

## Nietzsche's Jesus.

By Robert Hull

Nietzsche does seem at times in *The Antichrist* to be writing one more life of Jesus to add to the pile he is simultaneously rejecting in principle. If Jesus is properly a blank page in semiotic history then why does Nietzsche provide us with his vivid sketch of a blissful naïf?...But this would be a truncated reading of Nietzsche's argument. It is the semiotic rather than the biographical thematic which takes priority in *The Antichrist*.<sup>1</sup>

Gary Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives*

In this essay I argue that in *The Antichrist* Nietzsche provides a narrative portrait of Jesus that personifies what he calls the “psychological character of the redeemer.”<sup>2</sup> (A #29; 6 205) This portrait yields a Jesus whose actions and teachings are those of a “*frohe Botshafter*” (A #29; 6 206), or a ‘bringer of joyful tidings.’ Nietzsche uses this representation of Jesus to criticize as unevangelic traditions that attribute to Jesus belief in sin, guilt, punishment, a Last Judgment, eternal life in heaven (or hell), and other Christian themes and values. This critique of Christianity is not intended to depend on whether he could know with certainty that his portrayals of Jesus and his disciples are historically accurate, although he does use, *inter alia*, what he thought to be plausible conjecture regarding human motivation to present them. Rather, Nietzsche intended his account of Jesus an internal critique of Christianity: it reveals that the Gospels contain two highly antithetical representations of Jesus, that a chasm yawns between essential Christian theological traditions and the evangelic portrait of Jesus Nietzsche attempts to bring into relief. Convinced that scholarship cannot produce a representation of Jesus' life that we can know to be historically accurate, Nietzsche reads the Gospels as if they were a messy novel, written by multiple authors, whose central character is drawn sometimes convincingly as, and sometimes as the antithesis of, an *euangelion*.<sup>3</sup>

In making this argument I will also critique a position on *The Antichrist* that is at odds with this interpretation. The reading that I critique is what I will refer to as a hermeneuticist interpretation of *The Antichrist*, an increasingly fashionable approach to this and other signal problems in Nietzsche scholarship. A hermeneuticist reading of Nietzsche makes a constellation of issues in textual interpretation philosophically primitive in Nietzsche's thought. I refer to this interpretive strategy as *hermeneuticist* because the issues it foregrounds pertain to reading, writing, and interpreting texts, the politics of textual production, appropriation, and defacement,

and a number of problems in semiotics. Of course, earlier Nietzsche scholars, going back to Walter Kauffman, have recognized that these problems were of interest to Nietzsche. What makes this approach to Nietzsche innovative is that in it such concerns are viewed as constitutive of the very issues Nietzsche is addressing and of the philosophical and rhetorical strategies Nietzsche deploys in addressing them. As a consequence of this, what were once widely regarded as crucial, substantive components of Nietzsche's attempt at criticizing religious or moral traditions are revealed to be occasions for making claims about issues in hermeneutics.

In a prominent example of this trend, Gary Shapiro in *Nietzschean Narratives* has argued that in *The Antichrist* Nietzsche is actually offering a performative, asymptotic demonstration of the limits of historical narration, and that *this* demonstration is to be seen as that work's substantive means to a transvaluation of values. Once we recognize the semiotic objectives of Nietzsche's discussions of Jesus, nineteenth century biblical scholarship, and Judaism and early Christianity, we see that the biographical content of the portrait of Jesus that Nietzsche offers in *The Antichrist* is actually intended to suggest obliquely the limits of historical narration. The precise story of Jesus that account suggests, and the values Nietzsche ascribes to it, are consequently not to be regarded in themselves as improvements on other accounts. For Shapiro, Nietzsche's Jesus is a "floating signifier" whose life story invites multiple iterations, and recognizing this is a hermeneutical prolegomena to a transvaluation of values.<sup>4</sup> However, as I will argue, this approach to understanding Nietzsche overemphasizes hermeneutical issues while failing to assign sufficient weight to the biographical content of Nietzsche's alternative story of Jesus.

Taking his cue from remarks made by Nietzsche that his ideal readers have a "predestination for the labyrinth" and "new ears for new music," (A Preface; 6 168) in *Nietzschean Narratives* Gary Shapiro claims that *The Antichrist* is

concerned with those very questions of how it is to be read  
and how it exists as a piece of writing which we are supposed  
to think of as derivative and external interests of the critic and historian.<sup>5</sup>

Part of Shapiro's project is to contest emotivist readings of Nietzsche's *Antichrist*, readings that can't get past the shrieking, vituperative tone of the work and that contend that nothing new can be found in it. Rather than a rehashing of well-worn ideas punctuated by intemperate howls, Shapiro sees a book intensely focused on a variety of philological issues concerned with "the way in which the Bible was successively produced, edited, re-edited, interpreted and criticized."<sup>6</sup> According to Shapiro, in *The Antichrist* Nietzsche accepts many of the results of nineteenth

century biblical scholarship regarding the history of Judaism, from the epoch of warriors, prophets, and kings of pre-exilic Israel through the emergence of Judaism as a religion of law and ritual. However, Nietzsche's account breaks sharply with tradition when it approaches the figure of Jesus. While Nietzsche's contemporaries and earlier scholars assumed that Jesus' life must be depicted in a narrative account, "Nietzsche proposes an ahistorical and non-narrative psychology of the redeemer, according to which Jesus was, in our everyday language, blissed out."<sup>7</sup> According to Shapiro, this Jesus is ahistorical because his life is without any episodic development, whether secular or religious. Nietzsche's Jesus is symbolist whose various actions, proverbs, and parables are meant to point to an insight whose significance can only be realized in immediate experience. When Jesus says that we must 'become as children,' this is meant to suggest that the kingdom of God is at hand, here and now, in a life immersed in love, a life lived without opposition, struggle, or enmity. But it is not the moral message of the 'glad tidings,' but the nature of the symbolism that Jesus uses to communicate that message, that is at the center of Nietzsche's reflections on Jesus.

The point of Nietzsche's portrait of Jesus is semiotic because this Jesus is a symbolist whose words and actions are signs for what cannot be expressed using ordinary discourse. For Nietzsche, such a symbolist

Stands outside of all religion, all conceptions of divine worship,  
all history, all natural science, all experience of the world,  
all acquirements, all politics, all psychology, all books, all art –  
his 'knowledge' is precisely the pure folly that anything of this kind  
exists. (A # 32; 6 205)

According to Shapiro, in traditional Christian semiotics, one assumes that the history of Christianity is a series of signs and interpretations that reaches back through the tradition to Paul and ultimately to Jesus. Nietzsche's non-narrative depiction of Jesus as a symbolist challenges this tradition by providing an alternative semiotic history wherein the sign chain leads back to an absence, rather than a fullness, of meaning. Thus Nietzsche

accepts a historical Jesus who is historically relevant only  
because his actual presence was that of a radically ambiguous sign  
capable of indefinite interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

Shapiro argues that Nietzsche's Jesus is more akin to Robert Rauschenberg's erased de Kooning painting than David Strauss' *Life of Jesus*. One can convey the impossibility of a successful

narrative, and do so without contradiction, only indirectly. Just as in the Rauschenberg painting, Shapiro reasons, where erasure is the technique the painter uses to suggest the limits of visual expression, Nietzsche's depiction of Jesus is intended to suggest indirectly our inability to find the real Jesus underneath all the interpretations of his life. Nietzsche accomplishes this by providing a portrait of Jesus as a figure for whom only inner realities exist and whose constant use of symbolism is meant to suggest the resistance of his life to ordinary, non-symbolic narration. Consequently, the central objectives of *The Antichrist* are achieved through what Shapiro calls a semiotics of suspicion.

While Renan's Jesus is a central concern of *The Antichrist*, that concern is not in fact focused on to what extent Renan was attempting an historically accurate account. Neither is it concerned with the relation(s) between Renan's narrative and other placeholders in the 'sign chain' of Christian semiotics. It is intensely concerned with the character of various moral and psychological profiles of Jesus, including Renan's. Renan's *Life of Jesus*, we recall, concedes the historicity, but not the divinity, of Jesus, and its narration freely makes use of imaginative details that would not bear historical scrutiny.<sup>9</sup> It attempts a poetic recreation of that life, structured as a play and embellished with lyrical details that aim at profound reverential adoration but tend to manage only preciousness. As Albert Schweitzer put it, "The gentle Jesus, the beautiful Mary, the fair Galileans who formed the retinue of the 'amiable carpenter,' might have been taken over in a body from the shop-window of an ecclesiastical art emporium in the Place St. Sulpice."<sup>10</sup> Even the mule Jesus rides on has long eyelashes and big, brown eyes. But it is the moral and psychological content of Renan's portrait of Jesus, and not its muddled historiography or affected aesthetics, that Nietzsche excoriates:

Monsieur Renan, that buffoon in *psychologicis*, has appropriated for his explication of the type Jesus the two most *inapplicable* concepts possible in this case: the concept of the *genius* and the concept of the *hero*. But if anything is unevangelic it is the concept hero. (A 29; 6 198)

Nietzsche's approach to the New Testament is to assume that Jesus was not divine, that he performed no miracles, and that we cannot know *with certainty* which actions and sayings can be attributed to him. On Shapiro's account in *The Antichrist*, this realization is the beginning of a meditation on hermeneutical issues that culminates with Jesus who, as a 'floating signifier,' represents the limits of Christian semiotics. But were this reading correct, Nietzsche would have blasted Renan's obvious shortcomings as an historian, he would not have provided the episodic

narrative account of Jesus that we find in *The Antichrist*, and he wouldn't have created or used that account as he did.

Nietzsche used a conception of *euangelion*, the 'bringer of joyful news,' certain views regarding human psychology, what we know about Jesus' historical epoch, plus a rule of biographical coherence, to create a narrative illustration of "the psychological character of the redeemer." Such a type

*could* be contained in the Gospels in spite of the Gospels, however much mutilated and overloaded with foreign traits: as that of Francis of Assisi is contained in the legends about him in spite of the legends. *Not* the truth about what he did, what he said, how he really died: but the question whether this type is still conceivable at all, whether it has been handed down by tradition. (A #29; 6 205)

In *The Antichrist* Nietzsche does not discuss the nature of symbolism as a form of expression, the semiotic issues that might arise from this, and how this might be relevant to his portrait of Jesus and to the Christian tradition. It is true that Nietzsche admits that one can't in principle rule out that the historical Jesus had characteristics ascribed to him by Paul and others.<sup>11</sup> He calls the "*Geschichtchen von Heiligen*" the "*zweideutigste*" – the most ambiguous—literature in existence. (A #28; 6 205) But his reasons for this reflect concerns native to traditional historiography: for example, the absence of reliable corroborating sources, and secular assumptions about human desires, wishes, and motivation. His real concern is the moral and psychological meaning of 'redeemer,' 'savior,' 'evangel,' and other allied terms, and what the implications of this may be for reading the Gospels. Most importantly, he will use his life of Jesus to suggest the *dysangelic* character of some of the most influential accounts of Jesus found in the Gospels.

Nietzsche finds in the Gospels two utterly contradictory narratives of Jesus' life and death. One of them describes a person who lived, and died, beyond judgment, sin, guilt, hatred, a life of "blessedness in peace, in gentleness, in the inability for enmity." (A 29; 6 205) *This* is the redemptive Jesus for whom the kingdom of God exists here and now and in a life lived in love. This Jesus personifies the moral and psychological traits that suggest to Nietzsche an *euangelion*, and in his account Nietzsche brings into relief those actions and words in the Gospels that are of a piece with such a 'bringer of joyful tidings.' Above all, Nietzsche's Jesus endures his trial and crucifixion in fealty to his teaching, and thus bequeaths to us the image of an authentic Christian practice:

The 'bringer of glad tidings' died as he *taught* ---not to redeem mankind but to demonstrate how one ought to live. What he bequeathed to

mankind is his *practice*: his bearing before the judges, before the guards, before the accusers and every kind of calumny and mockery—his bearing on the *Cross*. (A #37; 6 210)

Nietzsche considers it an irony of *world-historical* proportions that Christianity has subsequently embraced a Jesus whose teachings and actions are diametrically opposed to this portrait of the Evangel. It is as if, in a world culturally dominated by the stories of the *Iliad*, lessons belonging to Leo Buscalia had been attributed to Achilles: we might not know who Achilles really was, but we would recognize the attribution as unheroic. In the case of Jesus the antithetical notions include guilt, sin, hell, eternal life in a Kingdom of Heaven beyond death, the Last Judgment, and any form of doctrinal theology whatsoever. If one keeps in mind the portrait of Jesus outlined above, we can understand Nietzsche's caustic sarcasm regarding New Testament verses that have become prominent features of Christian faith:

‘And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.’ (Mark ix, 42) – How evangelic!....

‘Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall Not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with Power.’ (Mark ix, 1) – Well *lied*, lion.... (A 45; 6 215)

Only the lie of personal immortality could attract and retain the faithful, and Nietzsche speculates about how this representation of Jesus' message began to take hold. To make sense of Jesus' death the disciples interpreted the crucifixion as an event that was a meaningful and reasonable necessity. To this end they convinced themselves it was fated, and they insisted, with the fanaticism Nietzsche considered the natural soil of disciples, that Jesus was the Messiah. With that, all the cultural components necessary for a second, very different Jesus were in place--- judgment, retribution, punishment, the sacrificial innocent, otherworldly rewards. Subsequently, early Christian writers toil as the propagandists of the new religion, with rewards of a decidedly earthly character on the line.

Recent scholarship has attempted to reconstrue Nietzsche's Jesus as a reverential account, but this is a mistake.<sup>12</sup> An aversion to all enmity, to all resistance, and an allied immersion in a

religion of blessedness and love seem to Nietzsche irredeemably hedonistic, and reflective of a world-weary hypersensitivity to suffering. Having split the Gospels into a schizophrenic contradiction, Nietzsche uses diagnostic strategies familiar from his earlier work to label Jesus a decadent. Clearly, an interpretation of *The Antichrist* like Shapiro's would need to marshal considerable independent argument to reconcile the 'blank slate' or 'floating signifier' reading of Jesus with this psychological profile. Furthermore, underplaying the significance of the biographical thematic in Nietzsche's alternative Jesus vitiates the point Nietzsche attempts to make about the moral incoherence in the Gospels' Jesus: that fundamental traditions in Christianity could themselves be criticized as *unevangelic*, and so criticized on the basis of an account of Jesus created from essential components of the Gospels.

"*Sehen wir uns ins Gesicht,*" Nietzsche says at the very beginning of *The Antichrist*. "*Wir sind Hyperborean.*" –"Let us look one another in the face. We are Hyperboreans." (A # 1; 6 169). In the final analysis, setting aside whether they can be part of a coherently drawn Jesus, why are moral judgment, punishment and reward, sin, justice, and the Kingdom of Heaven *unevangelic*, the bad tidings of a dysangel? Nietzsche believed that the world plunges along without any moral or divine purpose, without any unifying *telos*. Judgments about the world inevitably find it wanting, and for Nietzsche are always propped up by theories that would "substitute the mere shadow of a man for a man of flesh and blood,"<sup>13</sup> and doctrinal Christianity is merely an egregious example of this. Such a world would seem to have found an ally in one who would preach the loving acceptance of everything, without addition or subtraction. But Nietzschean affirmation always got its intensity from the gaze into the abyss, from its perpetual meditation on the dead ends of the Western philosophical tradition. Only a 'Hyperborean' will have the new ears needed for Nietzsche's music, and thus is Jesus excluded from Nietzsche's choir.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989) p. 136. The most influential biblical scholarship in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century combines secular philological and historical interpretive strategies with liberal, humanist values. In their writings about Jesus, such thinkers as David Strauss and Ernest Renan, and later Albert Schweitzer, were attempting a kind of moral-philological retrieval. Writing in an academic milieu wherein belief in the supernatural was considered indicative of superstition and naïve credulity, Renan and Strauss ultimately produce what amount to fanciful recreations of Jesus' life guided by liberal moral principles. The scriptures would be salvaged but their religious significance would be completely altered. According to Strauss et. al., the disciples and later chroniclers gave Jesus' life, teachings, and works interpretations that reflected the religious and political realities of the day. In the view of the new secularist historians, whatever early documents we might have regarding Jesus are inherently polemical. Furthermore, differences among the early accounts of Jesus regarding fact plus scant corroborating archaeological evidence convinced these biblical

scholars that Gospels could not be read as accounts that document accurately the true facts of Jesus' life and teachings. By the standards of historical evidence embraced by 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars a factually veracious account of Jesus was no longer available. In *The Antichrist* Nietzsche accepts the secular philological strategies used by earlier thinkers, but he is sharply critical of the values that they use to construct a moral narrative of Jesus. Until fairly recently, *The Antichrist* has been written of as derivative and overly emotional, most notably by Walter Kaufmann and Arthur Danto. But recent scholarship, including Shapiro's *Nietzschean Narratives* and Tim Murphy's *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* (State University of New York Press, 2001), has resisted this view.<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*. Trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1989). References to *The Antichrist* are given as follows: (A #1; 3 p. 250). The first citation refers to the section quoted from Hollingdale's translation of *The Antichrist*, while the second refers to the volume and page number of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Samtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, hrsg: Colli and Montinari (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 1980). I indicate in the text where I diverge from Hollingdale's translation. In the quotation preceding the second endnote I translate "character" for *Typus*.

<sup>3</sup> This is the Greek term from which "Evangel" and other words are derived. It combines the prefix *eu* with *angelion* which connotes "message" or messenger."

<sup>4</sup> This is in general terms what Shapiro does in "The Text as Graffito: Historical Semiotics" in *Nietzschean Narratives*, pp. 124-141. Timothy Murphy's *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* (State University of New York Press, 2001) is a book-length example of this approach to *The Antichrist*. A detailed survey of this approach is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Shapiro, *Nietzschean Narratives*, p.126.

<sup>6</sup> Shapiro, p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> Shapiro, p.131.

<sup>8</sup> Shapiro, p. 131.

<sup>9</sup> Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) has influenced this section of my paper. According to Schweitzer, Renan's narration of Jesus' life produces a portrait of Jesus that is "precious" or what we might today call "Disneyesque." Regarding Renan's awkward blending of scientific history, Christian faith, and dramatized psychobiography, Schweitzer approvingly quotes Ernst Luthardt: "It lacks conscience.....There is a kind of insincerity in the book from beginning to end." Schweitzer, p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> Schweitzer, p. 182.

<sup>11</sup> He makes this point at (A #36; 6 240)



<sup>12</sup> See for example Thomas Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), p.154, and John Evans, "Nietzsche on Christ vs. Christianity," *Soundings* vol. 78 1995, p. 573.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) p. 67. Camus' excellent short general essay in *The Rebel*, "Absolute Affirmation" has influenced my essay. According to Camus, Nietzsche wrote as a philosophical diagnostician who believed that the Western philosophical tradition must confront nihilism, the crisis that the tradition's most influential values had lost their relevance and meaning. Camus believed that Nietzsche sought an affirmation of life in his intense interrogation of Western values, and that this affirmation ended in a deification of the world that could be used to justify injustice. Camus' discussion of Nietzsche's Jesus differs from mine in that it fails to account for Nietzsche's view that a religion of blessedness and an aversion to all enmity suggests decadence. Camus claimed that Nietzsche's critique of Christianity left Jesus alone (Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 67), but this is not so. I address Nietzsche's discussion of Western values and nihilism in "Epistemology and the Autodevaluation of Morality: Toward an Atheoretical Nietzsche," *Southwestern Philosophy Review*, January 1992, pp. 119-125, and in "Skepticism, Enigma and Integrity: Horizons of Affirmation in Nietzsche's Philosophy," *Man and World*, Fall-Winter 1990, pp. 375-391.