Nietzsche’s Übermensch: A Hero of Our Time?

Eva Cybulska dispels popular misconceptions about this controversial figure.

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“Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Übermensch – a rope over an abyss.”

Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Prologue

The term Übermensch, often translated as Superman or Overman, was not invented by Nietzsche. The concept of hyperanthropos can be found in the ancient writings of Lucian. In German, the word had already been used by Müller, Herder, Novalis, Heine, and most importantly by Goethe in relation to Faust (in Faust, Part I, line 490). In America Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote of the Oversoul, and, perhaps with the exception of Goethe’s Faust, his aristocratic, self-reliant ‘Beyond-man’ was probably the greatest contributor to Nietzsche’s idea of the Übermensch. Nietzsche was, however, well familiar with all the above sources.

The first public appearance of Nietzsche’s Übermensch was in his book Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883-5). As a teenager Nietzsche had already applied the word Übermensch to Manfred, the lonely Faustian figure in Byron’s poem of the same name who wanders in the Alps tortured by some unspoken guilt. Having challenged all authoritative powers, he dies defying the religious path to redemption. Nietzsche’s affinity with Manfred culminated in him composing a piano duet called Manfred Meditation, which he sent to his musical hero, the conductor Hans von Bülow. The maestro’s verdict on this ‘masterpiece’ as “the most irritating musical extravagance” put a decisive end to Nietzsche’s career as a music composer.

For Nietzsche, the idea of Übermensch was more like a vision than a theory. It suddenly surfaced in his consciousness during the memorable summer of 1881 in Sils-Maria (Swiss Alps), born out of that epiphanic experience that also gave rise to Eternal Return, Zarathustra and God is Dead. It was a timeless moment of ecstasy at the boundary between the conscious and the unconscious, of past and present, of pain and elation. Nietzsche entered his own inferno in “the middle of life, so surrounded by death”, haunted by memories of his father’s death, and also of his shattered friendship with Wagner, the most significant relationship in his life. He never explained what he meant by Übermensch, only intimated:

“The Übermensch shall be the meaning of the earth!
I entreat you my brethren, remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of supra-terrestrial hopes!

…
Behold, I teach you the Übermensch: he is this lightning, he is this madness! …
Behold, I am a prophet of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightning is called Übermensch.”

Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Prologue

Nietzsche’s reluctance to spell out exactly what he meant has provoked numerous interpretations in the secondary literature. Hollingdale (in Nietzsche) saw in Übermensch a man who had organised the chaos within; Kaufmann (Nietzsche) a symbol of a man that created his own values, and Carl Jung (Zarathustra’s Seminars) a new ‘God’. For Heidegger it represented humanity that surpassed itself, whilst for the Nazis it became an emblem of the master race.

There have been problems with translating Übermensch. It has been rendered as a ‘Beyond-man’ (Tille, 1896), ‘Superman’ (G.B. Shaw, 1903) and ‘Overman’ (Kaufmann, 1954). The difficulty hinges on the prefix über (over, above, beyond) and ultimately the word proves untranslatable. Although it is gender-indifferent, for the sake of simplicity I shall be using a masculine pronoun in its stead.
**What the Übermensch is Not**

“Above all do not confuse me with what I am not!”
*Ecce Homo*

The Übermensch is not a Nazi. Nietzsche’s anti-semitic sister Elisabeth invited Hitler to her brother’s shrine in Weimar in 1934 and essentially made an offering of his philosophy. The Führer, who never read the philosopher’s works, took to the selected snippets that Elisabeth provided like a proverbial fish to water and adopted the Übermensch as a symbol of a master-race. Little did he know that Nietzsche had written that he “would have all anti-Semites shot”, not to mention his strong anti-nationalistic and pan-European tendencies. Provocatively, he also talked of himself as “the last anti-political German” (*Ecce Homo*, *Why I am so Wise*).

Some anarchists appropriated Übermensch to their cause, latching onto its aspects of strength and individualism. But Nietzsche never advocated abolishment of the state or legislation in pursuit of selfish aims. Quite the opposite: he argued for a well-ordered soul and a well-ordered society.

Übermensch is not a tyrant. If anything, he is someone capable of tyranny who manages to overcome and sublimate this urge. His magnanimity stems not from weakness and servitude, but from the strength of his passions. He is rather like “the Roman Caesar with Christ’s soul” (*Will to Power*, 983), a value-creating and value-destroying free spirit who disciplines himself to wholeness. It’s important to stress that there has never yet been an Übermensch; it remains an ideal.

**The Hero’s Quest for Wholeness**

“It returns, what finally comes home to me is my own Self and what of myself has long been in strange lands and scattered among all things and accidents.”
*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, The Wanderer

The word ‘hero’, coined in English in the fourteen century, derives from the Greek Ἡρώς (hero, warrior). Nietzsche had a deeply heroic streak in his soul, and a hero archetype became a motivating drive in his life and in his philosophy. He confessed in Ecce Homo: “I am by nature warlike. The attack is among my instincts… I attack only causes that are victorious… where I stand alone.” It may well have been the heroism of exceptional men that appealed to him in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and in Shakespeare’s tragedies, which he read as a young teenager. He later rediscovered the hero’s mythical journey in the musical dramas of Wagner.

Jung believed that the archetype of a hero is the oldest and the most powerful of all archetypes, and considered religious figures such as Buddha, Christ or Mohammed to be its various personifications (*in The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*). The hero’s journey is ultimately a journey towards self-integration. The final destination, which Jung called ‘individuation’, is a state of wholeness and completeness, and it involves the unification of opposites. Indeed, *coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of the opposites), a concept borrowed from Heraclitus, is a propelling force in becoming the Übermensch. The constant tension and energy of the conflict becomes a source of inspiration and creativity; the strife leads to “new and more powerful births”. The superabundance of any force inevitably produces its opposite and an inner balance can be achieved by uniting (or overcoming, to use Nietzsche’s term) these opposites. The restoration of equilibrium is the essence of healing. The Übermensch advocates a new ‘great health’ which he equates with an all-embracing totality whereby “all opposites are blended into a unity” (*The Gay Science*, 382). The conscious and the unconscious, good and evil, the earthly and the spiritual synchronize in contrapuntal harmony. A noble soul is no longer divided; it becomes an *‘individual’* not a *‘dividual’*, as Nietzsche has stressed. The element of
transformation (or resurrection) lies at the heart of the hero’s message. The great hero (der Überheld) overcomes himself, sublimates his impulses and passions, and owes nothing to anyone, not even to God. In the process of ‘becoming what one is’, the Übermensch unites reason and passion, order and chaos, discipline and ecstasy. But to become ‘all one’, and be free, ultimately means to be alone, taking full responsibility for one’s life. There is no scapegoat to take the blame for one’s misfortunes; not the Jews, not the Christians, not the Muslims, not even the Devil himself. One is sentenced to freedom and its aloneness:

“During the longest period of human past nothing was more terrible than to feel that one stood by oneself. To be alone, to experience things by oneself, neither to obey nor to rule, to be an individual – that was not a pleasure but a punishment; one was sentenced ‘to individuality’. Freedom of thought was considered a discomfort itself.”

The Gay Science

Reclaiming the Divine

“The beauty of the superman came to me as a shadow: what are gods to me now!”
Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Prologue

Nietzsche has earned a reputation of being the most audacious of God-assassins. In his Gay Science(fragment 125), a madman announces that “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him”. He then asks a question: “must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?” The image of a ‘dying god’ is millennia old: Egyptian Osiris, Greek Dionysus, as well as Jesus Christ suffered death, followed by a form of resurrection. Perhaps humanity’s yearnings to create gods have been intertwined with an urge to destroy them?

In The Phenomenology of the Spirit, Hegel proposed that alienation of human essence as divinity, and its subsequent re-appropriation, had accounted for the emergence and decline of religions. ‘Young Hegelians’, among them Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, took up the theme. Feuerbach saw God’s creativity as a projection of human failure to realize full potential, and God’s omnipotence as a projection of human sense of finitude and vulnerability. “Atheism is a secret of religion” – he claimed in The Essence of Christianity. Once humanity achieves mature self-consciousness, there will be no need for such projections. Nietzsche’s own departure from Christian faith coincided with his reading of Feuerbach, later augmented by his immersion in Schopenhauer. His mission was to reclaim the god-like part of humanity, and Übermensch can be seen as an attempt to do just that.

The quest for wholeness is a quest for cosmic unity; it is also a quest for God. Jung believed that the emergence of the archetype of the Self is a revelation of religious nature; a revelation of God and also of man. The revelation of the Self is experienced as a transpersonal power which he called the ‘God within’, and this is “an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (C.G. JungMysterium Coniunctionis). The Übermensch craves “nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity”. The Eternal Return turns into an ultimate test of total self-acceptance; it is also a manifestation of amor fati (love of fate), which became Nietzsche’s ultimate life-affirming formula. Zorba's defiant Dionysian dance on the Cretan beach in Kazantzakis’ novel Zorba the Greek is the most compelling condensation of this thought.

The Übermensch is a true ‘poet of his life’. He is no longer a plaything in the hands of God or gods, but a master of his own fate. In self-creating and self-destroying, he ‘becomes what he is’, a symbol in which “the creator and the creature are united” (Beyond, 225). In Nietzsche’s moral universe, evil is a necessity and something to be overcome. The ‘will to power’ is a will to master one’s own instincts, one’s own evil and resentment, and has nothing to do with subjugating others. In the process of perpetual self-overcoming, the Übermensch transcends the limits of human existence; man becomes a lord upon himself. “I teach you
the Übermensch. Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?” (Zarathustra, Prologue). To the Christian doctrine of ‘original sin’ that divided the perfect God from the imperfect human being, Nietzsche opposed the Übermensch, a symbol of unification. Completeness, not perfection, is the ultimate Holy Grail in the hero’s journey.

The Übermensch as a ‘Good European’

“Europe wants to become one.”
Beyond Good and Evil

“To lure many away from the herd – that is why I come.”
Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Prologue

As an adolescent, Nietzsche wrote: “We are pilgrims in this world: we have our homeland everywhere and nowhere: the same sun shines over us all. We are citizens of the world – the earth is our realm.” (Juvenilia, 1:100). Later, in Human All Too Human, he urged writers to be ‘good Europeans’ who could “guide and oversee civilization on our Earth”. Good Europeans are homeless ‘free spirits’ who are “too multiple and too mixed in race and descent… to participate in that mendacious racial self-aggrandisement and ill-breeding that proclaims itself a sign of the German way of life…” (The Gay Science, 377). If this would have caused Hitler a serious headache, then Nietzsche’s views of the Jews could have brought about an attack of apoplexy: “The problem of Jews exists only within national states, in as much as their energy and higher intelligence, which accumulated from generation to generation in the long school of their suffering … As soon as it is no longer a matter of preserving nations, but rather of producing the strongest possible European race, the Jew becomes as useful and desirable an ingredient as any other national quality” (Human, 475). Whilst promoting the idea of the ‘good European’, Nietzsche de facto advocated the destruction of nationalism.

However, the free-spirited Übermensch would not succumb to the herd mentality and become a nonentity in some monstrous super-state. Released from the chains of tradition and ideology, such an individual would be free to create new values with a sense of uniqueness and passion for life. In the mood of Greek agon, he would go beyond (über) the narrowness of national divisions and parochial resentments.

Nietzsche lived as he preached. After being appointed to the chair of classical philology in Basel, he relinquished his Prussian citizenship and remained stateless for the rest of his life. Retiring from this post at the age of 35, he embarked on a ten-year odyssey, travelling throughout Europe and writing. This homeless free spirit, almost a vagabond, lived for philosophy, and not off it. His sense of identity rose above (über) any national borders, so that by claiming the ancestry of Polish nobility he referred to spiritual not tribal affinity.

A Journey to the Dark Bottom of the Sea

“Still is the bottom of my sea: who would guess that it harbours sportive monsters.”
Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Of the Sublime Man

“He lived as he wrote... he lifted his hands and placed his feet as though this existence were a tragic drama into which he had been born to play a hero.”
Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks

If Heraclitus talked about coincidentia oppositorum (coincidence of the opposites), Nietzsche lived it. A man of passion and an advocate of Dionysian existence, he led the life of an ascetic hermit; a man of deeply religious
nature he became known as one of God’s most famous assassins. In his writings, the hyperbola of his attacks only matched the sublime tone of his exaltations. Nietzsche’s tragic flaw was his urge to erect and “consecrate altars in the deepest depth of his heart”, equalled by his fervour to smash them. Two antithetical forces of his psyche – that of separation and that of the unification of opposites – seemed to have entered a truly gladiatorial agon. Living by the Heraclitean motto “all things come into being through conflict” (Fragment 8), he turned his most cherished ideals (such as Christianity) into monsters to be overcome. By ‘taking sides against himself’, he waged an almighty war against himself; his philosophy not only became “a confession on the part of the author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir” (Beyond, 6), but a war diary! He gradually turned into a tragic mythical hero, destined for his own destruction.

In the manner of Oedipus, Nietzsche was searching for the essence of humanity that was sentenced to freedom in all its ‘existential aloneness’. As befits a tragic hero, he perished while fully conscious of the danger involved in such undertaking. His Columbus-like adventure into the unchartered territory of the human soul became a journey to the dark bottom of the sea. But he left us this Dionysian message:

“I shall return, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent – not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I shall return eternally to this identical and self-same life, in the greatest things and in the smallest, to teach once more the eternal recurrence of all things, to speak once more the teaching of the great noon-tide of earth and man, to tell of the Übermensch once more…”

Thus Spoke Zarathustra, The Convalescent

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