

“I teach you the Superman...’: Self-Sacrifice and the Alchemical Creation of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*.”

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I. *Übermensch* as Divine Ideal

a. A Process of Self-Divinization

In this paper, we would like to explore the historical background of sacrifice and divinity in Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy. Peter Berkowitz, in *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*, has shown how Nietzsche’s philosophy is oriented towards the process of self-divinization. Nietzsche’s philosophy is an attempt to work out what kind of human beings would be necessary, if “God is dead,” (*The Gay Science*, § 125) and “the world is the will to power – and nothing besides!”¹ (*Will to Power* § 1067) Berkowitz says that based on Nietzsche’s love of truth, “which he sometimes calls his gay science,” he comes to the conclusion that the final good or perfection “for human beings consists in the act of self-deification.”² Lucy Huskinson has suggested that Nietzsche’s later teaching on the *Übermensch* is really his re-interpretation of the esoteric doctrine of the Higher Self, which is the understanding of “God” in the Hermetic Tradition.³ A point we will explore later on in this paper.

Although Nietzsche mentions the *Übermensch* in his early Notebooks, in the Prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he officially announces the Persian prophet’s teaching on the subject.⁴ Zarathustra descends his mountain cave, out of his so-called love for humanity. Knowing in his heart that “God is dead,” he wants to bring humanity a gift. In the next section § 3, we learn that the so-called gift is Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, which he announces in a market square. For Nietzsche, the *Übermensch* is the answer to the “death of God” (Z, I, “Of the Bestowing Virtue,” 3), and the destiny of humanity itself depends upon its realization on earth (*The Will to Power* § 987).⁵ The *Übermensch* is not a transcendent ideal, but a superhuman species (Z, I, “Of the Bestowing Virtue,” 1).

b. *Übermensch*: A *Pharmakon* and *Pharmakos*

According to Nietzsche/Zarathustra, humanity is not worthy to remain as it is and must be overcome.⁶ The question is how does, or what type of mechanism does Zarathustra propose to achieve a higher type of humanity and his ideal of divinity in absence of a transcendent God? In Zarathustra’s fourth announcement of the *Übermensch*, in Section §2 of the Prologue, Nietzsche gives a clue. He claims that the *Übermensch* is both the lightning and the madness by which humanity can be immunized.⁷ It is significant that Nietzsche uses a medicinal term here, since the *Übermensch* is a painful medicine,

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968) 550.

² Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 14-15.

³ Lucy Huskinson, *Nietzsche and Jung: The Whole Self in the Union of Opposites* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2004) 57, 61, 62, 64, 96, 114; as “Other”: 57-59, 62, 64, 197; as “Perfection,” 88; as “Dionysos,” 93-94.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe (KSA), ed. Giorgio Colli andazzino Montinari, vol. 4 (Berlin: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, de Gruyter, 1999)

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 516. “What is most harmed is precisely the memory of the great, for the semi-failures and the failures misunderstand them and vanquish them by means of ‘successes.’ Every time ‘an influence’ shows itself, a mob crowds upon the scene; the chatter of the petty and the poor in spirit is a terrible torment for the ears of those who remember with a shudder that the destiny of humanity depends upon the attainment of its highest type.”

⁶ “Prologue,” 3, “Ich lehre euch den Übermenschen. Der Mensch ist Etwas, das überwunden werden soll.”

⁷ “Prologue,” 3, “Wo is doch der Blitz, der euch mit seiner Zunge lecke? Wo ist der Wahnsinn, mit dem ihr geimpft werden müsset? Seht, ich lehre euch den Übermenschen: der ist dieser Blitz, der ist dieser Wahnsinn! –”

or in Greek, a *pharmakon* that humanity will have to take in order to transcend itself. In Section § 4, Zarathustra's medicine is made more explicit and ominous. Zarathustra loves "those who do not first seek behind the stars for a reason to go down and to be a sacrifice, who instead sacrifice themselves to the earth, so that the earth may one day belong to the *Übermensch*." That is, they must make themselves into a *pharmakon* or a sacrificial scapegoat. He loves him "who lives to know, and who wants to know so that one day the *Übermensch* may live. And thus he wills his own downfall."⁸ In German, he uses the term "*Untergang*," which can also mean "descent" or "going under." Therefore, already at the beginning, Nietzsche makes it clear that in order for humanity to ascend to the level of the *Übermensch*, it must descend and be sacrificed.

II. René Girard and the Transfiguration of the Ancient Gods

a. Nietzsche and Dionysos

In a piece entitled "Dionysus versus the Crucified," René Girard discusses Nietzsche's acceptance and even encouragement of violence. Girard says that in order to create a superior form of humanity and culture, Nietzsche believed that human civilization must accept and even induce "the worst forms of violence," which is mediated through what Nietzsche came to call "Dionysos." According to Girard, "Nietzsche tells us that Dionysus accommodates all human passions, including the lust to annihilate, the most ferocious appetite for destruction. Dionysus says yes to the sacrifice of many human lives, including, not so paradoxically, those of the highest type that is being bred in the process."⁹ Through his study of classical texts and ancient myth, Nietzsche realized that ancient cultures perceived that wonton collective violence, where a whole society becomes murderers, could have a transformative effect.¹⁰ Girard understands this collective murder as the principal device of the scapegoating mechanism, where peace and unity are restored to the community through the destruction of a vicariously selected victim. After the scapegoating (murder or expulsion) of the victim, the guilt of the community for the deed, coupled with the appearance of an almost miraculous resolution of the crisis, becomes the basis for the victim's divinization by the community.¹¹ Girard believes that Nietzsche also saw how the scapegoating mechanism functioned in primitive society and sought not to reject it – as did early Christians – but to rehabilitate it as the cornerstone of a new form of religion, which he announces in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. By becoming a victim of his own chaos and madness, he could make himself into a god.

⁸ Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Prologue § 4, "Ich liebe Die, welche nicht erst hinter den Sternen einen Grund suchen, unterzugehen und Opfer zu sein: sondern die sich der Erde opfern, dass die Erde einst des Übermenschen werde. Ich liebe Den, welcher lebt, damit er erkenne, und welcher erkennen will, damit einst der Übermensch lebe. Und so will er seinen Untergang."

⁹ René Girard, "Nietzsche versus the Crucified," *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996) 246.

¹⁰ René Girard, "Nietzsche versus the Crucified," 247.

¹¹ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001) 1-2. "As soon as we detect the concealed scapegoating behind mythology, all recurrent features of mythical heroes make sense: their frequent physical blemishes and their foreign identities – Oedipus limps; he comes from Corinth – and also the other features that are known to polarize angry mobs against their possessors. All these features must be as real as the 'crimes' of these same victims are imaginary. Being unanimous against their scapegoats, archaic mobs are appeased and reconciled by their death. This reconciliation explains why these scapegoats are divinized as both culprits and saviors, as the simultaneously good and bad divinities of the archaic sacred. The concealed scapegoat hypothesis illuminates not only mythological but blood sacrifices, which deliberately reenact the original scapegoating and are done as a precaution against a possible relapse into violence."

b. Lou Salomé and the Esoteric Interpretation of Nietzsche's Philosophy

A similar point is made by Nietzsche's erstwhile girlfriend, Lou Salomé. Salomé's analysis of Nietzsche's philosophy positions him more as a religious leader and mystic than as a secular philosopher, an interpretation that has been intensely debated.¹² According to Salomé:

All of Nietzsche's knowledge arose from a powerful religious mood and was insolubly knotted: self-sacrifice and apotheosis, the cruelty of one's own destruction and the lust for self-deification, sorrowful ailing and triumphal recovery, incandescent intoxication and cool consciousness. One senses here the close entwining of mutual contradictions; one senses the overflowing and voluntary plunge of over-stimulated and tensed energies into chaos, darkness, and terror and then an ascending urge toward the light and the most tender moments -- ... a chaos that wants to give birth to a god, and must give birth to a one.¹³

In Salomé's description of Nietzsche two ideas stand out: The first idea was his need to destroy himself, which he understood to be a sacrifice of himself. The second idea was his belief that self-sacrifice would lead to his self-divinization or into his re-birth as some kind of a god. Recent scholarship has been increasingly willing to admit this more religious and even esoteric slant to Nietzsche's thought.¹⁴ Roger Hollinrake, in *Nietzsche, Wagner and the Philosophy of Pessimism*, claims that Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is an initiatory novel that imitates the structure of the ancient Mystery Religions.¹⁵ Babette E. Babich in "Nietzsche's *göttliche Eidechsen*: 'Divine Lizards,' 'Greene Lyons,' and Music,"¹⁶ alludes to the esoteric and alchemical nature of Nietzsche's thought, calling it "metaphorical alchemy."¹⁷

III. The Mysteries, Alchemy and the Hermetic Tradition

The connection that I have just made with alchemy and the Mysteries is important, for it is generally accepted that the processes to which the ancient and Renaissance alchemist subjected certain base materials (in material alchemy) or subjected himself (in spiritual alchemy) were probably structurally analogous to the processes that the adept of the ancient Mysteries was meant to go through in order to

¹² Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, 1974) 49. Although many philosophers acknowledge Nietzsche's religious motifs, many do not want to categorize him as a "religious thinker." The renowned Nietzsche scholar, Walter Kaufmann's unsubstantiated attempt to discredit Lou Salomé's interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy as "mystical" is a good example of this attitude.

¹³ Lou Salomé, *Nietzsche*, trans. Siegfried Mandel (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 24-25.

¹⁴ André van der Braak, *Hoe men wordt, wat men is: Zelfvervolmaking, Zelfoverwinning and zelfvergetelheid bij Nietzsche* (Budel: Damon, 2004), see especially 165-198. In the Dutch-speaking world, the author André van der Braak claims that both *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are esoteric writings meant to initiate the reader into a philosophical system of salvation.

¹⁵ Roger Hollinrake, *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1982) 78-79. "In Parts I-III, we are frequently reminded that in Zarathustra's scheme of reference self-annihilation ('Untergang') and self-transcendence ('Übergang') are part and parcel of the same process. The nightmarish, intestine struggle generated by these two contending yet strangely inseparable impulses is described in a series of discourses dealing either directly or in passing, with death and rebirth. One recalls the remark in a late collection of notes on the Greeks in which, by a daring attempt at intuitive deduction, Nietzsche identified eternal return as the teaching of the Mysteries. With their probably theme of regeneration and rebirth, the classical Mysteries were a regular subject of his lectures at Basel: 'Ich habe das Griechenthum entdeckt: sie glaubeten an die ewige Wiederkunft! Das ist der Mysterien-Glaube! (I have fathomed the Greeks: they believed in eternal return! That is the belief of the Mysteries! N-A, VII 18[15])"

¹⁶ Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 92. In alchemy, the "Green Lion" is a synonym for the *prima materia* or the "ore from which philosophical mercury is extracted."

¹⁷ Babette E. Babich, "Nietzsche's *göttliche Eideschen*: 'Divine Lizards,' 'Greene Lyons,' and Music," *A Nietzschean Bestiary: Becoming Animal Beyond Docile and Brutal*, ed. Christa Davis Acampora and Ralph R. Acampora (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004) 270.

experience divine “re-birth” and assurance of immortality.¹⁸ Since only vague second-hand accounts of the secret rituals exist, we can only speculate about their content. The initiate probably experienced a physical decent into darkness (e.g. into a darkened cave or hole) that entailed some kind of frightening experience or representation, implying his symbolic death and dismemberment. Thereafter, the initiate was allowed to re-ascend into the light, accompanied by the relief and ecstasy that he had survived the ordeal. It is often supposed that this ritual imitated the experience of the suffering of the gods, for example, the murder and dismemberment of the divine child Dionysos.¹⁹

Given time constraints, we cannot go into a history of alchemy here, however, we emphasize that the development of the vocabulary and the structure of ancient alchemy probably grew out of the experience of the ancient Mystery Cults, but also very closely connected to the Gnostic tradition of ancient Hermetism, mentioned earlier. The main body of Hermetic texts are called the *Corpus Hermeticum*, written somewhere during the 2nd century AD. They were supposedly authored by a legendary Egyptian priest, Hermes Trismegistus, who was reportedly the son or grandson of the Greek god Hermes. Hermetism is an ancient form of panpsychism, promoting a monistic understanding of Reality: *Hen to Pan*, meaning the “All is One.”

IV. Alchemy and the Hermetic Primal Man

a. Alchemy and the Modern Reinterpretation of the Hermetic Ascent

In Antiquity, Hermetic/Gnostic self-divinization was an intellectual ascent through the spheres, within a Neoplatonic framework. A period of intellectual frustration and mental instability led to an eventual intellectual breakthrough, where one had a vision of oneself *in* the Mind of God. Like the Mysteries, the process supposedly ensured the immortality of the initiate.

This Hermetic vision of seeing oneself in the Mind of God entailed recognizing one’s origin in the “heavenly” Primal Man or *Anthropos*, who was understood to be the ideal form of humanity. Later *Anthropos* became associated with Aion (In Greek, “Eternity”), the alchemical solar deity of Time. This god was also associated with the chthonic Zeus, the chthonic solar deity Helios, but also with the Orphic god, Dionysos Zagreus, an association that would have been important for Nietzsche. In representation, Aion was depicted as the lion-headed god, the famous *deus Leontocephalus*, where a serpent coils around a man, resting its head atop of the man’s and looking as if it is about to enter his mouth. (PICTURE) The serpent is also a symbol of the alchemical *Oroboros*, or the tail-eating snake. This is a Hermetic representation of the cyclical nature of the *cosmos* that repeatedly destroys itself in order to re-create itself. (PICTURE)

b. The Alchemical Becoming of Aion

In the Renaissance, with the acceptance of Hermetic animism, the understanding of Nature and God became increasingly psychological.²⁰ A cyclical understanding of time gradually replaced a linear one

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, trans. Stephen Corrin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) 149ff.

¹⁹ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987) 96.

²⁰ Harry Parry, *Thelxis: Magic and Imagination in Greek Myth and Poetry* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1992) 96.

and God was collapsed into Nature.²¹ With the reception of, amongst other things, Nominalism, the Neoplatonic framework that was used to make an intellectual ascent became redundant and another technique was needed to “become Aion.” This was found in the practice of spiritual/psychological alchemy. Spiritual alchemy was meant to sublimate or transfigure a degenerated spiritual condition into a sublime one. Just as base materials went through a process of dissolution -- understood as a sacrifice -- and were reduced to chaotic primary matter (the *nigredo* or black phase),²² so too must the alchemist go through a period of spiritual, emotional or even psychical destruction. This would supposedly lead to his purification (the *albedo* or white phase) and eventually to self-divinization (the *rubedo* or red phase), what alchemists called “gold” or the “Philosopher’s Stone.”

To accomplish the alchemical process of mastering time, usually, the alchemist enlisted the help of a magical assistant (*parhedros, agathodaemon*) or “divine other.” Not surprisingly, the preferred assistant of alchemists was Aion, the God of Time and Eternity. For the alchemist, the alchemical Mercurius or Aion united the opposites within himself²³ and was his curious *Doppelgänger*, or psychic double projection. For example, “Zarathustra” is the name that Nietzsche gives to his “divine projection.” Although in the beginning of the process, Mercurius or Aion was perceived to be outside of himself, in the end, the alchemist came to believe that the god was himself. In accepting and uniting both the good and evil within himself, the alchemist was thought to be imitating Nature/God. He accepted psychic self-destruction as a necessary step in the process of self-divinization, because Nature tends to destroy itself and then regenerate itself. Instead of performing experiments on metals and then associating the results to inner states, modern psychological alchemists started to experiment on their own minds.

V. I teach you the Superman...

a. Transvaluation as Psychological Alchemy

In 1888, in a letter to the Danish professor of philosophy Georg Brandes, Nietzsche openly claims that his program of transvaluation of the dominant Judeo-Christian values and is concomitant theistic worldview (i.e. paradigm), which he categorizes as dualism, has a distinctly alchemical structure.²⁴ Nietzsche believed that his psychological alchemy would be able to elevate human nature or even humanity into “philosophical gold.” Other methods, which dualistically oppose each other, merely achieve a reversal of the same. One creates gold by precisely integrating or conjoining oneself to one’s opposites, or the things that one hates or fears the most: good with evil, light with dark, cosmos with chaos, Apollo with Dionysos, God with Satan, Christ with the Antichrist, etc.

²¹ Karen-Claire Voss, “Spiritual Alchemy: Interpreting Representative Texts and Images,” *Gnosis and Hermeticism From Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds. Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Albany: State University of New York, 1998) 154.

²² Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 136.

²³ Voss, “Spiritual Alchemy: Interpreting Representative Texts and Images,” 154.

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe*, Band 8, Januar 1887-Januar 1889 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986) 318. “Diese Wochen habe ich dazu benutzt, „Werthe umzuwerthen“. – Sie verstehen diesen Tropus? -- Im Grunde ist der Goldmacher die verdienstlichste Art Mensch, die es gibt: ich meine der, welcher aus Geringem, Verachtetem etwas Wertvolles und sogar Gold macht. Dieser allein bereichert, die andern wechseln nur um. Meine Aufgabe ist ganz kurios dies mal: ich habe mich gefragt, was bisher von der Menschheit am besten gehaßt, gefürchtet, verachtet worden ist – und daraus gerade habe ich mein, Gold’ gemacht...”

b. Nietzsche and the Hermetic Tradition

In an article “Eagle and the Serpent in Zarathustra,” David Thatcher also contends that Nietzsche’s imagery in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was gleaned from the Hermetic Tradition. Thatcher explores the symbolism of Nietzsche’s literary *Doppelgänger* Zarathustra’s pet snake and eagle and believes that Nietzsche developed his ideas from Georg Friedrich Cruezer’s (1771-1858) *Symbolism and Mythology of Ancient Nations*. (PICTURE) There, he learned that “Zoroastrianism is based on the conflict between the divine source of light and goodness, Ormuzd the eagle, and the satanic source of darkness and evil, Ahriman the dragon,”²⁵ which was later associated with the *Oroboros*, or the self-consuming serpent. (PICTURE)

In Gnostic and Hermetic texts, the *Oroboros* was the symbol of the cosmos and the cosmic creative mechanism. In the Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia*, the dragon was also associated with the supreme solar deity or Aion,²⁶ mentioned earlier. Thatcher claims that in *Zarathustra*, I, “Of the Bestowing Virtue” 1, Nietzsche associates his main character, Zarathustra, with Hermes and his caduceus. Not only did the caduceus double as Hermes’ magic wand, but it also signifies that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is a “prophet, seer, magus or medicine-man, like Moses or Hermes.”²⁷ The caduceus was most often represented with two ascending, intertwining serpents that point towards two adjoining wings.²⁸ (PICTURE) In the magical Hermetic paradigm, the wand is a Hermetic symbol of power and dual opposites, which must be united in order for Nature to overcome itself. The serpents represent the chthonic powers of the earth, while the wings are symbols of transcendence and the air. In the passage that Thatcher recalls, Zarathustra’s disciples bid him farewell and present him with “a staff, upon the golden haft of which a serpent was coiled about a sun.”²⁹ By resting upon a staff with “a serpent coiled about a sun,” with references to gold that “makes peace between moon and sun,” etc., Nietzsche not only associates Zarathustra with the solar god Hermes, the Greek god of magic, inspired prophesy and trickery, but also with the aforementioned representation of Aion as *Deus Leontocephalus*, the alchemical and Hermetic god of Time and “gold-making.” [Nietzsche’s imagery of Zarathustra’s pet eagle and snake are attempt to achieve a literary reconciliation of opposites, of the earth and the sky, sun and moon, but also good and evil.]

VI. The Parable of the Shepherd and the Snake

Thatcher points out that the alchemical principle of conjoining evil to good is no where more evident than in *Zarathustra*, III, “Of the Vision and Riddle.” In section § 1, Zarathustra confronts his “devil,” the “Spirit of Gravity.” This “spirit” is “half dwarf, half mole; crippled, crippling,” who pours *lead* into his ears and brain, a symbol of the *prima materia*. This is an allegory of his psychological

²⁵ David S. Thatcher, “Eagle and Serpent in *Zarathustra*,” *Nietzsche-Studien: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung*, Band 6 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977) 243.

²⁶ Jack Lindsay, *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London: Frederick Muller, 1970) 272. “But the disk of the sun was a great dragon, with its tail in its mouth, which ascended to the seven powers of the left and was drawn by four powers in the shape of white horses.”

²⁷ Thatcher, “Eagle and Serpent in *Zarathustra*,” *Nietzsche-Studien*, 248.

²⁸ J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978) 144.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Classics, 1969) 100.

alchemy. In order to transfigure his lower self, i.e. his dwarf, into the Higher Self, i.e. Aion, he must first be willing to reduce his mental capacities to lead or to go mad.

Furthermore, when we take into account that the alchemical homunculus, literally a “small human,” was often depicted as a dwarf, the alchemical imagery of this passage is strengthened. Sometimes the homunculus was a symbol for the “philosophical child” or the “Philosopher’s Stone,” or was merely a “mischievous spirit.”³⁰ [In this case, the dwarf is a mischievous spirit, who represents Zarathustra’s “smaller,” merely human self. Zarathustra attempts to climb upwards, but he is hindered by his dwarf, who calls Zarathustra, you “stone of wisdom,” another expression for the Philosopher’s Stone.] Obviously, the dwarf is Zarathustra’s “shadow side,” who he must overcome through a psychological conjunction of opposites in order to turn his intellectual lead into gold.

In the following section, *Zarathustra*, III, “Of the Vision and Riddle,” § 2, Zarathustra meets a young shepherd, who is writhing on the ground with a black snake hanging out of his mouth. We should not forget that in Antiquity both Hermes and Dionysos were known to be shepherds. On the urging of a voice, which cried out from Zarathustra, the shepherd bites off the snake’s head and spits it out.³¹ In alchemy, the destruction of the serpent/*Oroboros* was associated with beginning of the alchemical *opus* or *nigredo*.³² He consumes the cosmic snake and then spits it out.

The subsequent transformation of the man from brass to silver and then to gold represents the stages of the alchemical process and spiritual progress, which ultimately leads to the creation of the “man of gold” Aion. The parallels, then, with “Of the Adder’s Bite” and “Of the Bestowing Virtue” are clear. After confronting the snake, a symbol of the underworld wisdom and death, but also the Hermetic *cosmos*, Zarathustra overcomes his fear and is transformed into a divine being,³³ who contains the sublimated powers of the cosmos within himself. When we take into account that the section “Of the Vision and Riddle” III, § 2, actually begins with a discussion of time and eternity, the connection with Aion is obvious. This is where Zarathustra mentions the Eternal Return of the same.

VII. Dying at the “Right” Time: Nietzsche’s Suicidal Self-Divinization

In “Of the Bestowing Virtue,” I, § 2, Zarathustra appears as an alchemist, a solitary figure, encouraging his disciples to withdraw from society. Zarathustra says that the vice of ignorance became embodied in our present form of humanity, so that it needs to be purified with knowledge. Only by *going under*, by succumbing to self-destruction, which is simultaneously the destruction of the other, can one gain knowledge and cross over the abyss to the side of the *Übermensch*. For Nietzsche, human beings stand between the animal nature and the divine nature and must submit to the Dionysian scapegoating processes in order to be “sublimated” into the *Übermensch*. Not only is the

³⁰ Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 102.

³¹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 179-180. “Thus a voice cried from me, my horror, my hate, my disgust, my pity, all my good and evil cried out of me with a single cry.”

³² Lindsay, *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 272. “In alchemical myth, he was seen then as the guardian of the secret that had to be gained, the initiation-monster that had to be slain or outwitted. After the design of the dragon with three ears and four feet we read, ‘The dragon is the guardian of the temple. *Sacrifice him, skin him, separate the flesh from the bones, and you will find what you seek.*’ Then appears the man of brass who changes colour and becomes the man of silver, who in turn becomes the man of gold.”

³³ Thatcher, “Eagle and Serpent in *Zarathustra*,” *Nietzsche-Studien*, 250.

transcendent God of Christians “dead,” but all humanity, the little gods, must die, so that Nietzsche’s god, i.e. the *Übermensch*, might live.³⁴

In the preceding section, “Of Voluntary Death,” Zarathustra gives a speech on “dying at the right time.” Namely, it is an exhortation to “heroically” commit suicide as a form of self-sacrificial divinization. He says that humans should make death or dying into a festival.³⁵ He wills the advent of “the preachers of speedy death” so that he and others becomes earth again.³⁶ He associates his exhortation to “speed up the natural processes of destruction” with the throwing of a “golden ball” to his disciples, encouraging them to throw it to others. In mythology, a golden ball is a symbol of the sun; however, the throwing of the “golden ball” is also associated with the Harpies,³⁷ or the goddesses of mischief. Originally, they were “the goddesses of the sweeping storm, symbolic of the sudden and total disappearance of men.”³⁸ Therefore, through an alchemical and Hermetic allusion to the sun, Zarathustra is exhorting his disciples to create mischief on the earth so that humanity, as it finds itself, will disappear. Because Zarathustra “loves” humanity, he advocates the destruction of the unworthy in order to produce alchemical gold out of those who will become. The subsequent increase of power that one supposedly amasses after one survives the destructive process of the psychological conjunction is the path that Nietzsche/Zarathustra believes that one must take to create a superior form of humanity. In Hermetic panpsychic monism, since the category of real otherness is thought to be an illusion, what one does to others is merely another form of what one does to oneself. Coupled with the belief in psychological alchemy, there is the idea that psychic destruction will lead to psychic re-birth. Since he probably believes himself to be the conscious Will to Power, Nietzsche rationalizes the harm done to the weak as necessary for what he deems to be the greater good. Self-sacrifice or suicidal type self-destruction is thought necessary to increase power and, hence, for self-overcoming. And, Zarathustra proposes to his “disciples” that if they want to found a new religion of the *Übermensch*, then, they will have to become a sacrifice themselves.³⁹

Conclusion

The application of alchemical theory to Nietzsche’s philosophy, as a form of psychological alchemy, helps to make it understandable and explains many contradictions and issues of contention. As Girard

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 104. “And this is the great noontide: it is when man stands at the middle of his course between animal and Superman and celebrates his journey to the evening as his highest hope: for it is the journey to a new morning. Then man, going under, will bless himself; for he will be going over to Superman; and the sun of his knowledge will stand at noontide. ‘All gods are dead: now we want the Superman to live’ – let this be our last will one day at the great noontide. Thus spoke Zarathustra.”

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 97. “I commend to you my sort of death, voluntary death that comes to me because I wish it. And when shall I wish it? -- He who has a goal and an heir wants death at the time most favourable to his goal and his heir.”

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 98.

³⁷ Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*, 17.

³⁸ Oskar Seyffert, *The Dictionary of Classical Mythology, Religion, Literature, and Art* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1995) 270.

³⁹ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 217. “O my brothers, he who is a first-born is always sacrificed. Now we are first-born. We all bleed at secret sacrificial tables, we all burn and roast to the honour of ancient idols. Our best is still young: this excites old palates. Our flesh is tender, our skin is only a lamb-skin: -- how should we not excite old idol-priests! He still lives on in us ourselves, the old idol-priest, who roasts our best for his feast. Alas, my brothers, how should the first-born not be sacrifices! But our kind will have it thus; and *I love those who do not wish to preserve themselves. I love with my whole love those who go down and perish: for they are going beyond.* (Italics mine; Z, III, “Of Old and New Law Tables,” 6).”

suggests, from his understanding of ancient texts and myth, Nietzsche probably saw that ancient societies accepted and rationalized the sacrificial scapegoating mechanism as a method to channel potentially annihilative violence and keep communities from falling back into absolute mayhem. Nietzsche also saw that an original apocalyptic-like event probably preceded the institution of the sacrificial system, whose story lived on in the Mystery Religions. This event of catastrophic human violence was also somehow the origin of the gods and the religious sacrificial system itself. If someone – namely a sorcerer or *pharmakeus* -- could control that mechanism on a societal level, then, they could create a new society, religion and make themselves into a “god.”

Given its close affinities to the ancient Mysteries as well as Hermetism, Nietzsche as Anti-Christ saw that alchemy, albeit psychologized, provided the tools to catalyse the destructive phase and perform a psychological conjunction of opposites on what he thought to be degenerated Christian psyches. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was the literary vehicle or talisman that would initiate his disciples into the Nietzschean Mysteries, although according to Nietzsche it might take more one hundred years. Out of societal chaos that would be wrought would supposedly emerge a new society and a new man, the *Übermensch*, whom we have shown to be Nietzsche’s interpretation of the Hermetic Primal *Anthropos*, Aion. By ingesting Zarathustra’s painful *pharmakon* (poison or medicine, depending on one’s perspective), western civilization would be more willing to reduce itself to the *prima materia*, that is, destroy itself. Out of its ashes, supposedly a new, stronger, healthier civilization would rise. This seems to be what the National Socialists attempted in Nazi Germany, a dangerous experiment that, of course, did not work. Neither did Nietzsche’s own final descent into insanity, out of which he would never ascend.

At the beginning of our paper, we pointed out Berkowitz’s understanding of Nietzsche’s philosophy as an attempt to work out what kind of human beings would be necessary if the transcendent God of Judeo-Christianity is dead and the world is “Will to Power.” We have shown how Nietzsche developed his doctrine of the *Übermensch* from the Hermetic ideal of Aion. However, if the world is merely will to power, where “there are neither facts nor rights, only projections and creations of the strongest or most efficacious wills,” then, Nietzsche also came to realize that even his attempt to create the *Übermensch* was an illusion.⁴⁰ Given the fact that Nietzsche was unable to “heal himself,” i.e. become *Übermenschlich*, Nietzsche’s attempt to create the *Übermensch* and subsequent project of self-divinization was a failure, casting serious doubt on the value and relevance of his moral project of the transvaluation of all values (*Umwertung aller Werte*). Paradoxically, what Nietzsche’s own life-experiment shows is that the attempt to find the ultimate good or perfection of human beings cannot be divorced from an objective morality – let alone an objective reality -- without destroying the very foundation upon which such a state could be achieved.

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⁴⁰ Nietzsche: *The Ethics of an Immoralist*, 19-20.