
Nietzsche and the Figure of Copernicus: *Grande Fantaisie* on Polish Airs

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A parte, something to sing, but only for the most venerable
ears of Prince Bismarck:

Poland is not yet lost, -
For Niezky still lives ... (KSA 14, 483)

In Nomine

Heidegger's '*Nietzsche*' speaks volumes. The fact that he was able to choose as the title for his study simply the surname of the philosopher tells us something about the reputation he himself had gained by that stage (1961), about the rather less crowded field which was 'Nietzsche studies' thirty-five years ago (few publishers nowadays would allow such a monograph to eschew a subtitle if it were not part of an established series), and perhaps about the Western cultural canon in general (since Umberto Eco's novel, for example, who are we to understand by 'Foucault?'). But the irreducibility of Heidegger's title is also intentionally programmatic, for as he explains at the opening of his Foreword: "'Nietzsche'" - the name of the thinker stands as the title for *the matter* of his thinking.¹ The strength of this claim emerges when we are later told that 'each thinker thinks only one *single* thought', and that for Heidegger Nietzsche's singular thought is 'the thought that he gave shape to in the phrase "the will to power"',² for which the name 'Nietzsche' can thus be deemed to function as a kind of monolithic metonym. However, Jacques Derrida resists the reductivism of this gesture and responds with a rhetorical question: 'Next to Kierkegaard, was not Nietzsche one of the few great thinkers who multiplied his names and played with signatures, identities, and masks?''³

The pertinence of Derrida's question is most signally demonstrated by the last letter Nietzsche wrote to his former colleague and lifelong friend

Jacob Burckhardt, on 5 January 1889, in which he indulges in a veritable orgy of identifications. The letter begins, famously: 'Dear Professor: Actually I would much rather be a Basel professor than God; but I have not ventured to carry my private egoism so far as to omit creating the world on his account' (Middleton, p.346; KGB III/5, 577f.). Not content with being 'just' God, however, in the rest of this one letter Nietzsche proceeds to claim that he is a whole succession of (mostly deceased) nobles, architecturally-minded diplomats and 'decent criminals' then in the news: King Carlo Alberto of Sardinia, his sons Count Robilant and the late King of Italy Vittorio Emmanuele II, de Lesseps and Antonelli, Prado, Prado's father and Chambige. 'The unpleasant thing,' he writes, 'and one that nags my modesty, is that at root every name in history is I'. This letter is undoubtedly a testament to Nietzsche's recent collapse into (dia)chronic megalomania, and it was interpreted as such by its recipient, but when Nietzsche claims Caesar as one of his 'incarnations', in a contemporaneous letter to Cosima Wagner (KGB III/5, 573), this is more than simply an indication that he has just crossed his own tragic Rubicon, for in all these late letters we can see him taking to an extreme a practice which has been prevalent throughout his philosophical writings, that of identifying with historical characters. In January 1889 Nietzsche achieves apotheosis Via Carlo Alberto, he breaks down in Turin, but throughout his career the question of Nietzsche's identity *breaks down* into the question of Nietzsche's identifications. This pluralised identity is the (oxymoronic) starting point for my paper, and for the wider project of which it is a part - an exploration of *Nietzsche's Figures*, the role-call of personages who go to make up the *dramatis personae* of his philosophy.

'Nietzsche's name', *pace* Heidegger, is no singularity but a subsumptive, synoptic aggregate: it is 'Nietzsches' name', always already irreducibly *plural*, if only in the trivial sense which Heidegger ignores, namely that from birth 'the Antichrist/ian' has two Christian names. But for Nietzsche even this given is no trivial matter, and on his own analysis the conjunction of his three given names precludes any conveniently unproblematic one-to-one correspondence of the kind Heidegger would seek to establish. As Nietzsche recounts in the manuscript of *Ecce Homo*, he was given his Christian names - 'the Hohenzollern names *Friedrich Wilhelm*' - in recognition of the birthday he shared with the then ruling King of Prussia,

Friedrich Wilhelm IV, for whom his reverend father 'was full of a deep reverence', while his surname betrays the fact that he is descended, on his father's side, from a long line of Polish nobility.⁴ The names of the thinker do indeed 'stand for *the matter* of his thinking', but the conflicted *Sache* they represent - for Nietzsche himself - is a 'genealogical' (physiological/typological) indivi-duality, an inner division between his German and Polish 'instincts' which exist in a state of constant agonal tension. Now, as we shall see, Nietzsche's 'alleged Polish descent' was in fact a figment of his imagination - Sarah Kofman terms this whole passage in *Ecce Homo* an exercise in 'fantastic genealogy'⁵ - but its affective import was nonetheless profound. In his youth Nietzsche the musician composed 'a little booklet of mazurkas' dedicated "'To the Memory of Our Forefathers'" (KSA 9, 681f.),⁶ but in the 1880s Nietzsche the philosopher takes his cue from the Op. 13 of his namesake and would-be countryman Fryderyk Chopin, composing a '*Grande fantasia* on Polish Airs' which crescendos to a tempestuous climax in 1888. This fantasy develops out of a 'figure' with whom Nietzsche identifies from early on in his philosophical career, Copernicus, and it is on his construction of this figure that I want to concentrate here.

Copernican Revolutions

Kant was not one to stoop very often to 'examples and explanations, which are necessary only from a *popular* point of view',⁷ but in the Preface to the second edition of his First *Critique* he does grace us with an unwonted analogy:

We here propose to do just what *Copernicus* did in attempting to explain the celestial movements. When he found that he could make no progress by assuming that all the heavenly bodies revolved round the spectator, he reversed the process, and tried the experiment of assuming that the spectator revolved, while the stars remained at rest. We may make the same experiment with regard to the *intuition* of objects.⁸

Since one of Nietzsche's fundamental motivations was to out-Kant Kant,⁹ in the context of this well-known passage it is no surprise that he should be interested in Copernicus; what is perhaps surprising is that he should show so little interest in him from this Kantian perspective. For all the

'experimentalism' of his own philosophy, Nietzsche does not thematise Copernicus's experimental method (although it is this aspect of his analogy which leads Kant himself to *abandon* it, finding it too dangerous to sustain for long);¹⁰ he also goes beyond simply exploiting the *metaphor* of 'Copernican revolution' and does not apply it, as he so easily might have, to his own 'revaluation of all values'.¹¹ Instead, his attention is drawn to Copernicus as a historical figure, and he treats his life as a chapter in what one might call the social psychology of scientific revolution. The Copernican role-model is itself plural, and in adopting it Nietzsche follows not Kant but Goethe, who records his admiration for Copernicus in the *Farbenlehre* as follows:

But of all discoveries and convictions, nothing may have produced a greater effect on the human spirit than the doctrine of Copernicus. The world had scarcely been acknowledged as round and complete in itself when it was obliged to forgo the tremendous privilege of being the centre of the universe. Never, perhaps, has a greater demand been made on mankind: for through this recognition so many things went up in smoke: a second paradise, a world of innocence, poetry and piety, the evidence of the senses, the conviction of a poetic-religious faith; no wonder people did not want to let all this go and mobilised all possible resistance to such a doctrine, which authorised and demanded of those who accepted it a hitherto unknown, indeed unimagined freedom of thought and grandeur of attitude.¹²

Nietzsche's Copernicus is likewise a revolutionary idoloclast who met with incomprehending inertia on the part of his contemporaries, for Poland, ironically enough, was 'the only country in western-Roman culture never to experience a Renaissance' (KSA 8, 530f.).

The first references to Copernicus in Nietzsche's work are to be found in the notebooks from his student years, in August-December 1865. Here he charts the development in occidental cosmology from 'The World-View [*Weltanschauung*] of the Catholic Middle Ages' through 'The World-View of Protestant Orthodoxy' to 'The Modern World-View' and remarks that in the time of the Reformation: 'Despite Copernicus people

held on to their old heaven, their old earth and their old hell' (FS III, 126), whereas nowadays: '*The Copernican world-view* has entered the bloodstream of our time. The difference between heaven and earth has fallen away, and with it hell, and with it *angels and devils*' (FS III, 128). Here Copernicus is cited as the exemplary protestant, and ranks even higher in this respect than Luther, another figure with whom Nietzsche often identifies but who is here dismissed as less progressive, 'merely a child of his time'. Copernicus is a heterodox cleric who rebels against the theocratic order and succeeds in taking the first and most decisive step towards the demystification of the world, the abolition of that invidious distinction between 'real' and 'apparent' worlds which Nietzsche himself will allegorise in the section of *Twilight of the Idols* entitled 'How the Real World Finally Became a Fable', and which will culminate in his own proclamation of the death of metaphysics, the death of God. As Nietzsche reminds himself almost two decades after this initial note, 'God and Man' is 'the standpoint before Copernicus' (KSA 10, 643).

Nietzsche's emphasis on the contemporary resistance to Copernicus's findings is also apparent in the first passage in his published writings where Copernicus is invoked, in the third *Untimely Meditation, Schopenhauer as Educator*, where he thematises the self-satisfaction ('*Biederkeit*') with which the academic also-rans have invariably greeted the innovations of the great scientific pioneers:

And because everything new makes it necessary to relearn, this self-satisfaction, in case of need, will always revere the old opinion and reproach anyone who proclaims the new with a lack of *sensus recti*. It certainly resisted the teachings of Copernicus because in this case it had appearance [*den Augenschein*] and convention on its side. (UM, III, 6)

Copernicus is figured as the doughtiest doubter, the genius who sought to blow away the conceptual cobwebs, or rather to remove the scales from people's eyes - for he is the greatest opponent of appearance, '*Augenschein*', literally of how things appear to the eyes. Nietzsche is following Goethe very closely here, for Friedrich von Müller reports the following remark of Goethe's from 26 February 1832:

The greatest truths often flatly contradict the senses, in fact they almost always do. The movement of the Earth around the Sun - to all appearances [*dem Augenschein nach*] what could be more absurd? And yet it is the greatest, noblest, most momentous discovery man has ever made; to my mind more important than the whole Bible.¹³

Following Goethe, Nietzsche treats Copernicus as the arch-combatant of theological dogmatism, the heroic and representative scientist who succeeds in unseating humanity from the centre of the universe, in unmasking perhaps the most fundamental of the 'anthropomorphisms' which had previously passed as truths. In *Schopenhauer as Educator* Nietzsche establishes 'the teachings of Copernicus' as a benchmark against which sixteenth-century 'self-satisfaction' can be judged, and even much later in his philosophical career, in 1887/88, Copernicus will still serve this purpose, when Nietzsche's critique of 'resistance' has sharpened into an attack on the 'resentment' symptomatic of a 'slave mentality'. For the debilitated 'herd-men' in every period want only to level down the uncommon achievements of the great to their miserable common denominator: their watchword is 'cut off Cicero's tongue, blind Copernicus, stone Shakespeare' (KSA 13, 147).

But the value to Nietzsche of Copernicus's example is far greater than this, for his revolutionary achievement in overturning the prevailing worldview remains a point of reference for scientific endeavour in the modern age, and it is in this context that Nietzsche writes of him in the most famous passage in which he is mentioned - most famous because it was included by Nietzsche's philosophical executors as the first section ('Toward an Outline') in *The Will to Power*. Here, discussing 'the nihilistic consequences of contemporary natural science (together with its attempts to escape into some beyond)', Nietzsche remarks: 'The industry of its pursuit eventually leads to self-disintegration, opposition to *itself*, an anti-scientific mentality. - Since Copernicus man has been rolling from the centre toward x' (WP I). Now although Nietzsche himself abandoned *The Will to Power* as a project in late August/early September 1888 (cf. KSA 14, 398), he had already salvaged this particular passage, a note from the period summer-autumn 1886 (KSA 12, 126f.). From a separate

but contemporary notebook (KSA 12, 203) it becomes clear that ‘Belittling of man since Copernicus’ (‘Verkleinerung des Menschen seit Copernicus’) was considered for inclusion in *Beyond Good and Evil*, and although it was passed over for that text it was eventually incorporated into the Third Essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Here Nietzsche takes up the theme of the nihilistic consequences of natural science as part of his *tour d’horizon* of crypto-ascetics, arguing that “‘modern science’” is not nearly self-reliant enough to create new values, with the result that it remains in involuntary service to the very ascetic ideal it prides itself on having overcome:

Has the self-belittlement of man [*die Selbst-Verkleinerung des Menschen*], his *will* to self-belittlement, not progressed irresistibly since Copernicus? [...] Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane - now he is slipping faster and faster away from the centre into - what? into nothingness? into a ‘penetrating sense of his nothingness’? ... Very well! hasn’t this been the straightest route to - the *old* ideal? (GM, III, 25)

Nietzsche evidently views *post*-Copernican science in a poor light (the twilight of the ideal), but it should be noted that Copernicus himself is exempted from Nietzsche’s swingeing irony, for Copernicus was astonishingly successful in engineering ‘the defeat of theological astronomy’, and it is his degenerate epigones, inescapably mired in the ascetic ideal, who come in for the fiercest criticism on account of their inability or unwillingness to emulate his audacity and take his discovery to its logical limit (which is where Nietzsche himself comes in).¹⁴ These lesser luminaries have shied away from confronting and affirming nihilism, let alone overcoming it, and have drawn back from the abyss, taking refuge instead on the path of least resistance, in a new transcendentalism. It is at this point that Nietzsche makes the only connection in his writings between Copernicus and Kant, for the latter, in Nietzsche’s eyes, is the most egregious culprit in this scandalous act of selling Copernicus short. Far from succeeding in his own ‘Copernican revolution’, Kant, for Nietzsche, simply finesses the ascetic ideal, and *On the Genealogy of Morals* marks the centenary of Kant’s Preface by continuing sarcastically at his expense:

All science (and by no means only astronomy, on the humiliating and degrading effect of which Kant made the noteworthy confession: 'it destroys my importance' ...), all science, natural as well as unnatural - which is what I call the self-critique of knowledge - has at present the object of dissuading man from his former respect for himself, as if this had been nothing but a piece of bizarre conceit. [...] Is this really to work against the ascetic ideal? Does one still seriously believe (as theologians imagined for a while) that Kant's victory over the dogmatic concepts of theology ('God', 'soul', 'freedom', 'immortality') damaged that ideal? - it being no concern of ours for the present whether Kant ever had any intention of doing such a thing. What is certain is that, since Kant, transcendentalists of every kind have once more won the day - they have been emancipated from the theologians: what joy! - Kant showed them a secret path by which they may, on their own initiative and with all scientific respectability, from now on follow their 'heart's desire'. (GM, III, 25)

Nietzsche refuses to let Kant get away with considering himself a worthy inheritor of the Copernican mantle, for the categorical imperative still grounds the astronomical observer of the 'starry firmament above' in a metaphysics of morals: at bottom Kant is but a 'crafty Christian' (TI, III, 6). By Nietzsche's reckoning Copernicus may have been a nihilist - he could not have been otherwise, for he inaugurated the period of dominance of the ascetic ideal in its modern scientific inflection - but he was at least an 'active nihilist', a destroyer of the old values (KSA 12, 350f./WP 22-23), whereas Kant is just a 'passive nihilist', a 'critic' and 'scientific labourer' (BGE 211) who diligently obfuscates in the wake of the genuinely 'free spirit' only to end up, like the pessimist Hartmann, 'arbitrarily incarcerating' himself in 'the pre-Copernican prison and field of vision' (KSA 12, 168/WP 789). Back in 1865 Nietzsche had noted Lange's observation that the Catholic church considered Copernicus's theory a 'Pythagorean doctrine' (FS III, 333), but he himself salutes it as a visionary *Weltanschauung* which liberated man from the tyranny of appearance and thus prepared the way for his own entrance on the philosophical scene, centre stage, as the 'genuine philosopher', the creator of new values, 'Europe's first perfect nihilist, who has nevertheless already lived nihilism

through to its end in himself - who has it behind him, beneath him, outside him ...' (KSA 13, 190/WP, 'Preface', 3).

Copernicus and Boscovich

In *Schopenhauer as Educator* Nietzsche presents Copernicus as the great antagonist of appearance ('*Augenschein*'), but later on he also grants this accolade to another figure, to the mathematician, astronomer and physicist Roger Joseph Boscovich (Rudjer Josip Bošković), whose main work, *Theory of Natural Philosophy* (1758), he read as early as 1873, when he became captivated by its refutation of the atomic model of matter.¹⁵ Although Nietzsche read Boscovich before writing *Schopenhauer as Educator*, he does not actually cite him until the 1880s, when Boscovich and Copernicus are almost invariably yoked together. In a note from autumn 1881, for example, Nietzsche writes: 'The two greatest opponents of appearance [*Gegner des Augenscheins*] are Copernicus and Boscovich, both Poles and both clerics - the latter was the first to destroy the superstitious belief in matter, with his doctrine of the mathematical character of the atom' (KSA 9, 643). He uses the same phrase ('Boscovich [...] and Copernicus are the two greatest opponents of appearance') in a letter to Köselitz of 20 March 1882 (Middleton, p. 182; KGB III/1, 183), and the importance of these two interrelated figures to him personally is apparent in a note from summer-autumn 1884 in which he reviews his own 'philosophical genealogy' and remarks that he considers 'Boscovich one of the great turning-points, like Copernicus' (KSA 11, 266). These observations on Copernicus and Boscovich eventually find their place in the published writings in paragraph 12 of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche's most forthright attack on the 'atomistic prejudice' of the scientists:

As for materialistic atomism, it is one of the best-refuted things there are; and perhaps no scholar in Europe is still so unscholarly today as to accord it serious significance except for handy everyday use (as an abbreviated means of expression) - thanks above all to the Pole Boscovich who, together with the Pole Copernicus, has been the greatest and most triumphant opponent of appearance [*Gegner des Augenscheins*] hitherto. For while Copernicus persuaded us to believe, contrary to all the senses, that the earth does *not* stand firm, Boscovich

taught us to abjure belief in the last thing of earth that 'stood firm', belief in 'substance', in 'matter', in the earth-residuum and particle atom: it was the greatest triumph over the senses hitherto achieved on earth. (BGE 12)

For Nietzsche, then, Boscovich shares with Copernicus in all the Goethean virtues which we have seen so far - he is another archetypal scientist striving to combat the prejudice of the senses, in fact the greatest and most heroic of all in this respect - but he also shares with Copernicus another attribute, which Goethe does not dwell on (and nor does Kant, for that matter), namely the virtue - in Nietzsche's eyes - of being Polish. For it is noticeable here that Nietzsche chooses to rank both Copernicus and Boscovich high in his own personal 'philosophical genealogy' as *Poles*, as representing that national character of which he is (or would like to be) the most illustrious example of all.

'Illustrious Poles'

At this juncture one should point out that Boscovich was not in fact Polish: he was born in 1711 in Ragusa, Dalmatia (present-day Dubrovnik in Croatia), to a Dalmatian father and Italian mother, spent the greater part of his life in Italy and died in Milan in 1787, having been naturalised a Frenchman in 1774.¹⁶ Boscovich was by birth at least a Slav; he did spend a few months in Poland in 1762, and he published an account of his travels there as well as an essay on the political system of the country,¹⁷ but it seems that Nietzsche is so keen to draw an analogy between Boscovich and Copernicus that he goes so far as to invent a nationality for him.

For Nietzsche it stands to reason that Boscovich, like Copernicus, must be a Pole because he shows the same spirit of individuality, independence and innovation that characterises the nationality which could dream up the political institution of the '*liberum veto*' or 'unrestricted veto', the convention according to which, in the mediaeval diets, if any one nobleman vetoed a decision then it could not be implemented. The fact that the *liberum veto* was a disaster as a workable political system is incidental to Nietzsche - in fact if anything it only goes to recommend the Polish *polis* to this 'last anti-political German'. Even as a boy, he reflects in an important passage from the summer of 1882, the Poles had

particularly appealed to him:

The Poles struck me as the most talented and chivalrous of the Slavic peoples; and the talents of the Slavs seemed to me greater than those of the Germans, indeed I even thought that the Germans had joined the ranks of the talented nations only through a strong mixture with Slavic blood. It did me good to think of the Polish nobleman's right to overturn the resolution of a diet with his single veto; and the Pole Copernicus seemed to me simply to have made the greatest and most worthy use of this right, in directing it against the resolution and appearances [*den Augenschein*] of everyone else. The political boisterousness and weakness of the Poles, like their dissipation, were more a proof to me of their talents than of the opposite. (KSA 9, 682)

Copernicus, as arch-wielder of the *liberum veto*, is refigured here as the archetypal Polish nobleman, for whom Nietzsche shows such a fondness because, as he explains, 'I was taught to trace the descent of my blood and name back to Polish noblemen who were called Niëtzky'. It is no coincidence that at precisely the time Nietzsche is developing a self-image as 'free spirit', in the early 1880s, he should begin to dwell - for the first time since his childhood - on his origins among this race of 'free spirits' *par excellence*. Moreover, in a passage which was drafted as an Introduction to *The Gay Science*, it is only natural that Nietzsche should turn to Poland's most celebrated scientist, Copernicus, for his identificatory model.

'*The Copernican world-view* has entered the bloodstream of our time', Nietzsche wrote back in 1865, but it is not till the 1880s that this metaphor becomes activated for his own personal purposes. In a letter of 20 August 1880 to Köselitz from Marienbad, Nietzsche writes: 'There are many Poles here and - remarkably [*es ist wunderbarlich*] - they take me for a Pole through and through, come up to me with Polish greetings and - won't believe me when I claim to be Swiss' (KGB III/1, 37; cf. KSA 9, 681). He had indeed adopted Swiss nationality a decade before, on his move to Basel, but his evident surprise here at being taken for a Pole is short-lived, and further correspondence from the first half of the 1880s illustrates the growth of his renewed interest in family history. 'Consider

my name: my forebears were Polish aristocrats - even my grandfather's mother was Polish', he writes to Heinrich von Stein in early December 1882 (Middleton, p.197; KGB III/1, 287), and in a letter of 7 April 1884 he confesses to Franz Overbeck: 'I am ashamed to know so little about the *Poles* (who, after all, are really my "ancestors"!)' (Middleton, p.221; KGB III/1, 494).

Even beyond the period of the 'free spirit trilogy', then, Nietzsche continues to proclaim his Polishness, and with increasing vehemence, for in the later 1880s his Polish identity takes on a new meaning beyond an association with the land of the *liberum veto* - specifically, being Polish means *not being German*. In the wake of the founding of the Reich - which, in the first *Untimely Meditation*, Nietzsche was already deeming synonymous with 'the extirpation of the German spirit' (UM, I, 1) - his hostility to his German contemporaries became ever more pronounced, and culminated in that wickedly barbed section of *Twilight* entitled 'What the Germans Lack'. By 1888 Nietzsche was finding his German pedigree quite intolerable, and he adopted a variety of strategies for denying it. He had already been spending as much of his time as possible outside his native country - ten years in an academic post in Basel, a further nine shuttling between the Upper Engadine in the summer and the Italian and French Riviéras in the winter - and while physically his centrifugal movement took him to points south, intellectually it took him to all the other points of the compass as well. The first recognition of his philosophy came from the north, from the Danish philosopher Georg Brandes who gave a lecture series on his work in Copenhagen in 1888, to Nietzsche's great delight;¹⁸ to the west lay France, and in 1888 Nietzsche's long admiration for French culture heightened to such an extent that he began claiming his works of that year were actually written in French,¹⁹ that 'it is high time I returned to the world as a Frenchman' (KGB III/5, 535).²⁰ Even in this late letter to Jean Bourdeau, though, Nietzsche writes that his 'forefathers were Polish nobles', and his most determined attempt at disavowing his Germanic origins remains in 1888 his ever more vociferous assertion that his origins lie to the east, in Poland.

Yet Nietzsche's Polish roots were a fiction. As with his construction of Boscovich, with the construction of his own identity we are in the realm of

'fantastic genealogy' - although, ironically enough, one characteristic he undoubtedly *did* share with his fellow-pseudo-Pole was the penchant for making unwarranted claims to noble descent.²¹ Walter Kaufmann notes: 'During the Nazi period, one of Nietzsche's relatives, Max Oehler, a retired major, went to great lengths to prove that Nietzsche had been racially pure', in publications such as the article 'Nietzsches angebliche polnische Herkunft' ('Nietzsche's Alleged Polish Descent') and the pamphlet *Nietzsches Ahnentafel (Nietzsche's Pedigree)*.²² Oehler's researches have been borne out by subsequent biographers of Nietzsche,²³ though it is a further irony that at the same time as Oehler was successfully rescuing Nietzsche for the Fatherland, other scholars were seeking rather less convincingly to do precisely the same for Copernicus. Nor were they the first to do so, and it should not be forgotten that by styling Copernicus a Pole Nietzsche was actually taking up a position in a heated debate. This debate had inevitably intensified with the rise in German nationalism through the nineteenth century, but as early as 1799 Lichtenberg, (otherwise) one of Nietzsche's favourite writers (cf. WS 109), wrote a layman's introduction to Copernicus for a series entitled *Pantheon der Deutschen*, in which he is at pains to establish his subject's Germanic pedigree and indeed makes Copernicus's greatness a function of his Prussian extraction.²⁴

At any rate, by 1888 Nietzsche had become perfectly convinced of his own Polish ancestry, and on April 10 of that year he sends a CV to his new admirer Brandes, which begins as follows:

Curriculum vitae. I was born 15 October 1844, on the battlefield of *Lützen*. The first *name* I heard was that of Gustav Adolf. My forebears were Polish aristocrats (Niězky); it seems that the type has been well preserved, despite three German 'mothers'. Abroad, I am usually taken for a Pole; even this last winter the aliens' register in Nice had me inscribed *comme Polonais*.²⁵ I have been told that my head and features appear in paintings by Matejko.²⁶ My grandmother belonged to the Goethe-Schiller circle in Weimar; her brother became Herder's successor as superintendent-general of the churches in the duchy of Weimar. (Middleton, p.293; KGB III/5, 288)

The opening embellishment of the truth (Nietzsche was born in Röcken, a few miles away from Lützen) allows Nietzsche to strike a suitably martial pose,²⁷ and his reference to the Swedish king Gustav Adolf is no doubt also calculated to bolster his Scandinavian credentials in the eyes of his Danish correspondent, but most significantly of all, the displacement of his birthplace to a seventeenth-century (and Napoleonic) battlefield establishes his identity as a site of conflict, the warring parties being the Polish (paternal) and German (maternal) aspects of his inheritance. He seeks to 'redeem' his German origins on his mother's side by pointing out that his maternal grandmother had been associated with Goethe (by this stage the only 'good German' he has left) and thus beyond reproach, but he does not try to deny these origins altogether, and this carefully constructed self-image finds its way into the manuscript of *Ecce Homo*:

I am a *Doppelgänger*, I have a 'second' face in addition to the first. And perhaps also a third ... Even by virtue of my descent I am permitted to look beyond all merely locally, merely nationally conditioned perspectives, it costs me no effort to be a 'good European'. On the other hand I am perhaps more German than present-day Germans, mere Reich Germans, are still capable of being - I, the last *anti-political* German. And yet my ancestors were Polish noblemen: I have many of their racial instincts in my body, who knows? ultimately even the *liberum veto*. When I consider how often on my travels I am addressed as a Pole and by Poles themselves, how rarely I am taken for a German, it might seem that I am one of those who have been merely *sprinkled* with Germanity. But my mother, Franziska Oehler, is in any event something very German; likewise my paternal grandmother, Erdmuth Krause.²⁸

Here the identification with Copernicus's *liberum veto* is at its most developed, but this particular paragraph became a *cause célèbre* when it emerged in 1969 that, at the last, Nietzsche had intended it to be superseded by another which his sister had suppressed. It is not hard to guess why she should have done so, for in the later version the delicate balance which Nietzsche cultivates in his self-depiction as *Tripelgänger*, straddling the two traditions with a view beyond both, is overturned in favour of an impassioned outpouring of anti-German spleen directed

specifically against the mother and sister whose Germanity he could in reality do so little to counteract. In the new version, the passage runs as follows:

And with this I touch on the question of race. I am a Polish nobleman of *pur sang*, to which not one drop of bad blood has been added, least of all German. When I look for my profoundest opposite, the incalculable pettiness of the instincts, I always find my mother and my sister - to think of me as related to such *canaille* would be a blasphemy against my divinity. [...] - But even as a Pole I am a monstrous atavism. One would have to go back centuries to find this noblest of races that the earth has ever possessed as instinctively pristine as I represent it. I have, against everything that is today called *noblesse*, a sovereign feeling of distinction - I wouldn't award the young German Kaiser the honour of being my coachman. (EH, I, 3)

This was destined by Nietzsche to be the first reference to his Polish origins in print (his draft Introduction to *The Gay Science* had not been used), but he clearly protests too much, for on the one hand the heightened vehemence in his denial of his German extraction certainly *weakens* the case for an acceptance of this 'fantastic genealogy'; on the other, with his talk of 'pristine instincts' and 'purity of blood' he seems to be succumbing to a prefigurative perversion of 'Blut und Boden' ideology, to be falling squarely back into the kind of overtly racist rhetoric which he had weaned himself off on breaking from Wagner.²⁹ In the 1882 letter to Heinrich von Stein quoted above, he had continued: 'my forebears were Polish aristocrats - even my grandfather's mother was Polish. Well, I regard it as a virtue to be half-German', but in this intemperate outburst from the very end of his philosophical career, and in other drafts and letters from the same period,³⁰ the inner typological balance between the German and the Polish which Nietzsche had been scrupulously maintaining is definitively tilted: the Poles lose their counter-pole. The reference to his 'divinity' in this passage is already an indication of the proximity of its composition to the letter to Burckhardt from which I quoted at the outset, but in another of his last letters, addressed 'To the Illustrious Poles', Nietzsche obliges himself to forgo the tremendous privilege of being the centre of the universe so as to spell out in the starkest terms imaginable the by now *absolute*

nature of his Polish identity:

I belong to you, I am even more Pole than I am God, I want
to bring you honour, as I am capable of bringing honour
... I live among you as Matejo ...
The Crucified (KGB III/5, 577)

French Polish Finish

Nietzsche constructs his figure of Copernicus out of a complex series of associations and fantasies. Firstly he shares Goethe's exhilarated feeling of liberation at 'the greatest, noblest, most momentous discovery man has ever made' and depicts Copernicus as a heroic free spirit flying in the face of appearance and convention. Given the preponderance of optical metaphors in Nietzsche's 'perspectivistic' philosophy, it is perhaps surprising that he should not make reference to Copernicus as representative *astronomer* - in general he makes relatively sparing use of astronomical metaphors and references - but Copernicus is certainly a representative scientist and theological rebel. The author of *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* is indeed himself a representative revolutionary, but Nietzsche does not take the Kantian turn, since by now the notion of 'Copernican revolution' had already become just another philosophical trope, common coin debased by the likes of Auguste Comte,³¹ and as a result his identification with the figure of Copernicus is more subtle - more internalised - than Kant's glibly metaphorical appropriation (did he discard the 1882 Introduction to *The Gay Science* because the Copernican reference *there* would have been too obviously Kantian a gesture?). It is by criticising Kant's impartial 'revolution', the impartial resolution of the problem of nihilism by this starry-eyed metaphysical recidivist, that Nietzsche prepares the ground for his own more implicit claims to succeed his illustrious forebear. As he fearlessly diagnoses the vicissitudes of the ascetic ideal, having opted out of modernity with a well-timed exercise of his untimely *liberum veto*, Nietzsche does not merely emulate Copernicus - he *becomes* him.

In the 1880s Copernicus is above all an exemplary Pole with whom Nietzsche can identify on account of his own imagined ancestry, for the more he exploits 'genealogy' as metaphor, the more he becomes interested

in his 'actual' family tree. But Copernicus is not the only Pole with whom Nietzsche identifies: Boscovich is made to fit the bill, as we have seen, and Matejko fits it anyway, as does Chopin, for whose music Nietzsche expresses a particular fondness (singling out not the 'Revolutionary' *Étude*, as one might perhaps expect, but the *Barcarolle*).³² His most extreme expression of admiration for Chopin comes, unsurprisingly, in 1888, in *Ecce Homo*:

I shall never admit that a German *could* know what music is. What one calls German musicians, the greatest above all, are *foreigners*, Slavs, Croats, Italians, Netherlanders - or Jews: otherwise Germans of the strong race, *extinct* Germans, like Heinrich Schütz, Bach and Händel. I myself am still sufficient of a Pole [*sic*] to exchange the rest of music for Chopin. (EH, II, 7)³³

Poles become so important to Nietzsche, particularly in the later 1880s, because they can be set up in this way as models antagonistic to the 'German spirit' (itself now dismissed as a contradiction in terms), but in his last year of philosophical activity Nietzsche's attempts to distance himself from his own German birth and inheritance by asserting his Polish origins become progressively more burlesque and desperate, till one is tempted to apply to Nietzsche himself his description of the decadent Socrates: 'Everything about him is exaggerated, *buffo*, caricature' (TI, II, 4). In the final interpolation in *Ecce Homo*, where Nietzsche broaches 'the question of race', his Germanophobia reaches a level of virulence and violence previously unknown even in the writings of this most anti-German of Germans, and the baseness of his attack seems to belie the very typological - 'Polish' - nobility of instinct he wants so urgently to claim.

Yet we should beware of assuming that even at this screaming extreme, at the height of Nietzsche's self-proclamation as 'pure-blooded' Pole, he has thereby fallen into a facile racism. As Kaufmann and Kofman have shown, 'the question of race' is never so simple with Nietzsche as it might appear,³⁴ and just as we have seen that to the young Nietzsche 'pure-blooded' Germans did not exist, owing to their 'strong mixture with Slavic blood', by the same token even at the end of his career there is no such thing as a 'pure-blooded' Pole in any straightforwardly racist sense. In 1882, Nietzsche continues his projected Introduction to *The Gay Science*

by shifting his focus from Copernicus to Chopin, whom he apparently admired in his youth for 'the fact that he freed music from German influences' (KSA 9, 682). But Chopin is also criticised here, for, born of a Polish mother and French father, he spent the majority of his creative life in Paris where, as Nietzsche adds, 'Chopin unfortunately lived too close to a dangerous current in the French spirit [...] - the stronger Slav proved unable to resist the narcotics of an over-refined culture'. In *Ecce Homo*, as we have seen, Chopin's stock rises markedly in Nietzsche's estimation, but French culture in general is here startlingly revalued: 'I believe only in French culture and consider everything in Europe that calls itself "culture" a misunderstanding, not to speak of German culture ...' (EH, II, 3). It is in this context that Nietzsche confesses to Bourdeau he would like to be reborn a Frenchman, and that he makes the crucially revealing aside in *Ecce Homo* itself: 'It is not for nothing that the Poles are called the French among the Slavs' (EH, III, 2).³⁵

So even when, at the end of 1888, Nietzsche finally comes to abandon the German/Polish duality at the core of his being, he does so only in order to *substitute* another, a French/Polish duality which penetrates even to the heart of that 'pure Polishness' he so strenuously appropriates for himself. At the last, Torun acquires a new son (in Turin, Po-land), and Nietzsche finally succeeds in vetoing Germany, in voiding it from his genealogical topography, but he does so by 'bracketing' it out from east and west at the same time. Nietzsche's all-too-insufferable present as a German is comprehensively expunged by a twin fantasy, a simultaneous assertion of his Polish past and French future, and it is this topo-typological pincer movement that sustains the dynamic, agonal heterogeneity which is truly Nietzsche's 'life-blood'. His youthful mazurkas may have been conventional and derivative, but the Romantic *Grande fantasia* of his maturity is thoroughly worthy of (the) late Chopin. Nietzsche's 'key signature' is a tonic *tension* established from the beginning, and his work develops as the Polish and German themes vie with each other to emerge as dominant. When the former finally wins out, in late 1888, this is but an imperfect close, which modulates to the *interrupted* cadence of January 1889.

NOTES

All references to Nietzsche's published works are by paragraph number or title. For the *Nachlaß*, reference is made to *Friedrich Nietzsche: Frühe Schriften*, 5 vols, ed. Hans Joachim Mette, Karl Schlechta and Carl Koch (Munich, Beck, 1994-) (= FS) and to *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, 2nd edn, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich, dtv; Berlin and New York, de Gruyter, 1988) (= KSA).

For the correspondence, reference is made, where possible, to *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Christopher Middleton (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1969) (= Middleton), and otherwise to *Friedrich Nietzsche: Briefe. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 16 vols, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin and New York, de Gruyter, 1975-84) (= KGB).

Further abbreviations are used as follows: BGE - *Beyond Good and Evil*; EH - *Ecce Homo*; GM - *On the Genealogy of Morals*; GS - *The Gay Science*; TI - *Twilight of the Idols*; UM - *Untimely Meditations*; WP - *The Will to Power*; WS - *The Wanderer and His Shadow*.

Passages from Nietzsche's published works and *The Will to Power* are quoted in the English translations by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (modified where necessary), except in the case of *Twilight of the Idols*, where translations are from my forthcoming edition for Oxford University Press ('World's Classics').

Unless indicated, all other translations are my own.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, 2 vols, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1991), I, xxxix.

² *Ibid.*, II, 3f.

³ Jacques Derrida, 'Interpreting Signatures (Nietzsche/Heidegger): Two Questions', trans. Diane Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, in *Looking after Nietzsche*, ed. Laurence A. Rickels (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 1-17 (here, p. 12).

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, 2nd edn, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992), p. 106f.

⁵ Cf. Sarah Kofman, 'A Fantastical Genealogy: Nietzsche's Family Romance', trans. Deborah Jenson, in *Nietzsche and the Feminine*,

ed. Peter J. Burgard (Charlottesville and London, University of Virginia Press, 1994), pp.35-52.

⁶ Cf. also the 'Two Polish Dances' (one of which is actually a Hungarian csárdás) recorded by John Bell Young on John Bell Young and Constance Keene, *Piano Music of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Newport Classic compact disc NPD 85513, 1992).

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (London, Dent, 1934), 'Preface to the First Edition', p.6.

⁸ Ibid., 'Preface to the Second Edition', p.12.

⁹ Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (London, Athlone Press, 1983), p.1.

¹⁰ Cf. op.cit., p.14n.2: 'In this Preface I treat the new metaphysical method as a hypothesis with the view of rendering apparent the first attempts at such a change of method, which are always hypothetical. But in the *Critique* itself it will be demonstrated, not hypothetically, but apodeictically, from the nature of our representations of space and time, and from the elementary conceptions of the understanding.'

¹¹ Walter Kaufmann (*Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3rd edn (New York, Random House, 1968), p.288) and Friedrich Kaulbach ('Nietzsches Version der Copernicanischen Wendung', in *Nietzsches Idee einer Experimentalphilosophie* (Vienna, Böhlau, 1980), pp.139-44) both address Nietzsche's identification with Copernicus but construe it as a Kantian move, whereas my intention here is to sketch out an alternative interpretation.

¹² Johann Wolfgang Goethe: *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*, 24 vols, ed. Ernst Beutler (Zurich, Artemis, 1949), 16, 395.

¹³ Ibid., 23, 844 (cf. 9, 643; 17, 702f.). Nietzsche owned a copy of C.A.H. Burckhardt's 1870 edition of Goethe's *Unterhaltungen mit dem Kanzler Friedrich von Müller* (cf. *Nietzsches Bibliothek*, ed. Max Oehler (Weimar, Gesellschaft der Freunde des Nietzsche-Archivs, 1942), p.36) and could hardly fail to have been impressed by this remark.

¹⁴ Cf. the desolate, anti-humanistic 'fable' with which Nietzsche begins the early essay *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* (1873): 'how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary

the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened' (*Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the early 1870's*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Humanities Press International [sic!]; Hassocks, Harvester Press, 1979), p.79). Although this essay remained unpublished, the flavour of its opening is captured at various points in Nietzsche's published work thereafter, such as WS 14 and GS 109.

15. Cf. Nietzsche's letter to Heinrich Koselitz (Peter Gast) from late August 1883 (Middleton, p.217; KGB III/1, 442) and Anni Anders, 'Nietzsches Verhältnis zu den Naturwissenschaften in den Jahren 1872 bis 1875', in Karl Schlechta and Anni Anders, *Friedrich Nietzsche. Von den verborgenen Anfängen seines Philosophierens* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann, 1962), pp.127-40.

16. Cf. Elizabeth Hill, 'Roger Boscovich: A Biographical Essay', in *Roger Joseph Boscovich S. J. F.R.S., 1711-1787: Studies on his Life and Work on the 250th Anniversary of his Birth*, ed. Lancelot Law Whyte (London, Allen & Unwin, 1961), pp.17-101.

17. *Essai politique sur la Pologne* (Warsaw, 1764) and *Journal d'un voyage de Constantinople en Pologne* (Lausanne, 1772).

18. Cf. letter to Köselitz, 31 May 1888: 'My problems seem to have interested these northerners very much; individually they were better prepared, for instance, for my theory of "master morality" as a result of the widespread precise knowledge of the Icelandic sagas, which provide extremely rich material for it' (Middleton, p.297; KGB III/5, 324).

19. Cf. letter to Köselitz, 12 September 1888 (KGB III/5, 417): 'between ourselves, it strikes me that it is only this year that I have learnt to write German - I mean *French*'.

20. Cf. Kofman, 'Explosion I: Of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', trans. Duncan Large, *diacritics*, 24/4 (winter 1994), 51-70 (55f.).

21. Cf. Hill, p.18: 'There was a tradition in the family that the Boscovichs were descended from the Pokrajic Illyrian noble family, one of whom called himself Boskovic after a Bosko from Orahovo [birthplace of Rudjer Josip's paternal grandfather]. When Boscovich was a distinguished scholar moving in high society he supported his nobility

by sealing his letters with the seal of this family's crest, but there is no evidence to warrant this.'

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, Random House, 1967), p.225n.

23. Cf. R.J. Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and His Philosophy* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), p.5œ

24. Cf. 'Nicolaus Copernicus', in *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg Schriften und Briefe*, 4 vols, ed. Wolfgang Promies (Munich, Hanser, 1972), III, 138-88, especially 143œ Surprisingly, Anni Anders perpetuates the debate with her passing remark that 'Boscovich was no more a Pole than was Copernicus' (op.cit., p.137). The definitive riposte is offered by Alexandre Koyre (*The Astronomical Revolution: Copernicus-Kepler-Borelli*, trans. R.E.W. Maddison (Paris, Hermann; London, Methuen; Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1973), p.19f.).

25. Cf. letter to Köselitz, 7 April 1888 (Middleton, p.291; KGB III/5, 286).

26. Jan Matejko (1838-93), Poland's leading nineteenth-century artist, noted for his monumental historical pictures. Ronald Hayman fills in the background here: 'Resa von Schirrhofer [...] was in Nice from 3 to 13 April 1884, and he was delighted when she told him that the shape of his head and the growth of his moustache reminded her of a historical painting by Jan Matjekos [sic] she had seen in Vienna' (*Nietzsche: A Critical Life* (London, Quartet, 1980), p.273f.).

27. Cf. his speculative etymology at GM, I, 5 - 'I believe I may venture to interpret the Latin bonus as "the warrior", [...] as the man of strife, of dissension (duo), as the man of war' - and EH, I, 7: 'I am by nature warlike. To attack is among my instincts.'

28. Op.cit., p.106.

29. Cf. Kofman, 'Une "erreur" de jeunesse', in *Le mépris des Juifs: Nietzsche, les Juifs, l'antisémitisme* (Paris, Galilée, 1994), pp.76-84.

30. Cf. letter to Meta von Salis, 29 December 1888: 'I seriously regard the Germans as people of an *utterly vulgar* sort, and thank heaven that in all my instincts I am Polish and nothing else' (Middleton, p.343; KGB III/5, 561).

- ³¹. Cf. Kofman, 'Le modèle astronomique', in *Aberrations: Le devenir-femme d'Auguste Comte* (Paris, Aubier Flammarion, 1978), pp.93-101.
- ³². Cf. WS 160; KSA 9, 38f.
- ³³. Cf. KSA 8, 510 (spring-summer 1878); WS 159; letter to Franz Overbeck, 7 April 1884 (Middleton, p.221; KGB III/1, 494).
- ³⁴. Cf. Kaufmann, op.cit., pp.284-306 ('The Master Race') and Kofman, 'La question de la race', in *Le mépris des Juifs*, pp.66-75.
- ³⁵. Kofman remarks here: 'Nietzsche wants to consider himself Polish *only* because "the Poles are called the French among the Slavs"' (my emphasis), but this is surely an overstatement, for what is new in this typological configuration is not the Polish element but the French. Cf. *Explosion II: Les enfants de Nietzsche* (Paris, Galilée, 1993), p.34.