

According to Friedrich Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra, the meaning of human existence is to make room for the "Superman": a superhuman who perseveres in its capacity for unlimited self-creation. (Pg. 49)¹ In order for humankind to embrace its self-creative nature and allow for the transcendence into this superhuman condition, however, we must first learn to destroy our present tables of values; it is our desperate adherence to traditional (religious) values which prevents us from actualizing our potential for self-creation. It is important to note, however, that it is not the creation of these traditional values in and of itself that Nietzsche condemns. After all, self-creation is not only a positive thing but, is the true essence and meaning of human existence. Rather, it is our insistence on treating these values and beliefs (e.g. the existence of God) as permanent and *a priori* which sickens him. When we perceive these values and beliefs as permanent, it numbs both the ability and motivation for human beings to self-create the future or, what he calls, the "self-creating will". As Nietzsche's protagonist states, "God is a supposition; but I want your supposing to reach no further than your creating will...Willing liberates: that is the true doctrine of will and freedom... (Pg.'s 110-11)

Manifest in Nietzsche's vision of human self-creation, however, is a fundamental tension between the past and the future. On the one hand, he tells the reader that because everything is past and begs destruction, it is disgusting for anyone to blindly adhere to traditional value systems. Yet, on the other hand, the future (Superman) is fundamentally connected and, perhaps, even indebted to the past; the existence and destruction of present-day humankind is a necessary condition for the creation and emergence of the Superman. So, in spite of the immanent desire to be rid of the past, Nietzsche's protagonist, Zarathustra, finds himself unable to completely sever himself from it. Hence Zarathustra's struggle to affirm his past while pursuing a self-creating future.

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, I will provide evidence for the interpretation of *The Prophet* as an elucidation of the struggle of Nietzsche's protagonist to reconcile this inalienable relationship between the past and the future. In doing so, I will focus on three main facets of the passage, namely, the prophet, Zarathustra's dream and, the misinterpretation of the dream by the disciple. Second, I will demonstrate how *The Prophet* can simultaneously be interpreted so as to advance Nietzsche's own view of human nature as self-creativity. Third, I will explicate what ramifications my interpretations of *The Prophet* has on the relationship between Nietzsche and his reader.

The Inalienable Relationship Between the Past and the Future

The Prophet begins with Zarathustra being told that "Everything is empty, everything is one, everything is past!" (Pg. 155) That is, the prophet informs Zarathustra that the present-day way of life has become tired and saturated; there is no more advancement to be made in the absence of a rudimentary transformation of humankind. In short, the time has come for the self-destruction and re-creation of humankind; the time has come for humankind to take a step towards the creation of the Superman. Upon hearing the prophet speak, Zarathustra becomes desolate and despondent and eventually falls into a deep slumber. It is clear that he is not ready to initiate this cataclysmic movement.² Zarathustra is not ready because he has yet to properly understand and accept his relationship to the past.

Upon awakening from his sleep, Zarathustra relays the contents of his disturbing dream which illustrates exactly how deep-seated his struggle to simultaneously affirm and overcome his past really is.

He begins by seeing himself as a night-watchman of corpses and coffins. His solitude is then interrupted by three heavy knocks on a vault, at which point Zarathustra describes the succeeding events as follows,

Then a raging wind tore the door asunder: whistling, shrilling and piercing it threw to me a black coffin...the coffin burst asunder and vomited forth a thousand peals of laughter. And from a thousand masks of children, angels, owls, fools, and child-size butterflies it laughed and mocked and roared at me. This terrified me dreadfully: it prostrated me. And I shrieked with horror as I had never shrieked before. (Pg. 157)

The grotesque images of vomit, cruel laughter and masks can be viewed as representative of Zarathustra's revulsion of the past. His self-perception as a protector of that which is dead and past denotes his inability to move beyond and overcome it. Zarathustra's dream, then, can be seen as a clear image of the inherent conflict between being disgusted with the past and, the incapacity to wholly sever himself from it. His inability to reconcile the past impedes his pursuit for the erection of the Superman; his Will to self-create the future is being suffocated by his psychological attachment to the past.

Subsequent to Zarathustra's request, one of his disciples offers a (mis)interpretation of the dream. The misinterpretation of the dream on the part of the disciple is grounded in his mistaking the coffin-ridden masks for Zarathustra and the night-watchman for his enemies (e.g. disbelievers). The disciple asserts, "Are you yourself not the coffin full of motley wickedness and angel-masks of life?...You will terrify and overthrow them with your laughter; fainting and reawakening will demonstrate your power over them". (Pg. 158) In short, the disciple thinks that the masks represent Zarathustra

laughing at his enemies. What the disciple fails to see is that it is really Zarathustra that the masks are laughing at. The masks are mocking Zarathustra for being stuck in the past; they are laughing at his inability to be rid of them. The disciple, then, fails to properly understand that the affirmation of the past is a necessary prerequisite for future self-creation.

Thus far, I have attempted to demonstrate that *The Prophet* can be interpreted as an elucidation of Zarathustra's struggle to understand and reconcile the inalienable relationship between the past and the future. I will now turn to show how *The Prophet* can be concurrently read as an advancement of Nietzsche's view of human nature.

Human Nature as Self-Creativity

For Nietzsche, the time has come to convince humankind to uproot our present-day table of values and seize a self-creative tomorrow. Thus, the prophet's teachings at the beginning of the passage ("Everything is empty, everything is one, everything is past!"), can be understood as Nietzsche trying to convince the reader that humankind will no longer progress in the absence of a widespread exercising of our true self-creative nature. By doing so, Nietzsche hopes to motivate the reader to embrace her/his self-creative nature.

Nietzsche then presents Zarathustra's dream in the form of a series of frightful and grotesque images (e.g. decaying bodies, ghouls, etc.). In doing so, Nietzsche evokes particular feelings of revulsion and disgust from the reader. When the reader feels this way, she/he begins to acquire a sense of how truly disgusted Zarathustra is with his past. But, Nietzsche's reasons for presenting Zarathustra's dream as a succession of abhorrent images goes beyond simply facilitating a means by

which the reader can relate to Zarathustra's struggle. It can also be viewed as a direct attempt by Nietzsche to trigger in the reader a sense of disgust for her/his own past. Nietzsche wants the reader to turn into her/himself and recognize that she/he is merely a culmination of disguises that she/he has created. For example, as Zarathustra relays the contents of his dream (the coffin bursting asunder, a thousand masks emerging and laughing at him, etc.), Nietzsche is daring the reader to look at the masks and disguises that she/he her/himself has created. He is challenging the reader to examine her/himself so as to see that her/his identity is composed entirely of a myriad of masks upon masks beneath which there resides nothing authentic but the ability to create yet more masks.

Even still, Nietzsche's purpose behind using the language of masks is not limited to causing the reader to perceive her/himself as a combination of disguises. His chief aim in *The Prophet* is to trigger the realization in the reader that a mask is something which we can choose to take on and off. So, if our masks of values are something that is self-created then, we are not bound to abide by them in light of some supernatural force. Rather, we have the capacity to destroy these old values and create new ones; human beings have the power to overcome themselves and create anew for the emergence of the Superman. That is, exercising our capacity for self-creativity will result in the end of us guarding and protecting the masks that we have created (e.g. tables of values, notions of Good and Bad, etc.). In short, Nietzsche thinks that us reacquainting ourselves with our true nature will cause the cessation of our desperate treatment of these masks as permanent.

Thus, there is good evidence for understanding *The Prophet* as an attempt by Nietzsche to both advance his view of human nature as self-creativity and motivate the reader to embrace and

exercise this capacity for self-creation. Translating *The Prophet* as such, however, has a profound effect on the way the reader perceives Nietzsche as an author and, in turn, reveals the true essence of the relationship between Nietzsche and his reader. I will now turn to explicating exactly what these consequences entail.

Nietzsche and the Reader

In reading *The Prophet* as an attempt on the part of Nietzsche to compel the reader to recognize her/himself as a collection of self-created masks, the reader will inevitably be forced to come to the realization that Nietzsche's identity too must simply be composed of a group of manifold disguises. That is, in accepting Nietzsche's view of human nature as constant self-creation, the reader must also accept the further proposition that Nietzsche's identity (in so far as he is a member of the human species) is being forever re-created and, as such, is unidentifiable by the reader. In fact, it seems to be the case that the story of Thus Spoke Zarathustra must itself be a mask for Nietzsche. The book acts as a means through which Nietzsche portrays his different masks and, in doing so, engages in the process of self-creation. For example, at one level, the character of Zarathustra serves as a mask for Nietzsche through which he can portray himself as the protagonist of his story whereas, on a second level, the story in and of itself allows him to self-create and portray himself as an author and political-philosopher with a message for the people. Thus, just as Zarathustra shakes his head at the disciple for mistaking the identity beneath the coffin-ridden masks, so does Nietzsche shake his head at the reader for having mistaken the identity of Nietzsche to be encompassed in Zarathustra. Upon perceiving Nietzsche's work as such, the reader comes to the realization that she/he is acting as an audience for

Nietzsche's masks.

In recognizing the reader as Nietzsche's audience, we finally begin to get a glimpse of the true essence of his relationship with the reader. More specifically, Thus Spoke Zarathustra is a means by which Nietzsche exercises his capacity for self-creation; Nietzsche's writing provides an outlet for him to play out the various masks of protagonist, author, philosopher, etc. to the end of performing his own self-creation and re-creation. But, in order to portray these various disguises, Nietzsche requires an audience from which to mask himself from. Thus, just as Zarathustra is inalienably bound to the past and to the people, so is Nietzsche bound to the reader; just as Zarathustra needs the past in order to self-create the future, so does Nietzsche *need* the reader in order to perform his own self-creation through authorship. Hence the true nature of the relationship between Nietzsche and his reader.

In conclusion, I have attempted to support two particular interpretations of *The Prophet*. First, I have tried to present *The Prophet* as an elucidation of Zarathustra's struggle to reconcile the inalienable relationship between the past and the future. Second, I have endeavoured to show that the said passage also serves to advance Nietzsche's view of human nature as self-creativity. Lastly, I have put forth an explication of what I feel to be the ramifications of interpreting *The Prophet* in this way with respect to the reader's perception and understanding of Nietzsche and his work.

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1961. Thus Spoke Zarathustra. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Penguin Books: London.

2. Later on in the text, we see that this entails Zarathustra rising up and becoming the teacher of the eternal recurrence: that all things, including human existence, recur eternally. As his animals tell Zarathustra, "For your animals well know, O Zarathustra, who you are and must become: behold, *you are the teacher of the eternal recurrence*, that is now *your* destiny! That you have to be the first to teach this doctrine...that all things recur eternally and we ourselves with them, and that we have already existed an infinite number of times before and all things with us". (*The Convalescent*; Pg. 237; italics original) Upon hearing the prophet's words, however, we see that Zarathustra is not ready to become the teacher of the eternal recurrence.