed the movement of the self towards unity and wholeness; its appearance was accompanied by a sense of inner order, balance and peace. It was after the emergence of *Eternal Return* that Nietzsche wrote his greatest works.

## Discussion

*Only great pain, the long, slow pain that takes its time . . . compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths . . .*  
(Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*)

All three cardinal ideas discussed above emerged suddenly, fully formed and without any previous deliberation in Nietzsche’s mind. Paradoxically, despite his previous knowledge of them, he appeared to have conceived them *de novo*. In neither his published nor his unpublished work is there any evidence of Nietzsche’s conscious preoccupation with these ideas prior to August 1881. Several entries in his private notes (published posthumously as *Will to*

*Power)* were made after the ‘epiphany of Sils-Maria’. Whilst a scientist or a philosopher firstly asks a question before setting off on a journey of discovery, Nietzsche appears to have been trying to find the questions *after* he had already formulated ‘the answers’. A philosophical doctrine, being of speculative nature, might not need falsification/verification, but it requires definition, exposition and elaboration. Whatever these ideas were, they were neither scientific theories nor philosophical doctrines; to paraphrase Nietzsche – they belonged to *an indirect biography of his soul*. The revelatory nature of these dream-thoughts was accompanied by a strong feeling of certainty as to their truthfulness and importance. On the few occasions that they emerged in Nietzsche’s writings, they did so with an almost ‘photographic sameness’, more like recurring dreams (or nightmares?), or musical leitmotifs, than philosophical concepts. Their ‘phantom concreteness’ is uncanny. After all, were these ideas not, as Foucault (1993) would have had it, “arbitrary images in a vicious circle of erroneous consciousness” (p. 104)?

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche recalled how, at the age of thirty-six, he had reached the *lowest point of his vitality*, he talked of his life as being *encircled by death*, and made allusions to Dante’s *Inferno*. Perhaps the ‘epiphany of Sils-Maria’ was nothing other than his own descent into the inferno of psychosis, when the abyss of pain intersected with the apogee of elation – a conjunction that would remain fixed in his mind. Moreover, he would crave the return of that moment: the more pain, the more victorious elation, the more *overcoming* and sense of *will to power*. Thus the tears of pain were transfigured into the *tears of jubilation!* Melanie Klein (1981) asserts that in mania there is “the *utilization of the sense of omnipotence* for the purpose of *controlling and mastering objects*” (p. 277), and this 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 and abandonment. In manic-depressive illness, delusions – particularly of a grandiose, religious or philosophical nature – are common, and occur in as many as 75% of manic episodes (Goodwin & Jamison, 1990). They might serve to stabilise a fragile sense of self and have a protective function (Neale, 1988). Delusion might be best viewed as a kind of ‘reparatory effort’ in the face of a breakdown in the temporal synthesis of a psychotic experience. Or, as Nietzsche would have had it, *that life saving lie*. He wrote some of his most lucid and insightful philosophical works afterwards (e.g. *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Of the Genealogy of Morality*) and enjoyed seven years of great creativity (even if interlaced with psychotic moments). The tendency of

the mind to rescue itself by means of a convincing idea from the state of overwhelming anxiety, grief and the sense of the unknown, operates not just in psychosis but in many sudden abnormal or traumatic occurrences – hence the abundance of conspiracy theories that follow a tragic event such as the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. To accept the unknown and the unknowable, and to accept chance and accident, is extremely difficult in emotionally charged situations.

The distinction between delusion and poetic creation is less clear. Several researchers have reported a high prevalence of manic-depressive psychosis amongst poets and writers (Jamison, 1993). According to Kristeva (1984, p.124), poetry is a return to the repressed semiotic in language, through the use of rhythms and tones. A regression to the phonemic and eidetic qualities of language may well be what a psychotic and a poet have in common. Poetic creations need neither definition nor verification/falsification. Nietzsche’s ideas of *Übermensch* and *God is dead* certainly have these eidetic phonemic characteristics; perhaps this is why Nietzsche has sometimes been considered more of a poet than a philosopher.

Jasperian *understandability* as a criterion for delusion can easily become an instrument of alienation. *Understanding* can be applied to things logical, but not to music, visual arts, poetry, dreams or psychosis. Instead, an associative method underpinned by compassion and informed by a detailed knowledge of the person’s life (particularly of traumatic events), as well as personal connotations, passions and creativity, is proposed. The idiosyncrasy of delusion can be more adequately grasped by following an associative thread, and making sense of delusion would require a psychiatrist to look beyond the obvious. Also, enough room must be left for the unknown and the unknowable. From a scientific point of view, this method, being highly intuitive, would remain in essence *unfalsifiable*.

A disproportionate number of creative achievers lost one or both parents in childhood (Eisenstadt, 1978); taking into account methodological difficulties in this regard, on average such a loss is estimated as three times more frequent than in the general population. Brown and Harris (1978) observed a link between the early loss of a parent and a psychotic illness later in life, while Eysenck (1994) pointed out that geniuses score highly on psychotism. While psychotism – through a transient abolition of a categorical framework – may facilitate a paradigm shift for a scientist as well as a poet, it also has its hidden dangers. One can get lost not so much in Jasperian *untruth*, as in the labyrinth of the unconscious. In Nietzsche’s case, a reminder of trauma (reaching the age at which his father died, painful disappointment

in his friendship with Wagner), in the absence of a containing relationship or work-affiliation, and accompanied by a pre-existing mood disorder, triggered a psychosis. There seems to be a link between early loss, affective psychosis and 'reparative' creativity. Most of Nietzsche's writings are extremely lucid, contain penetrating psychological, cultural, moral and literary insights, and are written in a hauntingly beautiful poetic prose of high voltage. However, in all probability, the ideas discussed above belong to a period of psychosis, an experience as true as it was intense. *Encircled by death*, wounded, and living a life of radical solitude, he must have felt compelled to express the *truth that otherwise would have become poisonous*. Yet, ultimately, he remained mute. His pain

and the great sense of loss, while always intensely felt, remained at some unspeakable distance.

Shortly before his collapse, Nietzsche penned to a friend this Hamletian line:

The gulf has become too great. Ever since, I really do nothing anymore but buffooneries to remain master over an intolerable tension and vulnerability.

This is between us. The rest is silence.

(Letter to Dr. C. Fuchs, 18 July, 1888, *Sämtliche Briefe*)

## About the Author

Dr Eva M. Cybulska graduated from Gdansk medical school in Poland in the early seventies. She received her postgraduate training and further degrees in London, UK. During a long clinical career as a consultant psychiatrist, she has applied psychoanalytic understanding to everyday psychiatry, and particularly to psychotic illnesses. Dr Cybulska has published many articles in her field, and also a collection of short stories based on the narratives of her elderly patients (*Old Trees Die Standing*, Athena Press, 2006). She has served as a reviewer for professional journals, and has lectured on controversial topics to cross-disciplinary audiences drawn from a variety of professions. One of her chief interests has been the relationship between mental illness and creativity. Since taking an early retirement a few years ago, Dr Cybulska is now devoting her time to reading, writing and travel.

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