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THE HISTORY OF THE DEAD GOD – THE GENESIS OF ‘THE DEATH OF GOD’ IN PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE BEFORE NIETZSCHE

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Abstract: Few of the statements penned by philosophers have become as infamous as the “God is Dead!” of Friedrich Nietzsche. This study is not concerned with the reasons why this phrase is so popular. Instead, I would like to delve into the prehistory and partial genesis of the concept, something Nietzsche adopted from a previous tradition. Apart from known examples of theses on the death of God by Hegel, Schelling or Jean Paul, I will shed light on some of the confusion surrounding the phrase *deus est mortuus* in Mediaeval Christian liturgical literature and mysticism, with roots reaching back to Neoplatonism. The goal of this study is to point out that this phrase about the death of God had no significant constitutive meaning for Nietzsche but was, instead, a relatively common literary and rhetorical *topos* among other culturally diagnostic expressive elements. Nietzsche used it as an illustrative shortcut when describing the intercultural processes of his time, with no ambition to originality, instead, with the clear intention of shaking up the (non)thought of the comfortable bureaucrats and legalistic petit bourgeois of Germany in the late 19th century.

Keywords: God is Dead; *deus est mortuus*; *Gesta Romanorum*; Pascal; Jean Paul; Hegel; Nietzsche; cultural diagnostic

*Es haben aber an eigener
Unsterblichkeit die Götter genug
Hölderlin*

God is Dead: Zarathustra and The Gay Sciences

Mortality is the prerogative of the gods. Cultures that accepted this idea were no less concerned with the problem of death than that of life, respecting both as sacred. European modernity, based on rationalisation, scientification and industrialisation, has rejected the creation of new gods for over two centuries now. It watches over their death, associating it with new myths, enchanted by these no less than other, older and non-demythologised civilisations. Nietzsche, just as Marx before him, contemplated the end of myth in the machine age: the engine and the nature it commands were not, so they thought, the most fertile soil for new myths. Both of them were wrong and did not live to discover the fact: the transformation of the

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environment of modern humans and their creative efforts into a Heideggerian *Gestell* (Heidegger 1953) was just as successful in suppressing the dormant cultural and social mythogenesis as the earlier centuries of religious strife were in exiling the gods (Heine 1853). Myths are part of the lives of modern people in just the same way they were in older or even ancient times. This is not due to the tenacity of myths, but rather people's inability to live without them, whether or not they are capable of acknowledging myths as an anthropological force with individual impact, or consider themselves outside of mythical influence. Theogonies have an important place in even the oldest known aetiological myths of theistic cultures (such as ancient Egypt), and their claims about the birth, death and rebirth of the gods commonly provide an important legitimacy to a number of human societies. The lifecycles of the gods affirm the power with which they overcome death, guaranteeing the survival of society. They provide "refuge" from the inescapable nature of events in our world or the cosmos, from the absolute which appears before us when lonely, to the shortness of our lives as limited individuals, they become our haven, redemption, salvation, cave, shield: there are many cognitive metaphors for the self-imposition of myths (Blumenberg 1960; 1979).

The development of European and especially Latin Western cultures was influenced by the religious conflict of the Mediterranean world of (late) antiquity, which professed the myth of a dying and resurrecting god, who brought in the new age and a state of timeless bliss. During the Hellenistic Period, these so-called Saoshyant-religions dominated the cultural mentality of the Mediterranean and Near East. These were religions with characters of saviours, redeemers, sōtērs, saviours, messiahs, kings (κύριος – Christ), meaning Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Zorvanism, Christianity, the Chaldean cults, Mithraism and a number of other syncretic formations. Saoshyants entered into history, died and after being reborn they came to assume rule over the renewed world order: the undefeated Sun, *sol invictus*, equated with Mitra, was only one of many politically motivated attempts to institute a state Saoshyant cult in the Roman Empire.

After Christianity emerged victorious from its vicious conflict with the other religions and after a genocide of the adherents of old or divergent beliefs, cults and religions, an unprecedented event in the religious history of Europe, monotheism reigned supreme: the *credo in unum Deum, patrem omnipotentem* (Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεόν, Πατέρα, Παντοκράτορα) applied to everyone without exception from the time of the Council of Chalcedon in 451.² For the emerging orthodoxy, any debate on the death of God was inconceivable: God sent his Son who died, *descendit ad inferos: tertia die resurrexit a mortuis; ascendit ad caelos; sedet ad dexteram Dei Patris omnipotentis: inde venturus est iudicare vivos et mortuos*. The Church was always quick to defend its interests with resolute measures, whose consequences were often a death knell for those involved. Nevertheless, it is very hard to believe that before paragraphs 108 and 125 of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche 1882) were published, no wisecracker, theologian, philosopher or even poet ever felt the temptation to consider the results of the opposite metaphor – a god who dies and whose further destiny is decided by *Dichtung* (poetry) itself.

² This is the first sentence from *Nicaeno-Konstantinopolitanum*, which is word-for-word the same as the later creed, named *Apostolicum*.

Our suspicion is well justified: Nietzsche is in no way a unique or even the original proclaimer of the death of God in German and European philosophy. The axiom of the death of God is much older, it was used by the German Romantics, and before them the Pre-Romantic writers and poets, such as the brilliant Jean Paul. For them, the notion of a dead God was just as much part of the heritage of European civilisation and served as an identifying and diagnostic element typical for a certain state of culture. Though they may not have stated it *expressis verbis*, at least they accepted the results of the diagnosis. Their dissatisfaction led to attempts to revitalise the traditional Christian religion (emblematic for Chateaubriand in France or Novalis in Germany), as well as efforts to formulate a new religion that could avoid the dangers associated with the rigidity of Christian conservatism (this, for instance, led to the growth of the so-called “new mythology” as a religion of philosophers and poets for Herder, Fr. Schlegel and Schelling; this also led them to discover the concepts of the liberating Dionysian mystery ecstaticism, pushing out the cold, calculating and overly rational Apollonian element).

Talk of the death of God is therefore based on a certain tradition, has a culturally diagnostic context which Nietzsche did not reject, and even consciously emphasized. He doesn't talk of the death of God in order to create a modern sensation, in order to damage or destroy Christianity, in order to “desecrate” the Church or to hurt believers: if anyone was guilty of betraying themselves and their believers it was the clergy themselves, the Christian Churches itself, whose behaviour during their “salvation history” exposed their purported intentions as definitely un-Christian in the original sense (not Jesus-like). The history of the Christian Churches required no German philosopher to repeat the obvious facts: a little self-reflection would go a lot further – if they were brave enough to try. Nietzsche's words also contain no delight or joyful glee over what the Churches had become; he wants to recognise and understand why things have gotten so bad, he doesn't want to gloat, noting to himself that mockery, cynicism and acrimony were now pointless³, due to the spread of exhaustion, fatigue over even the most important symbols, things which had been tried and tried again without benefit apart from the realisation that they were worshipping a dying religion.⁴ As a consequence, he wanted to leave the critical historiography to Christianity itself⁵, instead trying something different and new⁶ (Nietzsche 1873). Nietzsche's deliberations come to no conclusion as to whether that “different” thing should be another religion or a new attempt at Christianity, or in contrast: science, philosophy, poetry, a synthesis of all knowledge in some new formation.

Though probably false, one interpretation sees a place for an “Übermensch”, for a perfect human (*der tolle Mensch*), who is equal to the gods and can therefore become a protagonist of historical substitution: gods die among other things in order to make way for humanity. This rather cosmic reading has one theoretical advantage: it would cleanly dismiss the idea that all this talk of the death of gods is self-serving. In all other aspects, however, this view shows the feeble-mindedness of the existentialist and psychoanalytical expulsion of gods from the contexts of human life, by sublimating the image of paternal oppression through emancipation and taking god's place by becoming a god oneself. Such conclusions cannot be reached even from a naive Enlightenment, let alone from Nietzsche's mature rationalism, in which human beings cannot be analogies, mere imitations or creators of imitations. Once more, I would point

³ “Selbst der Spott, der Cynismus, die Feindschaft ist abgespielt.”

⁴ “*Ich* ehre durch sie die Religion, ob es schon *eine* sterbende ist.”

⁵ “Das Christenthum ist ganz der kritischen Historie preiszugeben.”

⁶ “...es ist Zeit zur Nachahmung oder zu etwas Anderem.”

to a sentence from the cited fragment: everything has already been tried. Nietzsche had an excellent knowledge of antiquity, Hellenism, classical languages and the history of ancient cultures, and so it is possible or even likely that he was well aware of the ancient attempts to “correct” religion, not only by deifying humanity⁷ (the king in Egypt, Caesar and the Roman emperors after him, etc.), but also by directly creating a system of equality between gods and humans; this system is referred to as isotheism, i.e. the belief that humans have already reached the level, power and prestige of the gods or will one day achieve that level, and cannot, therefore, believe in organised religion or the Church, but exclusively in the notion of a god, who they will one day “equal”. The first appearances of isotheism have been documented from as early as the time of Alexander the Great: why would Nietzsche be content to merely repeat these, especially as such a pompous charade?

Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity is not meant to provoke; that was what the defenders of Church religion wanted it to be, and by pointing out the provocation, i.e. labelling it self-serving, intentional and therefore arbitrary, they sought to silence Nietzsche’s actual criticisms. Criticism is however not provocative in and of itself: it may be poignant and biting, or genuine and vague; detailed and analytical or surface-level and meaningless; it can contain elements of diagnosis and revitalisation, or be empty and self-serving. And when critique opens people’s eyes by changing their habitual, stereotypical viewpoint, and clearly formulates something previously only guessed at, in poetic imagination or as an unconscious and aimless protest, it is precious rather than provocative. This is true of critique as part of the theory of knowledge in general and there is no reason to omit Nietzsche’s socio-cultural critique, whose subject is explicitly, but not exclusively religious Christianity. Because he was able to justify the status of critique in his theory of knowledge, specifically knowledge of the European culture in the transitional phase between the old and new modernity, and sketched out a new philosophy of life, he cannot be simply dismissed as a provocateur, atheist, nihilist or sceptic. However, this classification itself cannot explain anything, because it can refer to a number of actual states of the knowing subject: above all this hides what must be once more uncovered in Nietzsche’s philosophy – that as a complex deliberation it comprises a profound constantly repeated questioning of the credibility of our cultural principles, those things we live and die by. Nietzsche is just one among many to question that credibility, but one of the few to ask directly, without weasel words and with admirable courage: he’d been told “have you heard?”, “do you know yet?”, “people are saying,” that God is dead; are these just rumours, gossip on the street, nothing certain, let’s laugh and brush off the tittle-tattle and hearsay, but only until someone squares us down eye to eye and we hear “you killed him!”. It’s not as if God just died and went away, had loftily faded into the heavens, we are the “murderers of all murderers” here, and our conscience is weighed down with the crime of murder. A dead god is not just a metaphor for all the things worth saving in European culture, worth developing, following up on and enriching, which has instead become (of our own will and murderous choice) a consumer good or commodity for us to hoard.

It’s not important to say god is no more: for Nietzsche he was never here, at least not in any sense worth discussing in the field of philosophy, knowledge and science. On this Nietzsche

⁷ A relatively common occurrence in the history of religion, referred to with the term apotheosis (Greek: ἀποθέωσις, from ἀποθεῶω/ἀποθεῶ, “to deify”; also called divinization and deification from Latin: deificatio, lit. “making divine”) is the glorification of a subject to the divine level and most commonly, the treatment of a human like a god.

was very clear: “*Gott*” ist eine viel zu extreme Hypothese⁸ (Nietzsche 1887, 212). Every theoretician of science knows it is better to avoid the more extreme hypotheses because finding standard hypotheses verifiable with the regular tools of science allows us to produce more standard results. Thanks to his exacting understanding of science, Nietzsche knew that “dying gods” would not affect its further development; what our pilgrim (*der Wanderer*) has to say and what he expects from the “perfect human”, represented by Zarathustra, is simple *parrhesia*, a risky and dangerous prediction, it is the speech of one who is so sure of themselves, that they cross over barefooted on a tightrope the valley of European civilisation, without any hidden stabilising absolutes. This is the language of that perilous sincerity which leads into desperate, agonised screams, the language known only by philosophers who have learnt to head out from the safe harbour of absolute positions backed by academic titles, while instead allowing self-reflection to transform their own thought, modify their own intellect through critical self-evaluation, reject any possible “position” and therefore every “perspectivism”. Nietzsche is not a perspectivist, because he is not a critic in the sense of the transcendental idealism of I. Kant, instead, more of a risqué poet: Nietzsche is a Parrhesiastes, he speaks the truth, not because he is in possession of the truth, which he makes public in a certain situation, but because he is taking a risk.

God is Dead: Deus est mortuus and un Dieu perdu in Pensées

Nietzsche was meddling and had clear reasons to do so. The approach he chose – a constant change of perspectives, meaning that reflections will only ever approach their goal, never reaching it and instead bring to knowledge once more the forgotten element of the infinite – can be traced back as far as early Jena Romanticism; its open flagrant disdain may have made Nietzsche more suspicious than anything unless he was actually aiming at late French or even Wagnerian Romanticism. This is because it is clear that the Early Romantic attempt at *symphilosophy* (perhaps unwittingly) provoked by Herder, but carried out by Fr. Schlegel and Novalis, spurred a number of inspirations that Nietzsche adopted from German thought of the turn of the 18th to 19th century. This is something fragment 374 of *The Gay Science* at first appears to mock, placing the term “infinite” in quotes, while in the text itself he confirms that the perspectivist character of being (existence) cannot be fully known, its character remains undetermined, nor can it be proven whether being without interpretation and therefore without “meaning” is or isn’t non-meaning, because human reason is also only active within perspectivist forms.⁹ The Romantic association of science and philosophy under the patronage of poetry corresponded to the idea of the continual association of changing perspectives that allow us to see *further*, not however to the infinite: the very infinite that Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, calls the Absolute, which wants to be with us (*das Bei-uns-Sein*). This once more shows Fr. Nietzsche’s propensity to meddle with the self-understanding of culture according to a viewpoint, something Hegel clearly also considered; however it was given its most precise form by Fr. Hölderlin in the couplet:

⁸ *God is too extreme a hypothesis*. Compare to the residual fragment *Der europäische Nihilismus*, 10 June 1887.

⁹ *Our new “infinite.”* - How far the perspective character of existence extends or indeed whether existence has any other character than this; whether existence without interpretation, without ‘sense’ does not become ‘nonsense’; whether, on the other hand, all existence is not essentially actively engaged in *interpretation* – that cannot be decided even by the most industrious and most scrupulously conscientious analysis and self-examination of the intellect; for in the course of this analysis the human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself *in* its own perspectives, and *only* in these. In Kaufmann W. (Ed.), Nietzsche, F., *The Gay Science with a prelude in rhymes and an appendix of songs*, New York, Vintage Books 1974.

*Nah ist
Und schwer zu fassen der Gott.*¹⁰

Some time in early 1871 Nietzsche noted, “Motto: The great god Pan is dead”; the further fragment No. 15 says “Great Pan is dead. Death of the gods. Tragic Man” (Nietzsche 1871). Nietzsche must have known that in theogony, Pan was not a god, but a daemon brought forth by nymphs, whose nature was not that of immortality, but of ephemerality and annihilation. The Arcadian Pan was the god of shepherds and fertility and took a theriomorphic form: goat legs, horns, a hybrid creature with the physiognomy of a satyr, susceptible to the yearly cycle of rebirth and dying (so-called ἐνιαυτός δαίμων). From this point of view, a local report of the death of Pan would be nothing special. Despite that, Nietzsche took inspiration from Plutarch, who, in his third Pythian treatise *Περὶ τῶν ἐκλελοιπότεων χρηστηρίων* (Lat. *De defectu oraculorum*) included the note that a certain Epitherses of Nicaea had told the story of his voyage to Italy, where close to the island of Paxos he heard a voice calling to the Egyptian pilot, Thamus, to convey the message of the death of the great Pan.¹¹ Some time later, Thamus does so and spreads these tidings to the world, something which the patristic Christian literature had already interpreted as the death knell of ancient polytheism and the baptism of the new, true religion. This somewhat *historical* exegesis was the interpretation of Eusebius of Caesarea, who saw it as the death of the old daemons making way for Christ. The event was to have taken place under the rule of Emperor Tiberius, in the times of Jesus’ life story, this opened up the door to an *allegorical* exegesis on the transition between human ages. Concerning Greek mythology, however, Plutarch (with his talk of the death of *all* [Gr. παν] daemons) left hope for the continued life of its gods: death was only an issue for the daemons, half-gods and other beings who had no direct involvement in the pure divinity of the Greek pantheon. This reference qualifies the *moral* exegesis of the talk of the death of Great Pan, because it assumes a state of changing balance between the deified principles of the human world: gods gain power and strength, but also lose it, they are abandoned, die, replaced by other gods: each god also contains within themselves an anti-god, or opposite, with which they also unite through the principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*¹² (the coincidence of opposites) and may change into them if such a transformation is contextually required (e.g. at cultural turning points). This interpretation of the death of a god was popular among scholars usually associated with the tradition of Neoplatonic mysticism. This perspective gives to god and gods a basic Protean character (Great Pan was encapsulated by Proteus), marrying a terrible mutability with an even more horrifying

¹⁰ *Near and/ Hard to grasp is the God*. Hoelderlin’s Poems, *Patmos*, translated by James Mitchell. Online: <https://www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greeks-us/hoelderlin-patmos.asp>.

¹¹ *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, 17, 1: He said that once upon a time in making a voyage to Italy he embarked on a ship carrying freight and many passengers. It was already evening when, near the Echinades Islands, the wind dropped, and the ship drifted near Paxi. Almost everybody was awake, and a good many had not finished their after-dinner wine. Suddenly from the island of Paxi was heard the voice of someone loudly calling Thamus, so that all were amazed. Thamus was an Egyptian pilot, not known by name even to many on board. Twice he was called and made no reply, but the third time he answered; and the caller, raising his voice, said, ‘When you come opposite to Palodes, announce that Great Pan is dead.’ On hearing this, all, said Epitherses, were astounded and reasoned among themselves whether it were better to carry out the order or to refuse to meddle and let the matter go. Under the circumstances Thamus made up his mind that if there should be a breeze, he would sail past and keep quiet, but with no wind and a smooth sea about the place he would announce what he had heard. So, when he came opposite Palodes, and there was neither wind nor wave, Thamus from the stern, looking toward the land, said the words as he had heard them: ‘Great Pan is dead.’

¹² Of course, Nicholas of Cusa was aware of more than just Plutarch’s Pythian treatises, but also their interpretation, viewing the phrase “great Pan is dead” as mere coincidence in his major work about God, *De Li non aliud* (On the Not-Other, 1461).

providence.¹³ The purpose of mysticism was in knowing in the form of insights, potentially containing visions of the future, pre-knowledge, foreseeing or providence. In fact, providential knowledge of a coming evil, a battle between principles, doom or some kind of cataclysm would be in accordance with *anagogical* exegesis and would thus complete that reading of the figure of the dead god. In contrast, infinite change or Protean mutability was only a path or gateway, a secret passage between the universal sphere (i.e. full universality) and the concrete sphere (i.e. full historical contingency), which clash and through their coincidence create human history, where a god can be human and die and a human can be a reborn god. From one perspective, this kind of manipulation of the metaphor of the dead god was especially valuable: it provided mysticism with a convincing justification, showed its irreplaceable impact on the history of the European type of rationality that we share today.

Across the centuries that separate us from the greatest efforts of the European mystical tradition, these were transferred primarily by poets and persons of letters: Fr. Rabelais, Richard Payne Knight, W. Blake, J. Keats, Lord Byron,¹⁴ E. Swedenborg, but also Elizabeth Barrett Browning, a Late Romantic English poet inspired by Schiller's *The Gods of Greece* (Schiller 1788), who penned an expansive and emotionally fraught lamentation over the gods' departure from the modern world, from the world of Newtonian laws and growing isolation (Browning 1844).¹⁵

None of these interpretations change the fact that Plutarch was neither a nihilist nor an atheist (he served for a quarter of a century in two of the highest positions at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi), but rather an ancient scholar whose primary interest could anachronistically be referred to as cultural diagnostics and specifically the status and functions of religion. If his clearly well-informed diagnosis led him to the metaphor of the death of Great Pan, it can be presumed that he had thereby created a tool to express cultural breakthroughs without need for the resentment, personal grievances, will to evil and holding of grudges, so often attributed to Nietzsche. Plutarch was among the most-read ancient authors throughout the Middle Ages, until the Renaissance and Modern Period. He was placed among the "scholarly" authors and for several centuries played a significant role in forming a specific type of European scholarship and European rationality, a space where we can also find the figure of the dead god.

During the High Mediaeval Period and the Late Mediaeval movement of *Devotio moderna*, this phrase cropped up repeatedly, always basically involved in thought experiments investigating the context of the eventual decline of culture and humanity. This is the case of the 14th century text *Gesta Romanorum* (Deeds of the Romans), which begins with the claim "Deus est mortuus", literally "God is dead." Tangentially, in his *Republic* Plato felt so alarmed by atheism

¹³ It seems the first to juxtapose Pan and Proteus was Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who clearly lost no sleep at the idea of bridging the monistic and pluralistic principles using Neoplatonic symbolism.

¹⁴ Byron, *Aristomenes*, Canto First: *The Gods of old are silent on their shore, / Since the great Pan expired, and through the roar/ Of the Ionian waters broke a dread / Voice which proclaimed "the Mighty Pan is dead."*

¹⁵ After her poem was published, her initial critics attacked Browning's "Victorian piety"; it took quite some time (also because the author travelled outside Britain, for health reasons, to Italy, leaving the interpretation of her poetry to her sister at home) until the full context of her work came to light: she had managed to connect Schiller's poem and Plutarch's treatise with the burgeoning industrialisation most painfully felt in Britain, as well as the broader cultural changes in which the author's Christianity offered apparent – but no longer absolute – support. This is made evident by a comparison of the first verses of Schiller's *The Gods of Greece* and Browning's *The Dead Pan*: *Da ihr noch die schöne Welt regiert,/ an der Freude leichtem Gängelband/ glücklichere Menschenalter führtet,/ schöne Wesen aus dem Fabelland! / Ach! da euer Wonnedienst noch glänzte,/ wie ganz anders, anders war es da!/ Da man deine Tempel noch bekränzte,/ Venus Amathusia! – Gods of Hellas, gods of Hellas,/ Can ye listen in your silence?/ Can your mystic voices tell us/ Where ye hide? In floating islands,/ With a wind that evermore/ Keeps you out of sight of shore? / Pan, Pan is dead.*

(for him that was a lapse in religious belief) that he proposed a special law recommending the death penalty for these “apostates”, quite a strong position for someone whose putative teacher, Socrates, was officially executed for *asebeia*, meaning impiety or atheism. At this point in the 14th century, during the greatest flourishing of Christianity, we come across the notion of the death of god in Latin and in a “scholarly” text: something similar is unprecedented.¹⁶ First the text:

Tertia ratio quarti philosophi: Deus est mortuus, ideo peccatoribus regnum est repletum. Certe, si deus quantum ad celerem vindictam peccatoris sicut ante incarnationem adhuc viveret, quando pro peccato luxuriae totum mundum subvertit octo animabus exceptis, procul dubio non essent peccatores sine metu. Nam etsi multi tunc non ex vera caritate aut timore gehennae a peccatis se abstinerunt, tamen timore vindictae, quia sciebant deum omnia vindicare, sicut patet in Sodomitis. Patet etiam in David, cui Deus pro uno peccato intantum iratus, quod in uno die ultra 70 milia hominum subitanee interierunt, ut habetur in libro Regum. Sed nunc quasi mortuus a nobis reputatur deus, ut neque de futuro iudicio neque de poenis inferni cogitemus. Ecce, audistis 12 rationes, quare totus mundus iam in maligno est positus et tot et tantis affligitur malis. “Quiescite igitur perverse agere et discite bene facere!” scribitur Isaiae. Et cum David et Ninivitis veniam postulate, quia omnia praetereunt praeter amare deum! (Nickel 2003, 257).¹⁷

In the *Gesta Romanorum* there is once more talk of the current state of the world, of the behaviour and actions of those who have lost respect and deference towards authority, on the hypocrisy with which they only abstain from even worse sins from fear of retribution, ending in the statement that god is dead. The text is written in the indicative (“But nowadays God is considered by us as if dead”, *quasi mortuus* in the original), not contemplating the actual death of God, that not being the purpose of the exercise: instead the goal is to prepare arguments concerning an explanation of the origins of the reasons to say “the whole world is corrupt and beset by evils both numerous and immense.” *Gesta Romanorum* express an intention towards theodicy: answering the unspoken, but clearly felt “*unde malum?*” is the starting point of the disputation – *deus est mortuus* here is the idea of people relying on the death of God giving them free rein to “sin”. This is another move in the perspective on the death of god in comparison to authors from antiquity (Plutarch) as well as modern thinkers (Hegel, Nietzsche). The author of *Gesta Romanorum* deplors the death of God and warns about the consequences of a breakdown of order, while Nietzsche merely states it and takes that fact to show there is no order – you and I have killed our god, we all are his murderers, we have all dismantled that order. No one stood up to the Church, the priests, hypocritical imposters, philosophers, counterfeiters, all the parasites using human society for their own purposes. For this reason, he announces the “perfect human” (*der tolle Mensch*) and a time of waiting; the death of god brings

¹⁶Of course, other earlier statements on the death of god exist, however formulated as “*mortuus est deus*”. In this case what is meant is the death of Jesus of Nazareth, while the opposite phrasing “*deus et mortuus*” is identical to Nietzsche’s “*Gott ist tot*”. It is also important to differentiate from Plutarch’s ancient phrasing, which may have considered mortal daemons and demi-gods, whereas here we are exclusively referring to the Christian God.

¹⁷ The third reason of the fourth philosopher: God is dead and so the kingdom belongs completely to the sinners. Certainly, if God were alive and enacted swift vengeance on the sinner as He did before the Incarnation, when for the sin of Lust He destroyed the whole world except for eight human beings, most certainly there would be no sinners without fear. For even if many at that time did not abstain from sins from true love or from fear of hell, nonetheless they did for fear of vengeance, because they knew God avenged all crime, as is clear from the case of the Sodomites. This is also clear in the case of David, with whom God for one single sin was so angry that in one day over 70,000 men died all at once. But nowadays God is considered by us as if dead, so that we think neither of judgment to come nor the pains of hell. So now, you have heard 12 different reasons why the whole world has got into such bad shape and is afflicted by so many and such terrible evils. “Take your evil deeds out of my sight, stop doing wrong, learn to do right!” As it is written in Isaiah. And with David and the Ninevites beg for mercy, because all things pass away except our love of God.

no happy tidings, as is repeatedly falsified by defenders of the indefensible, but instead shows the roots of the sociocultural upheaval brought on by mature modernity.¹⁸

The author of the *Gesta Romanorum* is unknown, however instead of their name we are left with an underappreciated style of thought. It seems to be the case, that even in the most unexpected and unlikely contexts, the living seed and roots of criticism remain, finding their way to the light and changing the basic context of our worldview: the associations between the things a culture considers absolute and the goals of its cognitive efforts, what is contingent, meaning what makes up its historical facticity, reason and memory. European rationality as a type loves to search and investigate. In the given context of the absolute and contingency, it searches for the roots of its own complex psychosocial experiences.

The author of the political poem against King Edward II of England from before 1311 is also anonymous. It contains the verses: Now will is counsel,/ wit is wicked, /and God [good] is dead.¹⁹ The distinction from the *Gesta* lies in the likely intended ambiguity of the statement on a dead god: the word *God* here could be used as a synonym for *good*, somewhat obscuring the question of whether god was actually to have died during the crisis of the time or whether a bad king had just taken away all things good. According to O. Pluta (Pluta 2000, 143), later transcriptions and transmission of this poem tended to prefer the form *good*. An analogical problem referencing the death of god is in a text from the 2nd half of the 14th century *Speculum Christiani*: “And note well that as long as man is in the state of deadly sin, all his good deeds are dead.”²⁰ The ambiguity is palpable and the context gives good reason to think this was not chosen by coincidence. In the London version of *Speculum Christiani*, G. Holmstedt (Holmstedt 1933, 335) uncovered a Latin commentary stripping most ambiguity from the phrase “god is ded”: *Item god is ded ... Nam sicut mortuus cito obliviscitur nec a quoquam tunc timetur, sic deus a memoria hominum recedit, & inter mille vix est unus qui ipsum perfecte timet & diligit ... Sed patet that god is ded.*²¹ Even the comparison of a dead god to a dead human shows that the writer must have been an open-minded person. The idea that god may disappear from the minds of people is a fact confirmed in many a study of the history of religion, something as of yet unverifiable in the 14th century. If they were, however, able to see that possibility based on the state of the society of the time, this person could not have been a simpleton nor a fanatic, but presumably a rationally thinking sceptic, unafraid to doubt.

Scepticism moved the minds of at least two more people who, while avoiding the explicit phrasing of the death of god, were nevertheless taking a complex approach to questions of (not only) their time. The first is the Catalan humanist and poet, Bernat Metge (?1340–1413), who fits within the context of loss of faith, trust in Church institutions and the idea of a dead god. Since his youth, he had been inclined to study Boethius’ *De consolazione philosophiae* and

¹⁸ The first German translation of the *Gesta* is from 1842 and was published in Leipzig and Dresden (Grässe, J. G. Th. *Gesta Romanorum, das älteste Mährchen- und Legendenbuch des christlichen Mittelalters, zum ersten Male vollständig aus dem Lateinischen ins Deutsche übertragen, aus gedruckten und ungedruckten Quellen vermehrt, mit Anmerkungen und einer Abhandlung über den wahren Verfasser und die bisherigen Ausgaben und Uebersetzungen desselben versehen von Johann Georg Theodor Gräße*, Dresden, in der Arnoldischen Buchhandlung 1842). Nietzsche was born close by in 1844 and his father, a Lutheran pastor, may have shown interest in this kind of literature; it is not inconceivable that Nietzsche may have even read these old tales as a boy.

¹⁹ Cit. according to Robbins, R. H. (ed.), *Historical Poems of the XIV and XV centuries*, New York Columbia University Press 1959, p. 142. In Middle English: Nu wille is red, / Wit is qued, / And god is dede.

²⁰ In Middle English: And note welle that as longe as man es in dedly synne, al his gude werkes ben dede.

²¹ God is dead ... For as a dead person is quickly forgotten and is not then feared by anybody, so God has disappeared from the memory of humans, and in one thousand there is hardly one who perfectly fears and loves him ... But it is evident that God is dead.

devoted his first writings to the question of the origin of God in the exegetic tradition. After imprisonment on suspicion of conspiracy against King John I of Aragon, in whose services he was employed, he utilised this inclination while imprisoned (apparently under house arrest), to write his most famous work *The Dream (Lo somni*; Vernier 2016). These are four dialogues with a dead king and other persons, with whom the author discusses the immortality of the soul, the moral nature of humanity and human dignity, but also politics, the Aragonese court, fashion, writings of Italian Renaissance authors or cultural mores. In the dialogues, it is the dead king who prevails using his orthodox Christian claims, while however repeatedly embarrassing Metge and the others with his open, often satirical, but essentially philosophically sceptical theses. Namely, the first dialogue about the immortality of the soul becomes a polemic between the classical biblical tradition and the free thought of the educated intellectual, eschewing any justification for all the hells, purgatories or a punitive Lord God, or at least it cares so much more about living a dignified and full human life in this earthly world. For his work, Metge gained his freedom, but also a barrage of hatred and attacks: the culmination of this whole paradoxical story is the aggressive attack by Raymon of Sabunde (in *Liber creaturarum*). A defence of Raymond himself and his work *Theologia naturalis* (criticised by other dogmatists) was penned by one of the most significant Neo-Pyrrhonian sceptics, Michele de Montaigne, in his elaborate essay *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*.

The other person is the French man of letters Blaise Pascal, who, in his aphorism 441 *Pensees*²², expresses the somewhat unclear belief that, if the depravity of human “nature” is allowed, the Christian religion would lose God (Pascal does not explain how it is possible to lose a god, God will suddenly become *a lost God*: this formulation is not, however, Miltonian, as can be easily understood from aphorisms directly mentioning Milton). However, Nature is such that it records everywhere the evidence of human corruption and so also a lost God. Pascal was evidently basing his thoughts on sceptical foundations, but was also a sceptic aiming at apologetics; this was not a contradiction, more that he was pointing out the role of personal experience in one’s relationship to religion.²³ After all, Nietzsche is not so far off from Pascal as it might appear.

It is clear that ever since the 14th century, the figure of the dead god was transposed from ancient literature and spread relatively unhindered, cropping up during critical reflections on society. This was helped by historical circumstances (the Black Death halfway through the 14th century, forty years of Papal schisms followed by the sudden devaluation of the Church, new forms of economy, the spread of education), worldview changes after 1492, the dangerously inadequate steps of the Church (*Malleus maleficarum*) and principally the somewhat infantile opinion that human reason can be protected from the fears of hell.

God is Dead: Speech of the Dead Christ to the Universe and Gott selbst ist tot

Metaphorical expression or even *Dichtung* (poetry) can make the claim that despite its fictionality, it says something factual about the world. Even without hearkening back to antiquity, as late as the *Essays* of M. de Montaigne it is true that philosophy can do both: make full use of metaphors, place them in poetic contexts, link them to melancholy, humour, sarcasm, sadness, irony and scepticism, all while discussing facts. The regular distinction between poetry and philosophy, in which poetry speaks through pictorial riddles, inklings and entanglements,

²² *For myself, I confess that, so soon as the Christian religion reveals the principle that human nature is corrupt and fallen from God, that opens my eyes to see everywhere the mark of this truth: for nature is such that she testifies everywhere, both within man and without him, to a lost God and a corrupt nature.*

²³ A similar realisation hits when we remember that the famous “Pascal’s Wager” was formulated by a person who spent a large part of his life as what today we would call a gambler.

while philosophy exists in a mode of distinction and difference, fails here; imagination is the factor reminding us of something just as available in the dream logic of poetry, as in the rational discourse of philosophy, but without being constrained by the rules for sequencing symbols and images, or the rules of logical deduction. Imagination is a simulation: it has the pretensions of a narrative rational discourse, as a reasoned narration it refers to something factual, while also crossing the boundaries of regulated linguistic expression or science and pulling in metaphors, poetic visions, new styles, affects, all of which may bear some relation to non-simulated facts. From the mid-18th century, European literature, existing in the shared space of *Wahrheit und Dichtung*, scientific knowledge and poetry, exhibited more and more frequent imaginations of a “dead god”.

In the German environment, especially, this impulse was associated with the Romanticising tendencies in art (Pre-Romanticism, early Jena Romanticism, the rebellious youth of *Sturm und Drang*); this idea presents itself and can be argued for quite easily (Romantic “graveyard scenes” were so strong in the genre that they required – after the death of all feeling – also the death of god, Christ, deity in general, etc.), but that is not the whole story. Above all this viewpoint ignores the roots from which it grew as a rejection of the worldview made up of the interconnected intellectual history of Spinozism, the Lockean conception of tolerance within the social contract, later Enlightened German writers of the Gottsched type, the Kantian metaphors *things-in-themselves* and *regulative principles*, and most importantly: Humean Empiricism. The centuries-old assurance that empirical reality is an expression of the divine creative act, which contains all the laws allowing humanity to investigate and observe it using human reason, changed to uncertainty under a multitude of influences. There was uncertainty in its starting point, i.e. the assumption that the empirical world is a manifestation of the “divine reason”, transcending the greatest bounds of human reason in all aspects, while ideally allowing this human reason to merge with it, with the conclusion of this ontological narrative where a human being as the *imago dei* transcends themselves towards the absolute and becomes part of it. Hume didn’t just wake Kant from a dogmatic stupor; rather his treatise on *The Natural History of Religion*, where he describes a world without any god or divine intervention and transposed religion onto a collection of the psychological needs of humanity, reflecting no “signals of transcendence”, but rather as acts of *transferring*, they return to the so-called sphere of transcendence as anthropomorphic projections, awakened a new kind of contemplation of gods and Christianity among poets, writers and Enlightenment thinkers knowledgeable of the philosophy of the day. When Hume called on philosophers to envision their gods appropriately to natural phenomena (*Let your gods, therefore, O philosophers, be suited to the present appearances of nature: and presume not to alter these appearances by arbitrary suppositions, in order to suit them to the attributes, which you so fondly ascribe to your deities* (Hume 1748, §106)) instead of assigning them properties according to their fancy, he initiated an era of thought where the death of a god was not terrifying or blasphemous, but a calculated event with causes and effects.

Schiller, Schelling, Heine, Schopenhauer, Bonaventura, Hegel, Bruno Bauer and others are among the direct predecessors of Fr. Nietzsche in confronting this position; however, one among these stands out with a mood of almost Baroque fantasy in his short surreal novella inserted into the novel *Stanislaus Siebenkaes, Parish Advocate* by Jean Paul (Richter 1797), known under the title *The Dead Christ proclaims that there is no God*: Upon the dome above there was inscribed the dial of eternity--but figures there were none, and the dial itself was its own gnomon; a great black finger was pointing at it, and the dead strove hard to read the time upon it. And at this point a lofty, noble form, bearing the impress of eternal sorrow, came sinking down towards our group, and rested on the altar; whereupon all the dead cried out,

“Christ! Is there no God?” He answered, “There is none.” (...) And Christ spake on, saying, “I have traversed the worlds, I have risen to the suns, with the milky ways I have passed athwart the great waste spaces of the sky; there is no God. And I descended to where the very shadow cast by Being dies out and ends, and I gazed out into the gulf beyond, and cried, ‘Father, where art Thou?’ But answer came there none, save the eternal storm which rages on, controlled by none; and towards the west, above the chasm, a gleaming rainbow hung, but there was no sun to give it birth, and so it sank and fell by drops into the gulf. And when I looked up to the boundless universe for the Divine eye, behold, it glared at me from out a socket, empty and bottomless. Over the face of chaos brooded Eternity, chewing it for ever, again and yet again. Shriek on, then, discords, shatter the shadows with your shrieking din, for He is not!” (Richter 1797, First flower piece).

The novella recounts a dream, the nightmare of a hypersensitive infant and ends with an awakening. Nevertheless, this cannot be simply explained through the psychosis of fear, Oedipal moments of anxiety at the loss of a father or just the author’s fancy. What takes place in the dream is happening in the imagination with the same weight of a poet or philosopher’s imagination, and similarly such surreal events can transcend time periods: past, present, the expectation of the future, linear events, these all fall away leaving an entirely reasonable image. Throughout the novel Jean Paul circles broadly, collecting the pros and cons surrounding suicide, moving through cycles in which Siebenkaes has experiences arguing in support of life, just as those against, with both returning in the same shapes and forms, but with their meaning displaced. Just as with Nietzsche, Jean Paul is not concerned with the perpetual return of the same old things,²⁴ instead, in the systematic altering of perspectives through which we observe the world, our experiences with it and ourselves: no significant differences can be found there, they are reduced to mere historical contingencies and any differences there might be are only in perspectives and constellations. I also don’t think it likely that the author would have postulated a terrifying vision of a world without a god in order to incite or strengthen a reasoned god-belief: this may have impacted a similarly unsettled and dreaming child, but the serious reader, on their third or further read of the novel, concentrating on the content, form, literary quality, authorial intention and rational contemplation of the text could hardly have been expected to flee to a church to pray as a result.

The poet draws from dreams which are analogous to the aesthetic fantasies of the philosophers, they can show that reality is an illusion, illusions are real in the emotions they manifest, the clash of reality and illusion gives rise to new imaginations creating visions, thoughts, broad ideas or small observations, which together fail to lead to definitive and absolute knowledge (which is non-existent), but rather stimulate human courage to live one’s life fully, or end it. In his remarkable publication *Über die natürliche Magie der Einbildungskraft*, Jean Paul says: Memory is but a narrow fantasy (...) The dream is a temple and a father’s fantasy: concerts that ring out in this darkened Arcadia, the Elysian fields they spread across, the divine figures inhabiting them, bear no comparison with anything the Earth begets and often have I thought: “Because Man awakens from so many beautiful dreams, those dreams of youth, hope, happiness and love: he could, Oh! – then they would all return to him – still linger in that fair and dreamy slumber.” (Richter 1796, 195). Irony, satire? Perhaps, but it is doubtless more appropriate than the rational and less robust tool chosen by Nietzsche when he wanted to come to terms with an unbearable reality that brings death even to the gods.

²⁴ Something typical of both is how their stories of the dead god contain the snake *uroboros*, the symbol of enclosed infinity, stifling any transcendence.

In the texts of G. W. F. Hegel the phrase about a dead god appears three times: the oldest instance is the early *Faith and Knowledge* (Hegel 1802), another two in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, both in the *Revealed Religion* portion, where Hegel describes the structure of the unhappy self-consciousness.²⁵ The concept of a dead god reaches back deep within German religious thought to the year 1802:

But the pure concept or infinity as the abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed, must signify the infinite grief purely as a moment of the supreme Idea, and no more than a moment. Formerly, the infinite grief only existed historically in the formative process of culture. It existed as the feeling that ‘God Himself is dead,’ (upon which the religion of more recent times rests; the same feeling that Pascal expressed in so to speak sheerly empirical form: ‘la nature est telle qu'elle marque partout un Dieu perdu et dans l'homme et hors de l'homme’) – by marking this feeling as a moment of the supreme Idea, the pure concept must give philosophical existence to what used to be either the moral precept that we must sacrifice the empirical being, or the concept of formal abstraction. Thereby it must re/establish for philosophy the Idea of absolute freedom and along with it the absolute Passion, the speculative Good Friday in place of the historical Good Friday. Good Friday must be speculatively re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its God forsakenness. Since the [more] serene, less well grounded, and more individual style of the dogmatic philosophies and of the natural religions must vanish, the highest totality can and must achieve its resurrection solely from this harsh consciousness of loss, encompassing everything, and ascending in all its earnestness and out of its deepest ground to the most serene freedom of its shape. (Hegel 1977, 190–191)

Hegel’s relation to older philosophies of religion is obvious in that he does not use the sentence on the death of god in a closed and unambiguous context. The reason for this is not where we would first expect it: in Romantic poetry, which had the most radical impact on the concept of the dying, dead and resurrected god and several of whose representatives (Schelling, Hölderlin) were friends with Hegel. Instead, he saw culprit in the weakness of philosophy, which assigned to the art of poetry a much higher potential for knowledge than it could possibly have according to Hegel. For him, the defining issue was how the symbolic experience of poetry remains always only an aesthetic experience without any direct relation to reality. This approach differentiates him not only from Jean Paul, but from the general Romantic “philosophy of poetry” in general, something which had inserted unclear, imprecise and arbitrarily applied terms into the theory of knowledge, instead of their rightful place within transcendental poetry. Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Tieck and others presumed that artistic symbolism was an indispensable layer of knowing: symbols are allegories and the symbolism of art means its (decodable, in principle comprehensible) allegoricality. Hegel failed to accept this semantic switch because it gave the poet free rein and sole responsibility to explain what the terms they used were supposed mean – in essence, they were just lecturing others about their viewpoint, leaving its origin, roots, causes and purposes hidden within the irrational convolutions of poetic language. Poets are however beholden to *Dichtung*; the blame for their rout from the field philosophy lies not with them, but with the immediately preceding German philosophy.

In this way Hegel’s statement on the death of god becomes a philosophical theorem, jointly formulating his call for philosophy to shed the mythologising and religiously motivated

²⁵ 752: It is the loss of substance as well as of the self, the pain that expresses itself in the harsh phrase that God is dead. 785: That death is the agonized feeling of the unhappy consciousness that God himself is dead.

aesthetic, the empty words and images that while symbolising something beautiful, only obscure the actual subject and tasks of philosophy and thought.

Conclusion: A man pays dearly for being immortal²⁶

The complex and dynamic metaphor “god is dead” has become commonplace and unattractive in contemporary philosophy. Our age has more real concerns than the formal abstraction of “godlessness” in the German cultural environment of the 18th and 19th centuries; or at least it thinks so, even as it forgets that for Nietzsche as well as a number of other representatives of European culture and learning, the *topos* of the death of god was part of their cultural self-identification and diagnosis of factors which were transferred into the 20th century, flourished there and bore fruit – including in part, the Shoa’h, after which many no longer doubted the death of god. The death of god was an explanatory formula, not exclusively German, but rather European. The individual is held down by an enormous, almost absolute feeling of dependency, loss of autonomy, resignation of the whole to the individual and abandonment within history, to which they no longer belong and nobody cares about belonging there or not, this is the result of a certain cultural state, same in its essential aspects even today, whether it is in Hegel’s, Nietzsche’s or our own time. We should not underestimate situations where people feel abandoned to forces outside their control, even as they are buffeted by them.

Contemplation of the death of god has its further history, after the departure from the Christian Church tradition there was a growing idea of a new religion, initially concretized as a new mythology in early Romanticism, placed at the epicentre of newly emerging mystery cults. The Dionysian and Neo-Dionysian project gained some prominence, originating in Hölderlin’s philosophical and poetic musings, but its first overall philosophical scheme was formulated by Schelling. The dichotomy of the Apollonian cultural contribution, schematically represented by a calculating, cold, disinterested and narrow reason, alongside the Dionysian, where the emphasis is on the merging of formal boundaries, the orgiastic interconnection of existence with a fully lived life was first adopted from Schelling by J. Bachofen and only from him by Nietzsche and his epigones, namely L. Klages, the *Blutleuchte* group and O. Spengler. In a similar way to the death of god, the feud between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles in Nietzsche’s work are the result of a long and culturally stable tradition that Nietzsche partially reiterates and partially develops by situating it in other contexts.

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²⁶ Fr. Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, Ch. 5, 84.

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