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“Oh Human! Listen up!”

What Does the Deep Midnight Say?

A Commentary on Nietzsche’s Poem

“Oh Human! Listen up!”

from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?
Erläuterungen zu Nietzsches Gedicht
"Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!
aus *Also sprach Zarathustra*

Im Auftrag der Stiftung Nietzsche-Haus in Sils Maria
herausgegeben von Timon Boehm und Peter Villwock

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Eins!
Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!
Zwei!
Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?
Drei!
„Ich schlief, ich schlief —,
Vier!
„Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht: —
Fünf!
„Die Welt ist tief,
Sechs!
„Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.
Sieben!
„Tief ist ihr Weh —,
Acht!
„Lust — tiefer noch als Herzeleid:
Neun!
„Weh spricht: Vergeh!
Zehn!
„Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit —,
Elf!
„— will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!
Zwölf!

Friedrich Nietzsche

One!

Oh, Human! Listen up!

Two!

What does the deep midnight say?

Three!

"I slept, I slept –;

Four!

"From a deep dream I woke up: –

Five!

"The world is deep,

Six!

"And deeper than can be grasped at day.

Seven!

"Deep is its woe –,

Eight!

"Joy – deeper still than heart's ache:

Nine!

"Woe says: fade!

Ten!

"Yet all joy wants eternity –,

Eleven!

"– wants deep, deep eternity!"

Twelve!

Friedrich Nietzsche

Places and Names of the Poem

The poem "Oh, Human! Listen up!" is one of Nietzsche's most famous texts.[1] It comes from the Third Part of his great didactic poem *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where it is attached to the section "The Other Dance Song." The first three parts of his *Zarathustra*, which Nietzsche published one after the other in 1883 and 1884, lead up to it. After they received little attention, Nietzsche had the Fourth Part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* printed in only 40 copies, of which he sent a small number to a select few. This Fourth Part deals with the "higher people," and at the end Nietzsche has his Zarathustra interpret or comment on the poem in detail for them. However, his comments are so obscure that Nietzsche scholars have hardly dared to approach them to this day.[2] The poem is also given an own name there, or more precisely, two names: "The Sleepwalker Song" and "One More Time," and its meaning, alluding to its penultimate verse, is called "in all eternity." Zarathustra explains it to the "higher humans" after a burlesque donkey festival they celebrated together, in a somnambulistic state, at midnight outside his cave. In his hand copy Nietzsche therefore also called the song "The Drunken Song." We will call it, as we will explain later, "The Midnight Song." After his

death, Nietzsche's enterprising sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche had the poem carved into the hugh rock on the Chastè, the picturesque peninsula in Lake Sils, whose name seems to recall a long-decayed castle.

The peninsula was one of Nietzsche's favorite places. Whatever one may say about the measures taken by the infamous sister, this is perhaps the most beautiful monument to Nietzsche. Long ignored, he had already become quite famous in 1900, the year of his death, after he had spent nine years in a state of mental collapse, and the local Swiss authorities played along. Years before that, in 1893-96, Gustav Mahler had already set the poem to music, for solo alto in the 4th movement of his Symphony No 3. There are some more musical versions. Among others, Richard Strauss concluded his "symphonic poem" *Also sprach Zarathustra* in 1896 with the *Nachtwandler-Lied*, now without words.

The Poem as a Song

The chimes are included in the Third Part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in which the song is heard for the first time, but no longer in the Fourth Part. On the plate in the rock as well as in Mahler and Strauss the chimes are omitted. But one must hear them as well. They resonate in every spoken verse, even and especially in the last wordless one, the 12th, when midnight actually arrives. They set the song to a steady and predictable rhythm, making the dreamlike depth of the poem's words

all the more palpable. Lukas Foss made the chimes audible again in his *Time Cycle*, premiered by Leonard Bernstein in New York in 1960 and acclaimed by audiences and critics alike. Nietzsche's entire philosophy seems to be condensed in this poem – in a song: He has his Zarathustra, in the third and for a long time last part of the poem, give birth to the thought of the eternal recurrence of the same under heavy labor in order to "recover" from it as from giving birth, in German "genesen." With this birth the insight should mature in him that his "soul" now has to "*sing*" if it does not want to "weep," namely "weep out" its "purple melancholy." It should "sing with a roaring song until all seas become silent, to listen for your longing, – / – until the skiff floats over silent longing seas, the golden wonder around whose gold all good and bad and wondrous things hop" (Za III, On Great Longing).

"Oh, Human! Listen up!" is the only song in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the usual sense: broken down into verses, metrically fixed, in rhyme, inviting to be set to music, and sung. Nevertheless, it is not simply "The Other Dance Song," as the section in which it is found is entitled – the whole section is called that, but is not written as a traditional poem, but, like the songs in the Second Part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "The Night Song," "The Dance Song" and "The Grave Song," merely in more rhythmic prose than usual. Yet Nietzsche concludes two of them (not all three and especially not "the Dance Song") with "Thus sang Zarathustra" instead of the usual concluding formula "Thus spoke Zarathustra."

The Other Dance Song

"The Other Dance Song" in the Third Part initially also describes in prose how Zarathustra chases after "life," which appears as a woman whom he names rather disrespectfully "*Weib*" instead of respectfully "*Frau*". In addition, he calls her a "sweet wildcat," an "innocent, ardent one, wind-bride, and child-eyed sinner." With this, not only does the rhythm increase, but also more and more striking rhymes appear, sometimes emphatically bumpy and comical ones such as "Zähnlein" ("little white teeth") / "Mähnlein" ("curly little mane"), "du boshafte Springerin" ("you evil little jumper") / "fiel ich selber im Springen hin" ("I slipped and now I'm on my rump here!"), "Abendröthen" ("sunset–swoons") / "Schäfer flöten" ("shepherds play their tunes"), "Hexe" ("witch") / "Klexe" ("spots"). This wants to be a song, but it isn't yet. At the climax of the hunt, the famous phrase appears, in a kind of dithyrambic three-four time and rhymed again in a bumpy way:

> "Nach dem Tákt meiner Peítsche sóllst du mir tánzen und
> schreín! Ich vergáss doch die Peitsche nicht? – Neín!"

> "To the beat of my whip you will dance so
> and yell so! But did I forget the whip? – Oh no!"

The verses deliberately leave open who holds the whip here, Zarathustra or life.

Life, however, remains calm and composed in its answer – and returns to prose. And yet it or she, the "*Vita femina*" (*The Joyful Science*, No. 339), speaks with increasing movement about the deep love between the two, which nevertheless does not prevent Zarathustra from wanting to leave life soon. And here she brings the midnight bell into play:

> "Es giebt eine alte schwere schwere Brumm-Glocke: die brummt Nachts bis zu deiner Höhle hinauf: —
> — hörst du diese Glocke Mitternachts die Stunde schlagen, so denkst du zwischen Eins und Zwölf daran —
> — du denkst daran, oh Zarathustra, ich weiss es, dass du mich bald verlassen willst!" —

> "There is an old heavy, heavy growling bell: it growls at night all the way up to your cave –
> – when you hear this bell toll the hour at midnight, then you think between one and twelve about this –
> – you think, oh Zarathustra, I know it, about how you will soon leave me!" –

The song "Oh, Human! Listen up!" which then resounds seems to be a song of farewell, a song of death, and yet it does not sound painful. Then, as Nietzsche stages it, life whispers a secret into Zarathustra's ear, which researchers are still working on unraveling today[3] (so it has remained a secret), and finally the two weep together. "At that

moment," Nietzsche has Zarathustra comment, "I loved life more than I ever loved all my wisdom." His wisdom is enticingly driven beyond itself to adventures with life, including the freedom to leave it. And it is in this situation, liberated from all everyday expectations, that the song resounds to the twelve chimes of midnight.

In the fall of 1884, the young Berlin university scholar Heinrich von Stein visited Nietzsche in Sils, and Nietzsche immediately took a vivid interest in the philosophically promising aristocrat, who, to Nietzsche's great sorrow, would die early. He reported Stein's visit to his trusted friend Franz Overbeck on September 14, 1884:

> "Stein said quite sincerely of Zarathustra that he had understood 'twelve sentences and no more' of it: which made me very proud, for it characterizes the unspeakable strangeness of all my problems and lights [...].
>
> On the other hand, Stein is enough of a poet to be deeply moved by the 'other dance song' (third part), for example (he had memorized it). For anyone who does not shed tears at Zarathustra's serenities is considered by me to be still very far from my world, from me."

"Shedding tears at serenities" – Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* is clearly less about new insights than about new experiences, which first liberate us to new insights. And like the experience, the insights could be unspeakably alienating.

Who Speaks?

From the very beginning, Nietzsche has artfully left it in the dark as to who is speaking or singing the song. From the third verse onwards, the poem says, it is the midnight who speaks; but can the midnight speak, doesn't someone have to let it speak? And who speaks the first two verses? If the midnight itself speaks, it could also do so in the 3rd person and therefore also in the first two verses. The speaker who lets her speak could of course be Zarathustra – but the usual "Thus spoke Zarathustra" is here in the section "The Other Dance Song" set just before the song and this obviously indicates that Zarathustra is no longer speaking. Is life speaking instead, which the midnight bell has announced and with which Zarathustra has happily come together? It may be midnight or life or midnight life – in any case, something is speaking that we could not previously imagine doing anything, let alone speaking: Nietzsche introduces a speaking subject that clearly does not exist.

However, subjects, as modern philosophy has imagined them, could not exist at all, and Nietzsche says this explicitly in his book of aphorisms following *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Nos. 16 - 20), which was intended to explain *Zarathustra*: We only *think* of subjects, only *imagine* them, in order to have a doer for everything we do, a cause for everything that happens, which we can hold responsible. Our language with its subject-predicate logic suggests this to us, so that we say 'it thunders,' 'it flashes,' without being able to say what this 'it' is, which obviously does not exist. And that could also be

the case with 'I': With 'I,' 'you,' 'he,' 'she,' 'it,' 'we,' 'you,' 'they,' subjects of this kind, we take the precaution of providing culprits where perhaps there are none ('I' said that, but what was it that spoke in me, and what does 'in me' mean?). Aristotle had interpreted the grammatical subject of which something is said as a substance, as a being that underlies all events, and had set this substance as the 'first category' of logical and philosophical thought. In the Greek sense of the word, however, 'categories' are 'charges,' 'accusations,' and according to Nietzsche this is still their meaning today. They follow a "schema" of "rational thinking," Nietzsche notes and emphasizes, "that we cannot discard"[4] and by which all that we conceptually conceive of is considered responsible from the outset. But midnight and life cannot easily be said to be responsible: So when it says 'I' and yet cannot be grasped as 'I,' this could be an indication that beyond language and its logic, no 'I' can be grasped in any other way. By letting the midnight speak, Nietzsche poetically goes back behind our usual, subject-suggesting language.

And he has already explicitly pointed this out in the First Part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* itself, in the famous section "On the Despisers of the Body":

> "'Ich' sagst du und bist stolz auf diess Wort. Aber das Grössere ist, woran du nicht glauben willst, — dein Leib und seine grosse Vernunft: die sagt nicht Ich, aber thut Ich."

> "'I' you say and are proud of this word. But what is greater is that in which you do not want to believe – your body and its great reason. It does not say I, but does I."

'I' is therefore only a foreground, a foreground owed to the "small reason," which for thousands of years has been held to be the true reason and elevated above life and its corporeality and intransparency: this reason saying 'I' seemed to be something one could make responsible in life wherever it seemed appropriate. Nietzsche, on the contrary, embeds reason into body and life again, and that is the point of the Midnight Song – let's call it this now, because this name would leave open who is speaking in or out of the midnight.

Anxiety and Calm at Midnight

The phrase "Oh Human! Listen up!" does not address 'the human' as a category that transcends individual people, i.e., as something universal and transcendent, but rather each and every individual, each in their own way, with which they are alone. Each person should pay attention to what they experience themselves. And it is night: nothing can be seen, only heard, and in the dark, noises and especially unknown voices frighten people. With the midnight scene, Nietzsche deliberately undermines the metaphor of sight and light that has dominated Western philosophy with its urge for 'enlightenment' through its 'small reason': In light, everything seems to be

unquestionably determined for this reason, which is indeed not, cannot be and does not need to be. But Nietzsche's midnight is not frightening: the twelve chimes in their regularity have a calming effect. They retain something of the familiar civilization with its well-known and well-organized order of time, even if only in sounds far away.

Awakening from a Deep Dream

Midnight "awakens" from a "deep dream" and now "speaks." It has slept like a living being, without being one according to conventional understanding. We have to adjust to surprisingly different orders. When the Midnight, as it says like a person, wakes from a *deep* dream, it remains open whether it is *no longer* speaking in a dream or *still* in a dream, only in a less deep, half-dream-like, somnambulistic state. The "I slept" in verse 3 is doubled as if drunken with sleep; the "drunken song" could be a drowsy one. The doubling "I slept, I slept" indicates that Midnight, as one says, was 'deeply' immersed in the dream: as modern sleep research has now shown, one 'sinks' into a deep sleep step by step, and even in deep sleep one still dreams, speech becomes possible again, speech in sleep that the speaker is not aware of, and, as Nietzsche then points out in the Fourth Part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, sleepwalking can happen. In so-called REM, i.e., rapid eye movement phases, dreams are more emotional and erotic, while in non-REM phases, waking cognitive life is recapitulated; the two phases alternate. It is assumed that this is how the brain reorganizes the daytime

memory and enables reorientation after waking. One has then, as one says, 'slept on something' and 'now sees more clearly,' 'the feeling' of being able to make a decision becomes 'more certain'; it is precisely in the still half-dream-like state of waking that serious insights can emerge and corresponding decisions can be made. In this way, dreams also become "deep" – and are able to grasp the world in a deeper manner than the day.

Dream Worlds below the Surface and Sign Worlds: The Music of Life

Midnight, this is striking and yet mostly ignored, does not speak of Zarathustra's famous teachings: neither of the overman, nor of the will to power, nor, as is usually assumed, since at the end there is talk of "eternity," of the eternal recurrence of the same. Midnight speaks only of the depth of the world, i.e., without distinguishing all that is or appears to be to the one who speaks about it. And in the worlds experienced in dreams, far more is possible than in the daylight worlds. All these possibilities can disturb and reassure, dismay or delight; one must always reorient oneself in them and through them. The dream worlds are usually forgotten upon awakening; if they are nevertheless occasionally remembered and expressed in the light and the language of the day, they disintegrate, extinguish, seem bizarre and impossible. But this does not – and this seems to be Nietzsche's point – render them ineffective; they can continue to occupy the soul without it being

aware of them and keep it in a state of subsurface restlessness. And this is how language works in general according to Nietzsche: in order to be generally understandable, it creates a "surface and sign world" (*The Joyful Science*, No. 354), which covers the subsurface experiences, prescribing us its subject-predicate logic with its imagined doers and the 'I' which don't exist outside the superficial sign world.

According to Nietzsche, it is the superficial sign world which makes consciousness necessary: In Book V of *The Joyful Science*, which followed *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche supposes consciousness could have arisen just for communication through language or, as he writes, has "*developed only under the pressure of the need for communication.*" For the use of signs in language, which one has to learn for a long time as a child and which can constantly generate misunderstandings, requires a particularly high level of attention, and this is why philosophy, especially in modernity, has again placed a subject and a substance behind it, a special and metaphysical 'conscious being' [Bewusst*sein*], which is supposed to control the access to the world as a whole. But this consciousness is not accessible as a being of any kind, but is only presupposed. Nietzsche, on the other hand, assumed (as did Leibniz before him, to whom Nietzsche referred) that it is only about a temporary state of 'awareness' [Bewusst*heit*], i.e., about that heightened and sometimes reflected attention especially when using artificial signs, from which nothing metaphysical can be made.

For the most part, our orientation, which is very complex and constantly renewing itself in new situations, is obviously not conscious and not brought to speech, but remains submerged in manifold

gradations as if in a dream. But if we talk about what we experience of the world and how we experience it, then the articulation in the forms of our usual language occupies our 'consciousness' (or what we imagine it to be) to such an extent that the individuality of all our experiences disappears behind it; it is, according to Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*, No. 268, transformed into "somewhat similar, ordinary, average, herd-like — common!" The "music of life," as he then calls it again in Book V of *The Joyful Science* (No. 372), the liveliness of the voice, facial expressions, gestures, posture, corporeality in general, through which speaking in communication only becomes sufficiently clear, falls silent under the words in common use and even more so under the highly abstract concepts of philosophy, as Nietzsche encountered them. After millennia of idealism, he writes, "a genuine philosopher no longer heard life" and therefore "*denied* the music of life." Nietzsche then uses music in the narrower sense to explain that communication in abstract signs only becomes comprehensible in its concrete meaning for the respective situation through this music of life: if the "world interpretation" is based on strictly universal concepts modeled on mathematics, all that remains is mechanical calculability. But if "one assesses the *value* of a music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated, put into formulas — how absurd would such a 'scientific' assessment of music be! What of it would be comprehended, understood, recognized? Nothing, just nothing of what is really 'music' in it…" (*The Joyful Science*, No. 373).

The Other Way of Speaking, the Music of Midnight: Deepening into Reality

With his Midnight Song, Nietzsche seeks to get back behind the surface and sign world, the logic of which philosophy has sticked to up to now, and discover the depths beyond it and that also means: "beyond good and evil." Yet, in order to make himself understood, he must likewise allow Midnight to speak as well, in a way that is generally understandable at least to a certain extent. Of course, it speaks differently, no longer in daylight terms: it is the art of a philosophical writer, such as Nietzsche was, to revive the silenced music of life in this different language. The Midnight's known, but unheard words make us realize how much the seemingly true world may only be a world of surfaces and signs.

In the Midnight Song, Nietzsche step by step deepens the depth: the word "deep" appears 8 times, doubled at the end. Deep in the philosophical sense is that which discovers what you have relied on so far as superficial and opens up alternatives to it. With his deepening philosophizing, Nietzsche wants to uncover the backgrounds of our seemingly self-evident surface world and again the backgrounds of these backgrounds, until the backgrounds are lost in something incomprehensible and uncertain. He does not want, as is often supposed and as Martin Heidegger, for example, his most influential interpreter, assumed, to discover an ultimate ground on which everything else could then be built. Nietzsche abandons this architectural metaphor, which promises a solid 'house of being' in

which we can confidently live. He also follows this in his *On the Genealogy of Morality*: there he deliberately unsettles morality, which, together with logic, defines and dictates our metaphysics, by demonstrating that even the origins of our morality in "life" are not moral ones. In doing so, he wants to create leeways for new morals that were more honest and more appropriate to life. This shall happen by way of a new "submerging, digging, deepening *in* reality" (*On the Genealogy of Morality* II, 24) – all the way to, as Nietzsche notes for himself, a reality which is "unspeakably differently complex" than we can imagine.[5] Today we speak of a 'reduction of the complexity' of life in our everyday and scientific orientation, which is unavoidable, but which must not result in life, especially human social life, being denied further opportunities for development.

The other main words of the Midnight Song besides "dream" (*Traum*), "world" (*Welt*) and "deep" (*tief*) are "day" (*Tag*), "woe" (*Weh*) and "joy" (*Lust*), which are emphatically monosyllabic and sound powerful. Together with the verbs "is" *(ist)*, "grasp" *(gedacht)*, "speaks" *(spricht)*, "fade" *(vergeh)* and "wants" *(will)*, they make it clear what the poem is all about: the old philosophical fundamental questions of being, thinking and speaking, change of time, and wanting. These are indeed Nietzsche's great philosophical themes. He sheds new light on them by contrasting them with alternative words and concepts: day with night, surface with depth and woe with joy. Woe and joy appear as the deep nocturnal backgrounds of the daylight surface world, as that which determines it subliminally and unconsciously, as motives to either repel and devalue something – the 'woe – or to accommodate

and enhance it – the 'joy.' From this, seemingly true and good judgments of good and evil emerge on the surface: the painful, pain-inducing becomes morally evil, the joyful becomes morally good.

Romantic and Dionysian Pessimism

The moral condemnation of the pleasurable life was the core of the philosophical pessimism of Arthur Schopenhauer, Nietzsche's most influential teacher in philosophy. With his declared pessimism, Schopenhauer condemned life as a whole, so that it was best to escape it into nothingness as soon as possible. "Deep is its woe"– this can be translated into Schopenhauer's formula that the world as will is the blind and senseless ground of the world as representation *(Vorstellung)*, in Nietzsche's language of our surface and sign worlds, and brings nothing but suffering into them. For Schopenhauer, the world of representation *(Vorstellung)* is also the world of reason, of clear insight and rational calculation, on which Western philosophy has placed everything – in its, according to Schopenhauer, hopeless optimism. But Nietzsche did not stick to this teaching of his great teacher, he no longer turned the will into a will as a unity persisting in itself which results as a metaphysical being. In Nietzsche's depths, there is no such fixed metaphysical unity, and for him suffering does not prevent philosophizing from thinking even more honestly and deeply, but on the contrary may trigger it to digg deeper. Below "heart's ache" *(Herzeleid)*, a romantic expression, which here appears almost comical

and in any case ironical – for Nietzsche emerges "joy" whose vitality and mutability forbids building new metaphysics on it. Again in Book V of *The Joyful Science* (No. 370), Nietzsche introduces the contrast of a "romantic" and a "Dionysian pessimism": the romantic one is Schopenhauer's, the Dionysian one Nietzsche reserves for his own future philosophizing. Dionysian joy is the joy of living *and* dying, the pleasure of living again and again, of experiencing life in all its depths with all the alternatives they open up. According to the deeper dream of the Midnight, *this* joy wants "eternity," "deep, deep eternity."

This is not the wish for the mere continuation of a happy moment which Goethe's Faust, when grown old, longs for, the "Stay a while, you are so beautiful!" with which Goethe lets him sink to his death.[6] Nor does it mean, as most interpreters take for granted, that all joy wants the eternal recurrence of the same; at least this is not what is said, and it would not really make sense: for the thought of eternal recurrence would even make death easier, would be a comforting thought which it is not, and the joy at the bottom of everything, not just human life, could hardly think such a thought. In the context of the poem, it seems far more plausible that all joy rather wants the eternity *of itself*, of its passing and returning, i.e., of becoming as such and of suffering which is involved in it. In his notes, Nietzsche called this joy the "Dionysian happiness" "in becoming":[7] it is the joy also in suffering and the suffering also in joy. It no longer distinguishes between good and evil; this joy does not need support from anything universal or normative, from anything teachable. This is precisely what makes it Dionysian.

The Choreography of the Song

Nietzsche does not *teach* the joy of Dionysian becoming in a way as he has his Zarathustra or, more precisely, his animals teach the eternal recurrence of the same. Instead, he *shows* it in the *form* of the song. Perhaps, he manifests his greatest poetic artistry here. He truly has the song dance, giving it a very refined choreography.

(1) Its basic structure is clear: in 12 verses (including the silent one), there are 4 *rhymes*. They first appear as a pair of rhyme a ("Acht!" / "Mitternacht?"), then crossed with rhyme b ("schlief" / "erwacht" / "tief" / "gedacht"). This is followed by a second cross rhyme c – d – c – d ("Weh" / "Herzeleid" / "Vergeh!" / "Ewigkeit"), and the last rhyme ("Ewigkeit") is repeated identically and continues to echo in the silent verse. All are so-called masculine rhymes: only the last and stressed syllable rhymes. This gives the poem its *impressive power*.

(2) The two different cross-rhymes divide the poem into two *symmetrical* halves of 6 verses, including the silent verse. This symmetry also makes the silent verse audible. In the 12th chime, the unspoken and inaudible resounds as an echo of the spoken and audible, the life in speech, the depths beneath the surface and sign world. This gives the poem its *mysterious aura*.

(3) Both halves of the poem are separated by a *point*, the only one in the poem. It indicates the central and pivotal point of the poem. After it comes the new: the turning away from Schopenhauer. Otherwise

there are only exclamation marks, question marks, commas, a colon — — and *dashes* (in German: *Gedankenstriche*, literally: 'thought-lines'). There are six in total, and dashes, according to Nietzsche, indicate his unspoken and, for him, most important thoughts. For him, "it always begins with the dashes,"[8] and many of his aphorisms end with dashes. What the Midnight speaks is full of the unspoken right from the start. One must therefore be able to hear the dashes as inaudible, i.e., as pauses, when reading the poem aloud. This gives the poem its *intellectual appeal.*

(4) Nietzsche also audibly choreographes the *vowels*, creating something like *sound rhymes* in the German original. This is particularly noticeable in verses 3 ("Ich schlief, ich schlief –": i î i î), 5 ("Die Welt ist tief": i e i î) and 7 ("Tief ist ihr Weh –": î i i ê), which surround the middle of the poem. The low-sounding e of "Weh," which is so common in the German language, only slowly emerges from the sonorous German o, a and i ("Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!": o e î a), then becomes dominant in verse 9 ("Weh spricht: Vergeh!": ê i e ê), unites in verse 10 ("Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit –" o a e u i e i ei) with the full-sounding vowels and then sounds out in a large i î e î e e i ei ("– will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!") like a longing cry. The darkest, if you like, midnight-like vowel u is only heard in the middle of the song, first in the harmless "Und," but then twice in "Lust" and only in "Lust." The seemingly bright *Lust* (joy) is dark, its dark tone sounds even darker in the vocal concerto that Nietzsche composes. This gives the poem its *singing sound.*

(5) The *meter* is simple – it is the meter of a dance song: 5-fold regular alternation between 2- and 4-beat iambs or single and double iambic dimeters – Gr. *iámbos* is the leg that steps. But that's not all. In the first three verses of the second half, Nietzsche composes *rhythmic displacements* (instead of "Tief íst ihr Wéh" "Tíef ist ihr Wéh", instead of "Lust – tíefer nóch" "Lúst – tíefer nóch," instead of "Weh sprícht: Vergéh!" "Wéh spricht: Vergéh!"): Woe (*Weh)* and joy *(Lust)*, which are now brought up, do not fit into the verse meter where they are brought up, do not fit into any meter at all, and Nietzsche makes this audible. But with the final verses, the regular iambic rhythm is regained, the dance becomes light and cheerful again, until it fades into the inaudible. This gives the poem its *exhilarating liveliness*.

(6) Nietzsche's use of the word *"tief"* (deep) also creates a dense and firm, but not rigid order, as is typical of living beings. "Tief" first appears twice in the positive (v. 2: "Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?" and v. 4: "Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht: –"), then twice in the positive *and* comparative (v. 5/6: "Die Welt ist tief, / Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht." and v. 7/8: "Tief ist ihr Weh –, / Lust – tiefer noch als Herzeleid:") and finally in the double positive (v. 11: "tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit"). "Tief" is all the more conspicuously absent (except in the opening and tenth verse, which prepares the eleventh) in the verse alluding to Schopenhauer "Weh spricht: Vergeh!" Nietzsche seems to indicate that this kind of speech still lacks depth. "Tief" (deep) is then also missing in the refrain of the following *Yes and Amen song* "For I love you, O eternity!" Here Zarathustra calls himself "lusting for the eternity [...] and for the nuptial ring of rings, – the ring of recurrence."

According to this, Zarathustra too would not be deep – at least if he still clung to a doctrine. Instead, the "woman" of whom he now speaks, would be deep, because she can bear him children which is for him the deepest depth. Nietzsche had indeed initially considered "vita femina" as the title for *The Other Dance Song*, "Ariadne" for *On Great Longing* and "Dionysus" for *The Seven Seals*.[9] In this way, he also inserts his own great love into this poem – as a riddle.

(7) In the awakening from a deep sleep, in which one becomes conscious and slowly reorients oneself, the Midnight speaks in a succinct, decisive style: in mostly monosyllabic (29), rarely bisyllabic (8), even more rarely and only toward the end trisyllabic (2) words (apart from the trisyllabic word "Mitternacht" in v. 2). It also exclusively uses main clauses, which, apart from the end, again consist of extremely short, simple, concise formulas. They remain well-ordered despite the colorful punctuation – until suddenly the irrepressible "Lust" (joy) breaks through the grammatical order: "Tief ist ihr Weh –, / "Lust – tiefer noch als Herzeleid:" is a broken sentence. Thus, Nietzsche uses the shattering syntax to show how joy breaks the ban of language, which excludes it no longer allowing it to be experienced, just as the traditional philosophical language, which is fixed on definable and logically connected terms, no longer allows the "music of life" to be heard. In the Midnight Song it is only woe that "speaks," and it is, according to Nietzsche, the "woe" that makes philosophers speak urging them to express their respective drives, aches, needs and sufferings in more or less morally justified "interpretations of the world." Joy, on the other hand, the deepest to

which the Midnight leads down and which dissolves the order of speech, does *not* speak; the Midnight only speaks *about it*. It does not contra*dict*, *speak* out against it. Instead, it with*stands* the "Vergeh!" which the "Weh" wants, the wish that all urges, aches, hardships and suffering may end.

The Midnight's "Doch" (Yet) is the first conjunction in the poem, the first logical connection after its awakening from the dream. Now, the Midnight seems to have arrived back in the surface and sign world and its logic. And so the first longer and rhythmically fluid sentence follows, yet still in the mode of a repetition that enriches itself. But it too is interrupted by a double dash, allowing the Midnight to reflect once more and then confirm: "wants eternity –, / – wants deep, deep eternity!" ("will Ewigkeit –, / – will tiefe, tiefe eternity!").

The logic, however, remains a dream logic. When Midnight says that joy "wants" anything, then it wants this without any reason, and just as the double "I slept, I slept" before, the double "deep, deep" now evokes a new sinking – a sinking down into the inaudibly fading and unteachable eternity.

The End of Doctrines:
The Innocence of Becoming

This unteachable inaudibility evokes mystical interpretations. But perhaps they also say too much, just as Schopenhauer says too much

when he speaks of the Buddhist Nirvana. All we can say is that the world and the life on earth will go on after the death of an individual living being and that we can enjoy precisely this if we agree with life. Life does not want – or its destiny is not to pass away, but to go on, and, according to Nietzsche, the living being neither can want anything else, nothing but the evolution of life that always only leads beyond it and is therefore pointless for many. This can be understood as a commitment to nihilism, the devaluation of seemingly higher values. The Midnight Song leads beyond the fear of suffering and death to the desire for further becoming beyond all reason, metaphysics and morality, which, according to Nietzsche, themselves spring from this fear of Dionysian becoming, in order to anxiously banish it into orders that are only considered true in the surface and sign world. Here one speaks of guilt and lives in a guilty conscience. Yet, in the deeper levels of life an "innocence of becoming" emerges that makes all attributions of guilt recognizable as superficial. And on the Chastè peninsula, surrounded by the Lake of Sils, in front of the wild rock into which the Midnight Song is immersed, you can still feel a bit of that innocence.

Overview of the Poetic Composition

Chime	*Text*	*Rhyme*	*Meter*	*Vowels*	*"deep"*
Eins!	Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!	a	v – v –	o e î a	
Zwei!	Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?	a	v – v – v – v –	a i i i e î e a	v – v tiefe – v –
Drei!	„Ich schlief, ich schlief —,	b	v – v –	i î i î	
Vier!	„Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht: —	a	v – v – v – v –	a î e au i i e a	v tiefem – v – v –
Fünf!	„Die Welt ist tief,	b	v – v –	i e i î	v – v tief
Sechs!	„Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.	a	v – v – v – v –	u î e a e a e a	v tiefer – v – v –
Sieben!	„Tief ist ihr Weh —,	c	v – v – *rhythmic displacement:* – v v –	î i i ê	tief v – v –
Acht!	„Lust — tiefer noch als Herzeleid:	d	v – v – v – v – *rhythmic displacement:* – – v – v – v –	u î e o a e e ei	v tiefer – v – v –
Neun!	„Weh spricht: Vergeh!	c	v – v – *rhythmic displacement:* – – v –	ê i e ê	
Zehn!	„Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit —,	d	v – v – v – v –	o a e u i e i ei	
Elf!	„— will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!	d	v – v – v – v –	i î e î e e i ei	v tiefe tiefe – v –
Zwölf!		d			

This interpretation of the Midnight Song was presented on July 26, 2016, in front of the 'Nietzsche Stone' on the Chastè peninsula by the Lake of Sils as part of the Nietzsche Summer Workshop organized by Peter André Bloch, Timon Boehm and Peter Villwock. An earlier version with a detailed scholarly apparatus appeared in *Nietzsche-Studien* 42 (2013), p. 85-115, entitled "*Oh Mensch! Gieb Acht!* Kontextuelle Interpretation des Mitternachts-Lieds aus Nietzsches *Also sprach Zarathustra*." Also in 2016, I attempted to explain the commentary on the Midnight Song, which Nietzsche has his Zarathustra himself present to the 'higher men' at the end of the Fourth Part of the work, under the title "Zarathustras philosophische Auslegung des ‚Mitternachts-Lieds," in: Katharina Grätz / Sebastian Kaufmann (Ed.), *Nietzsche zwischen Philosophie und Literatur: Von der Fröhlichen Wissenschaft zu Also sprach Zarathustra*, Heidelberg (Universitätsverlag Winter) 2016, p. 425-442. Rather than an interpretation of the text, Zarathustra's own commentary provides new insights when he remembers the song.

For an introduction to Nietzsche's entire philosophy see
Werner Stegmaier, *An Orientation to the Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Translated by Reinhard G. Mueller and Werner Stegmaier, Orientations Press, Nashville, Tennessee, 2022.

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Endnotes

[1] There are numerous English translations of the poem that also try to find rhymes, but by doing so heavily alter the meaning of the text. We dispense with the rhymes in our translation.

[2] See Werner Stegmaier, Zarathustras philosophische Auslegung des ‚Mitternachts-Lieds', in: Katharina Grätz / Sebastian Kaufmann (Ed.), *Nietzsche zwischen Philosophie und Literatur: Von der* Fröhlichen Wissenschaft *zu* Also sprach Zarathustra*,* Heidelberg (Universitätsverlag Winter) 2016, 425-442 (no English translation).

[3] See Michael Platt, "What Does Zarathustra Whisper in Life's Ear?," in: *Nietzsche-Studien* 17 (1988), pp. 179-194; Gabriel Zamosc, "What Zarathustra Whispers," in: *Nietzsche-Studien* 44 (2015), pp. 231-266; Michael Skowron, "Das Gewissen des Tänzers. Seele, Leben, Weisheit, Wahrheit, Ewigkeit, Liebe und Tod in und um Zarathustras anderes Tanzlied," in: *Nietzsche-Studien* 45 (2016), pp. 189-219.

[4] *Nachlass*, Sommer 1886 - Herbst 1887, 5[22], in: *Friedrich Nietzsche, Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden* [KSA], ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, München/Berlin/New York 1980, vol. 12, p. 193-194.

[5] *Nachlass* April – June 1885, 34[249], KSA vol. 11, p. 505.

[6] Goethe, Faust II, V. 11581-11586: "To the moment I'd dare say: / Stay a while, you are so beautiful! / The trace of my earthly days / Cannot perish in aeons. – / In the anticipation of such high happiness / I now enjoy the highest moment." Then the stage direction follows: "Faust sinks back, the lemurs pick him up and lay him on the ground" (transl. Reinhard G. Mueller). Nietzsche likewise considered letting Zarathustra die in happiness. Yet, in the published version Zarathustra's happiness seems to be different, a happiness limited to the time in which the Midnight Song is heard. He survives hearing the happy song. Nietzsche did not include it in his last work *Dionysus Dithyrambs*, where he compiled some *Lieder* out of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and some new ones, perhaps because he wanted to leave it entirely in the context of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.*

[7] See *Nachlass* Autumn 1885 – Autumn 1886, 2[110], KSA, vol. 12, p. 116: "Happiness in existence is only possible as happiness in *appearance* / Happiness in becoming is only possible in the *destruction* of the reality of 'existence', of the

beautiful appearance, in the pessimistic destruction of illusion. / *in the destruction of even the most beautiful appearance, Dionysian happiness reaches its peak*." (our transl.)

[8] Letter to Elisabeth Nietzsche dated May 20, 1885.

[9] See Montinari, Commentary, KSA 14.324, and Jörg Salaquarda, "Noch einmal Ariadne. Die Rolle Cosima Wagners in Nietzsches literarischem Rollenspiel," *Nietzsche-Studien* 25 (1996), pp. 99-125, here p. 113.