TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

**The Agonist** - December 2024 - Volume: 18, No: 2, pp. 63 – 71
ISSN: 2752-4132 (Print) ISSN 2752-4140 (Online)
journals.tplondon.com/agonist

Received: 23 November 2024 Accepted: 12 November 2024
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/agon.v18i2.3393

# Nietzsche's Pale Criminal Identified

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***Abstract***

*As he does in most of his books, in* Thus Spoke Zarathustra *Nietzsche is unfolding his dedicated resistance to established social standards and moral tenets, though in some sections therein in somewhat less than a clearly developed thematic progression. Thus, early in Part I of* Zarathustra*, we come across a speech by the eponymous character, titled "On the Pale Criminal," whose locus and relevance to the rest of the text seem to have perplexed every generation of students of Nietzsche's oeuvre since its initial appearance in print (in 1883). A closer reading of the speech, however, should reveal that the speech's main character, an (unidentified male) pale-complected criminal, who is about to be condemned to death for the capital crime of murder, is not as incongruous as he might seem at first blush — to the rest of the book or to the world of characters we meet later in* Zarathustra *or in any of Nietzsche's other texts. Once we correctly identify the reason for his pale complexion, we might more easily determine his motives as well as the identity of his victim. Once, in turn, we grasp these elements, we notice that the criminal is really a personification of Nietzsche's two other (self-declared) killers of God, namely, the madman, in* the Gay Science*, and the inexpressible one, the ugliest man, in Part IV of* Zarathustra.

***Keywords:*** *Nietzsche; Zarathustra; pale criminal; murder; Scott Horton*

> What is this man [the pale criminal]? A ball of wild snakes, which rarely enjoy rest from each other; so they go forth singly and seek prey in the world.
>
> — *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I, 6

> *The Madman.* Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market-place, and cried incessantly, "I seek God! I seek God!" — As many of those who do not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter . . . "Whither is God," he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him — you and I. All of us are his murderers . . . What was holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives.
>
> — *The Gay Science*, 125

Arthur C. Danto commences the principal body of his acclaimed *Nietzsche as Philosopher* with the following striking observations concerning the overarching lack of editorial discipline that seems to characterize most of Nietzsche's written thought:

> Nietzsche's books give the appearance of having been assembled rather than composed. They are made up, in the main, of short, pointed aphorisms, and of

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> essays seldom more than a few pages long; each volume is more like a treasury of the author's selections than like a book in its own right. Any given aphorism or essay might as easily have been placed in one volume as in another without much affecting the unity or the structure of either (1).

"Exceptions," Danto hastens to add, "must be made in the case of *The Birth of Tragedy,* perhaps, and of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for the former exhibits a conventional unity and develops a main thesis, while the latter acquires a certain external structure by having each segment pose as a homiletic uttered by Zarathustra. In neither book is there an ordered development, however, or a direction of argument or presentation. They may be entered at any point" (1–2).

Danto is, to be sure, correct on both counts: (i) Most of Nietzsche's books might well have been constructed differently, with perhaps none of their respective claims or themes suffering either in conceptual direction or in meaning, and (ii) *exception*s indeed ought to be made in the case of *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra.* Actually, the former may be considered Nietzsche's best thematically structured work: It begins with an analysis of classical tragedy (Sections 1-9), then proceeds to identify the two most prominent culprits who managed to drive Dionysus off the tragic stage (Sections 10-20), and, finally, introduces the musical genius most capable of reawakening the wine god's dormant spirit (Sections 19-25). While *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is hardly this well-defined structurally, it does nevertheless constitute an organic whole, with each section reemphasizing its author's character-mediated resistance to established social and political standards and moral tenets.

Even so, the First Part of *Zarathustra* comprises at least one section, or *speech*, by the eponymous character that appears to be decidedly out of place *vis-à-vis* the other nearly eighty speeches we find in the rest of the book. Specifically, while the other speeches feature Zarathustra's polemics against the state, his seemingly disparaging assertions on women, his view of marriage and what he hopes would be the ideal object of all such interrelationships, and his disposition toward men of wisdom, toward scholars, poets and poetry, "On the Pale Criminal" is a sympathetic, if esoteric, explanation of an imaginary individual's capital crime.

Granted, to expect rather strict and pellucid thematic consistency from so mercurial a thinker as Nietzsche would probably border on the silly. At the same time, the sort of capriciousness we encounter in most of his texts tend to lead to uncertainty and confusion about what exactly he wishes to convey to us; and "On the Pale Criminal" might be said to stand as a clear example of this sort of fluidity.

*The speech's plot*: The speech describes a court of law wherein an unidentified pale-complected man is about to be condemned to death for a most grisly deed — murder. Out of the criminal's eyes, his contempt speaks thus: "'My ego is something that shall be overcome: my ego is to me the great contempt of man'" (Nietzsche, 149–150). Zarathustra urges the presiding judges to make sure that the murderer's imminent execution serve as a valuable means to reaching the race of *the overman* — though Zarathustra has thus far revealed nothing either about the latter's physical appearance or about his collective personality. In the light of this goal, Zarathustra further enjoins the judges to refer to the condemned man as an *enemy*, but not *villain*, or as a *fool*, but not *sinner*.

The pale man in the witness box has just nodded, which indicates that he is ready to hear his sentence. His execution should in a most important sense be a relief for him as well, to the extent that it would bring him freedom from his "madness *after* the deed"; or, the obsessive idea that, though "equal" to his "murderous lust and greed for the bliss of the knife," following the act's commission he could think of himself as not much more than the "doer of [only that] *one* deed" (150). Of the presiding judges, the red-clad one notes that our criminal probably murdered no reason other than to rob; Zarathustra, on the other hand, insists that while he did indeed rob, the criminal did so not because theft was his overriding aim, but only in order to conceal his madness, of which he was "ashamed."

So, what are we to make of this arabesque, image-laden speech? In the Editor's Notes to his translation of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Walter Kaufmann, for one, writes that "On the Pale Criminal" is simply "[t]oo abstract to make sense to Nietzsche's first readers. [M]uch of this chapter now seems like reflections of Dostoevski's Raskolnikov." "But," Kaufmann tells us in the same breath, "Nietzsche had not yet discovered Dostoevski" (118). If so, one might well wonder, what would any first reader be said to have gained from laying eyes upon this particular note by Kaufmann? Really, nothing. On the contrary, it seems that one would likely have been less confused had he or she never encountered those perfunctory passages: It is, of course, true that "On the Pale Criminal" merits being characterized as *too abstract* to make sense to Nietzsche's *first* readers. At the same time, however, Kaufmann intimates that the text could not but stand as no less a challenge to even the more *seasoned* students of Nietzsche's written corpus: Insofar as Nietzsche had not yet read anything by Dostoevsky, Kaufmann's explanation would have to be regarded as a paradox, and thus as, if anything, merely *adding* to the confusion facing (especially) Nietzsche's first readers of this speech. Granted, the speech does depict an admitted murderer who, in Zarathustra's words, "thirsted after the bliss of the knife" (150–151), which parallels, but does not precisely reflect, Dostoevsky's description of Raskolnikov's axe-murder, or his motive for murdering the old pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, and her half-sister. But this is as far as the parallel between the two texts extends. In fact, other than this merely incidental overlap, one could point to (literally) nothing in "The Pale Criminal" as in any sense attempting to direct our attention either to Dostoevsky or to his novel's anti-hero or, still, to any, perhaps latent, trait in the human character writ large.

What with his Editor's Note under consideration Kaufmann does is, *au fond*, make it possible for others to feel safe about re-echoing his claim that Zarathustra's speech might be taken as a *psychological explanation* of crime in all its manifestations. Correspondingly, writing in *Harper's Magazine*, Scott Horton, confidently maintains that the

> 'pale criminal' is a study of evil latent in humankind — not the most dramatic or threatening kind of evil, but rather the sort of evil which infests the small-minded or petty thug .... The 'pale criminal' may well commit a deceit, a fraud, a confidence trick, without even thinking of his conduct as a crime, and may experience remorse in the wake of his actions (Horton, "Nietzsche's Pale Criminal").

Hmmm. . . I imagine a reader of the preceding remarks saying to himself or herself. This, and indeed no more than this, is what Horton has distilled from Nietzsche's "On the Pale Criminal"? How odd that where Nietzsche sees an ultra-violent individual, one obsessed

not only with the idea and urge that he absolutely must kill someone, but also gripped by a parallel obsession after the fact, Horton posits a "small-minded or petty thug," one who might, say, steal a shirt or a loaf of bread from a department store, or perhaps swindle another into doing something that the latter would not have done so on his or her own, and yet not see either of these acts as a crime, let alone be anguished by any pangs of conscience. As such, Horton appears to be speaking not *to*, but *past*, Nietzsche's text, and therefore, unsurprisingly, fails to reveal either the criminal's identity or his victim's.

No less a penetrating student of the human condition than Freud, too, has borrowed the phrase *pale criminal* to designate those who have committed, or would commit, a crime because of unconscious guilt (cf. Costello). While, surely, Freud's use of the same phrase does not quite rise to the level of *analysis* of Nietzsche's speech, his application of it to murderous acts points to his idea that the phrase must, initially, have had just such an aim.

Insofar as we could not learn much about either of these identities or about what might have motivated the pale man's destructive behavior from those who treat the latter ontically, that is, as an actual actor, it might behoove us to take another look at the original text —but from a different vantage point. We should have gone far toward this end once we put into focus at least two issues, (i) why our criminal is decidedly pale, and (ii) why Nietzsche describes him as being possessed by a madness *before*, and a parallel madness *after*, his murderous deed. Here, for the sake of clarity, we should continue to refer to the pale man as having murdered, but without treating his act as an actual deed, or claiming that his act reveals anything either about violence or about murder as a possibly latent human trait.

> (i) The pale criminal is pale in complexion not because, as one might surmise, his blood has drained from his face, but because, driven by his great contempt for man, and tormented by the world's revulsion and pity for the murder he committed, he has found shelter in self-isolation, a recluse in a personal underworld, a world through to which no sunlight can readily penetrate. His contempt for man, however, is not quite hatred of humans, but of what most of them have become, prayerful deniers of life, and hankerers after the otherworldly. More than this, perhaps most of humankind has come to believe that its collective (especially Judeo-Christian) table of values is a gift from God, and that it is no less than every person's life's duty to regard the terrestrial world as false and to eradicate practically all personal will and self-assertion. And inasmuch as the pale man at some point decided to take it upon himself to not only resist the spread of this social malignancy, but, in fact, to once and forever do away with its very source, he begins to seem decreasingly out of place where he first makes his entrance, as we notice a composite of at least two other self-identified murderers Nietzsche includes in his corpus' *dramatis personae*, the madman in the marketplace we meet in the *Gay Science* (Sec. 125), and the *ugliest man* in *Zarathustra* (Part IV 7): The *madman* openly declares himself one of the many who killed God, and the ugliest man who, in order to flee the world's alms and pity for having killed God, ran away to seek refuge into the depths of the valley of Snakes' Death, a place where neither vegetation grew nor birdsong was ever heard.

Ironically, some of those who are now sitting in judgment of the pale man, the red-clad judge, for example, are none other than the (normally red-clad) Catholic cardinals who, had they grasped that God really is dead, as did the retired pope (who immediately precedes the ugliest man in the same, final Part of *Zarathustra*), could, as Nietzsche says, provide the quickest road toward affirming life. It is precisely within the context of this clearing action that Zarathustra exhorts these judges to think of the pale criminal as, yes, an *enemy*, that is, of all that in any manner stifles life's spontaneous expression, but by no means a mere *villain*, a destroyer, and, yes, a *fool* for undertaking the world-transforming mission he did, but in no way a mere *sinner*.

> (ii) Our criminal, we might infer, must have observed that the credibility, which attached to religion, or, more precisely, to the widely held notion of God, appears to have been only minimally lessened (let alone neutralized), by earlier attempts at secularization and critical examination — through such texts as David Strauss' *The Life of Jesus*, Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*, and even Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. Though none of these texts is mentioned in Zarathustra's speech, we might further infer that the pale man's madness against God did not just spring into being whole and unquestioned, but that he probably formed his decision to effect the change he did, after some thought and even despite some mental reservations. Ironically, then, it was his helplessness *vis-à-vis* such a powerful enemy that led the criminal to resort to the highest level of violence as the most effective solution.

As for the madness that gripped the pale murderer after his bloody deed, it must have developed after he eventually realized that his act did not, ultimately, manage to bring forth a more life-affirming worldwide context. On the contrary, he (and his likely cohorts) only made possible the development of a new, political class of life-deniers and interpreters of the world. Phrased differently, the post-God humankind has simply put forth a new deity to fill the void. It has created a new idol, the *idol of the state*, which Zarathustra warns us against in no later than the speech immediately following "On the Pale Criminal." More specifically, what Nietzsche has in mind here is the state of what he in the *Antichrist* refers to as "[t]he socialist rabble, the chandala apostles, who undermine the instinct, the pleasure, the worker's sense of satisfaction with his small existence — who make him envious, who teach him revenge" (Sect. 57). In a word, the pale criminal made possible the rise of the class of the weakest, the *lumpen* proletariat (though Nietzsche does not use this phrase), whose incessant, principally envy-driven cry for equality and revenge share the same origin with Christianity.

We might well undergird the accuracy of our identification of the pale criminal as the murderer of God by clarifying at least three elements that, in the speech by the same title, relate to his trial and to his publicly displayed attitude:

First, what, through his bearing in court, might the defendant have wished to convey, presuming, of course, Zarathustra's reading of it is on target when he observes that out of the criminal's eyes his contempt speaks thus: "'My ego is something that shall be overcome: my ego is to me the great contempt of man'" (149–150)? Why, if so, does our pale man appear so obviously contemptuous of humankind, and, besides, how exactly does that same contempt relate to, or perhaps even *inspire* his murder of God? This question

also points to the possibility that our criminal either (incidentally) anticipates Zarathustra's *Übermensch* teaching to the residents of the town of Motley Cow, or, more importantly, stands as no less than a main precursor thereof. The answer should be rather clear: Insofar as his ego is intertwined with his rejection of existing humanity, the pale man's ego-overcoming might happen only after the latter's culture and its decidedly influential otherworldly antecedents have been rendered extinct. In a word, humankind will remain its own self- and life-denier so long as its pronounced tendency for (to borrow an apt phrase from Karl Marx) *oratio pro aris et focis* remains active (Marx, 378). Correspondingly, humankind would have to discover its essence within a post-religious social context; and since doing away with God would likely take a long while — if it happens at all — the defendant must have thought it more expeditious to take matters into his own hands, and so himself assassinate God.

Second, while it is true that Zarathustra's admonishment of the presiding judges to refer to the pale criminal as an *enemy*, but not villain, as *sick*, but not scoundrel, and as even a *fool*, but not sinner, detracts not at all from the notion that while the defendant must have indeed committed an act of world-historical dimensions, his deed would nevertheless be one of profoundly useful, that is, life-affirming, effects. Nor could a greater, universally propitious act, in Zarathustra's eyes, be perpetrated than that of neutralizing the very foundations of received standards and principles that brace up Western culture itself, the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Hence, yes, anyone who would willfully undertake that sort of daring task could not but be characterized as an enemy of the highest order, yet not necessarily a *villain*, or, a wicked, malevolent force, a person whose behavior would aim at merely harming others for its own sake. Similarly, while from a dedicated cleric's vantage point the pale man would have to be declared an enemy of God, he would have to be declared a liberator, a terrestrial deliverer from all the otherworldly advocates, from the teachers of virtue, and from the despisers of the body. Correspondingly, clerics and their sympathizers would be correct to see him as being sick, or, more accurately, psychologically imbalanced for not just wishing, but also actively working toward the elimination of the very foundations of such an advanced and stable social model as Western culture, but not a mere (aimless) destroyer, a nihilist.

Third, the preceding remark in effect invites us to put the object of the red judge's claim into focus: When the judge observes that the defendant killed because he "wanted to rob," he is really committing a red herring fallacy. Specifically, while the judge is attempting to create the impression that his aim is to point to a close relationship between robbery and murder, that is, that robbery might well lead to murder, he is in effect hoping we would equate the murderer of God with no more than a common thief, and so dissuade us from sympathizing, and perhaps even joining forces, with those who wish that they might (literally) do away with the source of all the stifling moral codes and regulations.

*Concluding remarks*: In the light of these considerations, then, the bottom line to our reading of "On the Pale Criminal" should be evident: Zarathustra's speech is nether out of place where Nietzsche has situated it, nor is it a (hopeless) mystery. It would make no sense to think that the speech in question appears, as it were, to exist *per se*, in vacuum. In place of any such view, I propose that we posit the following observation: Commentators on Nietzsche's written work who have thought it safer to merely reecho — or, at best, to only slightly embellish — Kaufmann's view of the chapter's seemingly enigmatic contents,

would have done better had they searched for a nexus between the pale man and some of the other, self-proclaimed criminals who are part of the *dramatis personae* we meet in the rest of Nietzsche's narrative.

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