

NIETZSCHE RESEARCH IN SZEGED

Interview with philosophers Zoltán Gyenge and András Czeglédi

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(Abstract) The conference entitled “Nietzsche and the 20th Century,” organized by the French Institute and the German-Hungarian Society for Philosophy, was held on 12-13 June 2013 in Budapest. The lectures were given by internationally acclaimed Nietzsche experts in Hungarian, German and French, with the assistance of professional on-site interpreters. The fact that two of the acclaimed lecturers are connected to Szeged is far from coincidental, in regard to the fact that the Department of Philosophy in Szeged has been paying special attention to teaching and investigating Nietzsche for decades. I talked to Zoltán Gyenge, the Head of Department, and András Czeglédi, one of the most popular lecturers of the Department, apropos of the conference.

In his lecture, Gyenge attempted to answer the question whether the author of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, who, as it is known, in his last insane years signed his letters as “Dionysus” and “The Crucified,” could be considered a so-called “founder of a religion”. As the Head of the Department of Philosophy, Gyenge maintains that the radical provocativeness of his thoughts and language are what make Nietzsche especially useful and interesting for the teaching of Philosophy.

Investigating the influence of Dostoevsky on Nietzsche, András Czeglédi concludes that the strongest argument for this influence is nothing else but the Nietzschean concept of Nihilism itself, as well as the “non-birth” of the proposed masterwork. Czeglédi considers Nietzsche the eternally timely philosopher, whose thoughts inspire, but at the same time also demand rethinking.

Keywords: transcultural interest, atheism and nihilism, founding of religion, anxiety of influence, psychology of suspicion

Outline of Article:

- 1 Nietzsche’s “anxiety of influence”
- 2 Nietzsche and the Russians
- 3 The fortuity of the Dostoevsky encounter
- 4 The “little priest” – the early years in Naumburg and Schulpforta
- 5 Transcultural effects (Max Müller, Paul Deussen)
- 6 The importance of music in Nietzsche’s thinking

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special attention to teaching and investigating Nietzsche for decades. I talked to Zoltán Gyenge, the Head of Department, and András Czeglédi, one of the most popular lecturers of the Department, apropos of the conference; but József Simon, the Machiavelli expert of our Department, also joined us for a while. The following conversation started out as a quick interview, then turned into a roundtable discussion for a while, and lastly became a friendly collegial exchange of views.

EL Zoli, the motto of your lecture (“Nietzsche as ‘religion-founder’?”) was already quite provocative, let me quote it: “When it comes right down to it I’d much rather have been a Basel Professor than God; but I didn’t dare be selfish enough to forgo the creation of the world.”¹ What made your reasoning especially interesting for me was what you added to this in your closing words: “but a God cannot found a religion.” Throughout your lecture, you were actually seeking for the answer to the question whether the author of *Zarathustra*, who, towards the end of his life, signed his letters as “Dionysos” or “The Crucified,” could be considered a “founder of religion.” I really liked that you emphasised the continuity of Nietzsche’s reasoning, which can already be observed in his very early writings. You mentioned his short piece entitled *The Childhood of Folks* from 1861, but there’s also *Fate and History* from a year later - and you highlighted the question already posed here: “What if there is no God?”

ZGy Quite interesting, since the question first came to him in the form of what if there was no one God but Gods – and later, what if there were no Gods either?

EL After these you mentioned the classical training in Pforta, his enthusiasm over the Greek ideal, then the massive influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner during his Romantic period. But when it comes to Nietzsche, sooner or later one comes up at the theme of the “eternal return,” which Nietzsche himself treated as his central thought. It seemed as if towards the end of your lecture, you referred several times to the unavoidable theoretical consequences of the fact that even Zarathustra himself was not a God, he was only a teacher or a prophet of the eternal return. But you also mentioned that Nietzsche, in his last, insane period, consequently signed his letters as “Dionysus” or “The Crucified,” identifying himself as a God. My question is the following: would you accept an interpretation presuming verifiable theoretical continuity between the later works and other parts of the oeuvre? Do you find it possible that this “formidable thought,” which he already touched upon in connection with Heracleitus, was what finally deranged him – which development itself then became a constitutive element of Nietzschean thinking?

ZGy We should also add, by the way – and there’s a library of literature relating to this – that Dionysus is quite an irregular God within Greek mythology. Many authors, such as Manfred Frank or Christoph Jamme, identify him as the coming God, i.e. Christ, who, just like Dionysus, contains within himself the paradox of being both God and human being at the same time. If we look at the period when insanity could not be diagnosed in Nietzsche yet, we find that he had always been disgusted by a certain type of person, namely the impassionate one, and it is this aversion that later culminated in the term of *ressentiment*. He kept returning to the thought – in harmony with Kierkegaard –, that the thing missing from the type of person he rejects is passion, termed insanity by him. Meaning, we need insanity in the world in order to have the spice of life ... For Nietzsche, insanity doesn’t come with a negative connotation, rather as kind of an expectation. And the other thing: Nietzsche as a madman. Nietzsche, who was diagnosed with dementia after that certain case with the horse in Turin; and certainly, he lived his last few years in a fairly catatonic condition. Not too much is known about these years, what we do know comes mostly from the reports of his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.

EL So do you think the world of the insane Nietzsche is, in a certain way, still coherent with the whole oeuvre? Many state the opposite, although he kept to his metaphors at the peak of his insanity, even in the most troubled *Wahnzettels* [the so-called “notes of insanity” – EL].

ZGy Absolutely – though this be madness, yet there is method in it. That’s only true though until 1889-90, as after that he did not write, only sang, danced (sometimes naked); and we also know about a case when his sister made him sit on a chair and fed him there, and what’s more, showed the nakedly crouching, insane Nietzsche to visitors.

ACz But that’s not only about Nietzsche, unfortunately it was possible in those days to do such things in European mental hospitals.

ZGy Yes, it was a trend in the 1700s with the London Lords and Ladies to visit the madhouse and take a look at the inmates. It was an after-lunch, before-coffee activity. But you asked me a bunch of questions that we have bypassed to get at the theme of insanity. For example, I myself have developed great interest in

¹ Nietzsche’s letter to Jacob Burckhardt. Turin, January 6, 1889. In: Friedrich Nietzsche: *Werke in drei Bänden*. München: 1954. Band 3, S. 1351.

Nietzsche's childhood recently; if we look on him not simply as a philosopher, but as a certain person who, amongst other things, did Philosophy, then we cannot ignore such facts as him losing his father when he was only a few years old, and growing up surrounded by women – which fact he deeply resented.

As he put it, the only massive argument against the eternal return was his mother and sister. I'm seriously interested in this line of thought. There was the opening of the Nietzsche Documentary Centre in 2010 in Naumburg – and let me refer back to the connection between Nietzsche and Szeged as well. One needs to know that Nietzsche research has two big centres internationally: the Nietzsche-Archiv in Weimar, and this Documentary Centre in Naumburg, which opened in 2010. It wasn't really a conference then, rather a congress, amidst great excesses, and I was invited to give a talk, but I also met Andreas Urs Sommer there. The interesting thing is that they intend to do something completely different from what the Nietzsche-Archiv is doing. They have erected an ultramodern building next to Nietzsche's house in Naumburg, only from donations – and that's how remarkable the difference is between the situation there and here in Hungary: I got talking to different people at the opening ball; for example, to a man who manufactures agricultural machine parts. I asked him why he was there, and I found out he had supported the construction with a considerable amount of money, simply because he considers his surroundings important. I've mentioned a speech of Thomas Mann's at the Munich Odeon² - well this congress in Naumburg went on amid similarly amazing excesses. Just an example: the boys' choir from Schulpforta sang Nietzsche's songs with piano accompaniment, and the German radio was also present.

EL If you don't mind, let us return to the lecture you gave at the conference in Budapest. You mentioned many correlations regarding the history of influences, using the expression "transcultural" several times, or referring to its possible connotations. For me the most interesting among these is Nietzsche's infamous "Fascism", constructed artificially and in retrospect. For that reason, I really appreciated when you mentioned Max Müller, whose Aryan-Semitic theory was also widely misunderstood, although for him Aryanism, as an Indo-European theory of origin, worked exactly as a counter-argument against Fascism. Wherein does the importance of the "transcultural" orientation of Nietzsche's thinking lie? And complemented with his critique of "old and new religion founders," do you find it a strong argument against the accusations of Fascism?

ZGy Nietzsche refers many times to Far-Eastern philosophy, Brahmins, Buddha, the Vedic religion, the Zend Avesta, and so on. What interests me the most is where this pronounced interest comes from. On the one hand, it may be a sign of the times, as this is the period when comparative Cultural and Religious Studies begin to take hold. For Nietzsche himself, as I have been trying to underline, by following the Pforta tradition, this interest became even stronger during his university years, and that's what is echoed in the case of Max Müller, but Schaarschmidt could also be mentioned here.

ACz But you've also mentioned Nietzsche had friends like Paul Deussen...

ZGy Yes, and he gathered first-hand information through this friendship. But for me, the question primarily is how the little Friedrich had got there, and how he used these things. Maybe this second aspect is more interesting, because the mentioned Far-Eastern references are often understood as a real alternative to Christianity for Nietzsche. My standpoint is that this view is completely wrong. Of course, Eastern religions provided an important source of knowledge, important reference points for him, but we need to add that in the 18th Century this is not novelty any more. As I briefly indicated, they had begun to use the notion of the "stranger," the notion of "race" (here I'm referring to the Kant-Foster debate,³ but I could mention many others) – the question was in the air. But we need to be careful about what we make of all this. Perhaps in the case of Schopenhauer, Far Eastern philosophy could be considered a realistic alternative to the European one. But nothing like that can be said about Nietzsche; for him the many references to Far Eastern or even Buddhist philosophy don't make up a coherent whole, but rather constitute a system of arguments that reinforces him in his argumentation against Christian culture.

EL Could we state then that in your reading, Buddhism for Nietzsche is not an alternative, much more so an argument against metaphysically based religions in general?

ZGy Exactly. Let's just consider the fact that even *Zarathustra* primarily fulfilled a dramaturgical function for Nietzsche, it wasn't about Zend Avesta or the founder of the Persian religion. But what I find the most important shaping factor in terms of Nietzsche's "transcultural" interest is music. Practically, he says, we need to move away from the type of ethics, the values Western culture presents to us as something given, as idol worship in a certain sense. We need something else instead: a trans-ethical world, a "Nomadic" world

² Thomas Mann's speech on 4 November 1924, at a ceremony held in Munich Odeon in memory of the 80th anniversary of Nietzsche's birth.

³ Georg Foster (1754-1794) German ethologist, scientist and writer.

– this is how we get to the influence of Liszt; Goths and Germans, to which I referred to at the conference as well – and perhaps it would be here that we could relate Nietzsche and Fascism to each other in some way. Namely that both Nietzsche and the Fascist ideology rejected the Christian paradigm: back to something ancient, back to something Nomadic. For Nietzsche, this is actually the desert, the endless steppe, the Slavic soul, which in that sense obviously was not compatible with Nazi ideology, but there could still be a link. But these are only external factors. If we specifically look at the compatibility of Nietzsche and Fascism, I could hardly name another thinker whose argumentation system could be used more effectively against Nazi ideology than Nietzsche's. It's no coincidence that Baeumler⁴ and Lukács were needed to "reinterpret" him, and Kroener-Verlag to publish his works falsified, and there was Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche herself. Just think about it: Nietzsche also wrote down what Heraclitus had already formulated: "it is wise to hearken, not to me, but to my Word, and to confess that all things are one."⁵ In *Zarathustra*, if I remember correctly, that sounds something like: "I am a herald of the lightning, and a heavy drop out of the cloud: the lightning, however, is the superhuman."⁶

EL One last question in relation to that: speaking of Zarathustra, which Hungarian translation do you prefer? We have Ödön Wildner's incredibly beautiful and poetic work, as well as the more recent one by Imre Kurdi, which, however, takes into account the current terminology of Nietzsche literature.

ZGy Well, I would vote for a third one, an unpublished work, which could probably have combined the benefits of the two aforesaid: Ede Szabó's translation,⁷ which sadly is not complete though.

EL András, the title of your lecture was "Nietzsche explores Dostoevsky." The introduction already caught my interest, when you cited Harold Bloom to describe Nietzsche's attitude to Dostoevsky. "Anxiety of influence" – such an appropriate expression, but what do you exactly mean by it? After all, coming to think about it, it may be assumed that after the disappointment with Wagner, this was his attitude to people in general – sometimes in a completely irrational manner.

ACz – Actually I tried to refer to this in my lecture. "Anxiety of influence" is a recurrent pattern for Nietzsche: he "meets" a great mind, whose name he apparently hadn't even heard of before, but who he finds quite amazing, phenomenal even. He did this with Stendhal, with Spinoza, and so on. What's interesting here is that he does this mainly through his private correspondence, later we may encounter a certain influence in posthumous fragments and notes, and at the very end of the process, we may finally identify it in the published works. It had long been known from his private correspondence that he knew Dostoevsky, read him and studied him, but still did not name him in the published writings. It's obviously also part of the "anxiety of influence" that he simply did not dare to acknowledge the influence. Wagner is an excellent example, because it was known that the young Nietzsche was completely under his influence – later he tried to break with this influence. However "anxiety of influence" has another dimension as well, and here comes a buzzword again: namely, I state that contrary to what Nietzsche explicitly said in his reports, that certain meeting with a great mind never happens *ex nihilo*, out of nothing.

EL That's exactly why it's so surprising that he consistently denied these influences for so long, even in his private letters. Or is this just a "human, all too human" thing?

ACz In my opinion it's precisely not even irrational, as Nietzsche is very sincere at the same time. It's one thing to hear about someone from this or that kind of source, and quite another to begin to read a certain text. It's clear that Nietzsche, long before he, so to speak, "discovered" Dostoevsky, could have heard, or had definitely heard about him. But it's quite obvious that he only started reading Dostoevsky's novels at the beginning of 1887. That's why it isn't simply about irrationality, or Nietzsche perfectly deceiving himself; it's rather about a strange kind of effect mechanism. The process whereby Nietzsche encountered Russian authors, including first of all Dostoevsky, was embedded into a learning process. It was a lengthy process, but once he started to read Dostoevsky in 1887, that was a different type of influence. He realized you couldn't put this person's texts down. Actually, I could even add that it wasn't simply about a "human, all too human" self-deceit or irrationality, rather about the great difference between "hearing something about someone" and "reading something by someone."

EL You stated in your lecture that one could sense such a conceptual analogy in *Human, all too human*, but in the "Foreword" of *Dawn*, concrete references can already be found.

⁴ See Baeumler, Alfred: *Nietzsche, der Philosoph und Politiker*. [Leipzig: Reclam, 1931.] among others.

⁵ Heraclitus B50

⁶ „Zarathustra's prologues 5." In. Friedrich Nietzsche: *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. (First part: Zarathustra's discourses.) [translated by Thomas Common] <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>

⁷ See *Friedrich Nietzsche válogatott írásai*. [selected and forewords by Zsuzsa Széll; translated by Ede Szabó] Budapest: Gondolat, 1972.

ACz True, but we might add that we're not talking about the main text of *Dawn*, but its late "Foreword," inserted by Nietzsche only in 1886. But I'm dead serious about there being a textually verifiable Dostoevsky-influence in this "Vorrede."

EL The following question could follow from what has been said so far, and this is what mostly concerned me, listening to you. In your opinion, how typical was what Nietzsche himself called the "psychology of suspicion" in terms of his conscious behavior as thinker or interpreter? When encountering someone, personally or via hearsay, or via the pages of a book, he immediately started something like a "brain-tennis," a mental battle with that certain person, and that could happen even before he would get thoroughly dug into that person's thoughts.

ACz Exactly! Of course, this kind of "service" could start even before he read a concrete text from the given author, for example, when encountering certain thoughts, theses, concepts or conceptual networks of a thinker through such an ingenious mediator as Lou Salomé.

EL Does this mean that you find a kind of positive understanding of the "psychology of suspicion" acceptable, as something operated not by exclusions, rather by...

ACz ... by encounters. Yes, and this is especially problematic in the case of Nietzsche, as for such a long time he thought of himself as that certain incomparable great psychologist of suspicion. But in his last one or two years he was forced to face the fact that a great tradition existed (i.e. Russian Nihilism – EL), which was there to be discovered, that the „psychology of suspicion" has a kind of, if you like, subcategory waiting to be processed. This does not mean Nietzsche was converted by the effect of Dostoevsky, simply that he had to face a challenge.

EL What made your lecture both enjoyable and easy to follow was the particularly accurate usage of words. This obviously has its own methodological advantage, but to me it seemed for you there is more to it...

ACz Indeed. Unfortunately the shortness of time didn't allow me to explain the whole concept of my dissertation at the conference, but I still attempted to emphasise to the importance of terminology. It's philologically verifiable that Nietzsche had read no fewer than six books by Dostoevsky, but the situation is still not that simple. Because once I have built it up, I destroy my reasoning again, reaching thereby the borders of philology. You know, it happens that someone reads something without leaving any trace, e.g. in notes or library catalogues. Like, as Andreas Urs Sommer asked during the discussion, there's no philologically supported evidence for Nietzsche having read *The Idiot*, but the Nietzschean usage of words easily leads us to conclude that he knew the novel somehow – for instance, from the particular usage of the term "idiot."

EL You highlighted two very definite standpoints regarding the Dostoevsky influence. According to György Lukács, the Nietzschean concept of Nihilism had been reached through a characteristic Russian "Anthropological Atheism." The other, even more radical interpretation is that of Ernst Benz, who claims Nietzsche couldn't have developed the "psychology of Christianity" at all without knowing Dostoevsky. Where would you locate your own standpoint?

ACz Actually my conclusion is that Nietzsche found out in his last years that there was a great Russian tradition needing to be dealt with in order for him to become the "psychologist of Christianity" that he wanted to be. I wouldn't go as far as Benz does, who declares that it was actually Dostoevsky who made Nietzsche what he really was: the psychologist of Christianity. For my part, I claim that facing the intellectual challenge emerging from Dostoevsky's texts may have contributed to the fact that *The Will to Power* wasn't born. More accurately, that the great summary Nietzsche had obviously planned for long couldn't have been born in the form he had originally wanted. But I would not want to be monocausal here. I am not saying this is the one and only reason. Several things may have contributed: stylistic factors, or Nietzsche's obsession that he regularly mentions, for instance, already in *The Twilight of the Idols*, regarding the intense antipathy he felt towards system creators... A thousand reasons may have contributed to the non-birth of this late big summarising main work, among others the Dostoevsky influence.

EL You have partly answered my next question with this. In light of the above, what kind of relation would you assume between the late Nietzsche, who knew, had read and rethought Dostoevsky, and the author of the previous writings?

ACz I think the oneness and uniqueness Nietzsche demanded for himself were called into question in the last few years. The role he had thought he possessed became problematic for himself, and this could have contributed a lot and could have had an adverse impact.

EL The reason why this question interests me is that if we accept a strong influence of Dostoevsky on Nietzsche's late writings, this raises the question of whether for him this was a kind of a rupture or a change

of direction, or more so the reinforcement of his previous intentions? As we know, he considered himself a psychologist as well, and he tended to accept Dostoevsky's influence only in this regard ...

ACz It's actually psychology, this very particular conception of psychology that ensures the continuity, this is the permanent motif. What, however, did create a rupture, was that the uniqueness Nietzsche thought to possess came to be questioned at that time, and this may have contributed to the fact that *The Will to Power* remained only in fragments. Nietzsche realised that his undertaking to write the complete history of Nihilism as kind of an opus magnum was quite problematic, so he began to cut up that huge material into parts. These cutting-ups then created such ingenious things as *The Antichrist*.

EL My last question may seem a bit banal, but concerning the present situation of higher education, could still be timely. Why do you find it important to teach Nietzsche at a Philosophy department today in Hungary?

ACz Because I find him a very provocative and impressive thinker, who is worth studying under all circumstances. So many philosophical problems proposed by Nietzsche emerge over and over again that are relevant to a variety of philosophical and non-philosophical disciplines. Here's my friend József Simon, for example, who has found concepts to grasp onto in Nietzsche's work for his own Machiavelli research, but the same could be said about my fiercest interest in aesthetics. It's about an oeuvre that still offers so much in so many regards today.

JS On my part, I would only add that I've only felt with Nietzsche that he could actually have been someone else, that there's a brutal fact of contingency – it would not be really important to be that certain person to raise these thoughts. It's like his personality could have been exchanged for anyone else's, but it is this exchangeability, this radical contingency that makes it incredibly timely.

ACz Exactly. And what makes the whole thing even more fascinating is that the radical contingency mentioned by Józsi is not only reasonable from an external and retrospective standpoint, but Nietzsche himself also reflected on it. In my opinion, the most exciting is the way he built it even into his more or less literary oriented, but still philosophically inspired works. Straight away, there's Zarathustra himself: now are *you* important Zarathustra? Say your word and break up on it! That means the contingency of the singular narrator is related to its radical singularity. He kept reacting somehow to this radical contingency of personality from *The Birth of Tragedy* onwards, and this has a strong connection with the "anxiety of influence" I quoted from Harold Bloom. This came to the fore, for instance, in Nietzsche himself feeling that Wagner had, so to speak, "annexed" him, or when in *On Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, and even in the final works, he reacted with lot of self-irony and self-criticism to the fact he actually had a weak personality.

EL So we can conclude that the complementary relation between radical contingency and the no less radical importance of personality has a particular relevance in this timeless actuality attributable to Nietzsche. Zoli, how would you take sides on this issue? What is it that makes Nietzsche distinct for you?

ZGy I can't comment on why he is important for others. For myself? Because he, and Kierkegaard, who I also study, created a turn in 19th Century philosophy that made philosophical discourse incredibly attractive and accessible even for those who are not philosophers by profession, or who are explicitly deterred by philosophy's rigorous nomenclature. Here I could refer both to Vattimo and to H. J. Schmidt; the latter claims that this was in a certain sense also a linguistic turn, as the language of philosophy began to resemble the language of literature more closely, which I find important in the sense that for me philosophy is not an academic discipline primarily, I feel it much closer to the arts – and as such it was made much more accessible by these two philosophers. *Nota bene*, I would also add that at the beginning of the 20th Century, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – but we could also name Arthur Schopenhauer- gave a fresh momentum to the somewhat non-philosophical Hungarian culture that was, as far as I'm concerned, unprecedented and unique since. The generation of *Nyugat* was explicitly concerned with these authors, corresponding with them. Árpád Tóth, Babits, Kosztolányi, Attila József and others – for example, in the case of Pilinszky the role of Kierkegaard is quite trivial. Among other things, this kind of mediation is what gives these philosophers something we call – lacking a better expression – timeliness.

EL Yes, but in the Bologna Process, where we need to think thematically, where the old methods don't work anymore, sadly we need to think twice about which thinkers we pay special attention to... In such a situation, why do you find Nietzsche especially important?

ZGy First of all, because I, for my part, particularly hate that kind of thematic thinking. Besides, Nietzsche is explicitly interesting, compared to, for instance, the philosophers of The Vienna Circle or the analytic philosophers. Please do not misunderstand me; I'm not suggesting these philosophers are not interesting or anything like that. They're simply a bit too dry for me. An interesting thing came to mind. When I studied in Heidelberg, they told me philosophy as such starts with Aristotle and ends with Kant.

When I asked where Nietzsche was then, they said: come on, Nietzsche is a writer, let literature scholars deal with him. I don't know if the Philosophische Seminar in Heidelberg still works that way or not, but in those days this type of rigid isolation was typical there. Honestly, this is something that leaves me absolutely uninterested. When I study someone, making a statement about them is not the first thing for me. Nietzsche is, on the one hand, definitely interesting, and on the other hand, definitely provocative. You can explicitly love or hate him, the only thing you cannot do is remain neutral. For me, Rudolf Carnap, for instance, is quite a neutral thinker, but this certainly cannot be said about Nietzsche.

ACz I think here we could repeat what Zoli had previously stated regarding the importance of mediation. Namely, that through Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, for example, it's possible to address people who we would not be able to reach solely through the discourse of professional philosophy – and this, for a teacher, is a great experience.

EL Well, I think that was the perfect final word! Thank you so much for the interview.

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