Nietzsche's collapse: The view from Paraguay

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Nietzsche’s Collapse: The View from Paraguay

Karl S. Guthke

Oscar Wilde in chains on the platform of Paddington Station, Rimbaud smuggling firearms in Abyssinia while Paris is in ecstasy about his Illuminations, Nietzsche, tears streaming down his cheeks, embracing a fiacre horse in downtown Turin as insanity descends upon him—these scandalous incidents, tailor-made for the boulevard press though they are, also sound an alarm in the wider landscape of the cultural history of the time. They stir the fin-de-siècle mind out of its complacency with familiar patterns of thought, and soon enough they become the focal points of a popular mythology that has lasted to this day. In the German-speaking countries, this is of course especially true of Nietzsche’s collapse in the first days of January 1889. Gottfried Benn, in his poem “Turin,” does not even need to refer to the famous case by name:

“Ich laufe auf zerrissenen Sohlen”,
schrieb dieses große Weltgenie
in seinem letzten Brief—, dann holen
sie ihn nach Jena—; Psychiatrie.

Ich kann mir keine Bücher kaufen,
ich sitze in den Libarrien:
Notizen—, dann nach Aufschnitt laufen:—
das sind die Tage von Turin.

Indes Europas Edelfäule
an Pau, Bayreuth und Epsom sog,
umarmte er zwei Droschkengäule
bis ihn sein Wirt nach Hause zog.

Between the lines are the well-publicized facts of Nietzsche’s last, half-lucid days in Turin. His third-floor furnished room in Via Carlo Alberto was a temple, the German professore had confided to his landlord, the newspaper vendor Davide Fino; any day now the king and queen of Italy would pay him a visit; torn-up money is found in the wastebasket; Nietzsche’s singing and piano-playing is so loud it can be heard all over the well-built house; and one day two policemen escort the philosopher back to his room: he had embraced a horse in the Piazza Carlo Alberto, they tell his landlord. This incident, the most notorious and most legendary of the numerous indications of Nietzsche’s headlong slide into madness,

1 See the list of symptoms in Pia Daniela Volz, Nietzsche im Labyrinth seiner Krankheit: Eine medizinisch-biographische Untersuchung (Würzburg 1990), 201-204, or the detailed account in Curt Paul Janz, Friedrich Nietzsche: Biographie, vol. 3 (Munich, 1979), 9-48.

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is now considered authentic; at the same time scholars of these “final days” are aware that as insanity approached, Nietzsche escaped into role-playing—and in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1.5) there is a scene very similar to Nietzsche’s antics in the Piazza Carlo Alberto: “Raskolnikov dreams of drunk peasants beating a horse to death and, overcome by pity, he embraces the dead animal and kisses it.”3 Such living in quotation is only an extension of the various impersonations that Nietzsche indulged in during the days of his collapse; they range from the obscure Parisian murderer Prado and de Lesseps of Suez Canal fame all the way to the “Crucified One” and the Antichrist as well as Caesar, Dionysos, and Phoenix.

Underlying the Turin events was the outbreak of the final phase of progressive syphilitic paralysis. This, at any rate, is the widespread, indeed popular view of the matter, taken for granted, for example, by that barometer of public opinion, Thomas Mann, in his Nietzsche novel *Doktor Faustus* of 1947. The vast majority of professional medical opinion agrees, though some voices can still be heard advising at least caution. (We may ignore some of the more recent ones: one reminds us that Nietzsche was “extremely parsimonious” and could have satisfied his demanding sexual phantasies “at best in very expensive brothels” if at all; another explains Nietzsche’s descent into insanity as a side effect of his opposition to metaphysics.) Syphilitic paralysis had already been the diagnosis offered by Professor Ludwig Wille to whose psychiatric clinic Friedmatt in Basel Nietzsche was committed in January, 1889; it was also the diagnosis of the staff of the Jena clinic where Nietzsche was held from 19 January 1889 to 24 March 1890, before he was entrusted to the care of his mother in Naumburg where he stayed, until he was installed by his sister in August 1897 in her Weimar villa Silberblick for the last three years of his life. (Taking care of his “Herzensfritz,” she protested a little too much, was her “dearest duty, the only happiness in my loneliness.”4 In point of fact, and contrary to her own statement, she had not returned from Paraguay in 1893 in order to take care of her brother, but rather to position herself as the high priestess of his fame.)

Progressive paralysis ("which, to be sure, in 1889 was considered to comprise a wider area of symptoms than today")5 and syphilis—for Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, as Dr. Bernhard Förster’s wife called herself to her brother’s disgust, this was unacceptable. When Dr. Paul Julius Möbius diagnosed venereal infection in his treatise *Über das Pathologische bei Nietzsche* (Wiesbaden, 1902), Elisabeth in 1905 panned the book in the journal *Zukunft* as spreading one of the "Nietzsche-Legenden," another one of which was the story that her brother had

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4 "Die Krankheit Friedrichs Nietzsche’s," *Zukunft* 30 (1900): 27.
6 Janz, *Nietzsche*, 3: 12; see also 55.
been "a passionate collector of frogs"; and as late as 1931 she dragooned Paul Cohn to reject Möbius's thesis in his book Um Nietzsche's Untergang. (She herself contributed to this volume four "letters" to Cohn on Nietzsche's illness; the only detail she was able to add here to the symptomatology of Nietzsche's "mental confusion" in the final days in Turin was that he had paid in twenty-franc coins for a "minor repair of a tea-kettle.")\(^8\) Not only did Elisabeth oppose the medical diagnosis that pointed to sexually transmitted infection, she also intrepidly attempted her own counter-diagnosis "in order to put a stop to this myth-making"; she did so above all in the final volume of her biography of her brother (1904), but also as early as 1900 in an essay on "Die Krankheit Friedrichs Nietzsche" [sic] published in the journal Zukunft, and more indirectly in the first volume of her Nietzsche biography, which had come out in 1895.\(^9\) That her brother had contracted a venereal disease (as he had stated himself, incidentally, for the Basel records)\(^10\) was incompatible with Elisabeth's life-long mission, defined in an unpublished letter of 20 November 1893 as "firmly impressing in people's minds Nietzsche's personality as the noblest figure of light ("edelste Lichtgestalt")—just about as incomprehensible in English as in German.\(^11\) In other words, Nietzsche was to be turned into a figure of mythic proportions. As supreme ruler over Nietzsche's papers, Elisabeth was to be spectacularly successful in this endeavor, which of course also gave her the opportunity to bask, rather more than was good for her, in the reflected glory of the "Lichtgestalt." (More than once she admitted that she understood nothing of her brother's philosophy, but that did not stop her from admiring it as a superlative achievement, and of a near-sighted man at that, as she liked to point out.)\(^12\) Elisabeth's idolization made a counter-diagnosis imperative. She needed a reading of the collapse that exonerated her brother "of the dirtying of his early manhood" ("Beschmutzung seiner Jünglingsjahre").\(^13\) From "far-away Paraguay,"\(^14\) admittedly without medical competence, but with all the greater self-assurance, she proceeded to diagnose "Chloral poisoning" instead of syphilis: Nietzsche's collapse was due to the abuse of "Chloralhydrat," a sedative then frequently prescribed, which Nietzsche had indeed taken for years, and which was, incidentally, given to him in the Basel clinic as well.\(^15\) An additional causative factor, to hear Elisabeth tell it, might have been the stress caused him by some of his critics and, of course, his "impetuous creative urge."\(^16\) "In ordinary circumstances the poison [in the sleeping medication] would not have had such a destructive effect; but given [Nietzsche's] extreme engagement of all mental and emotional faculties, its effect was increased a hundredfold, thus causing the infinitely sad paralysis of his mental abilities. . . . The only correct finding would be: a mind overly fatigued through strain of the eyes and the cranial nerves was no longer able to offer its former resistance to powerful sleeping medication and was therefore paralyzed as a result of its use."\(^17\) Hence the collapse was a "stroke"—what else?\(^18\) Professional medical opinion naturally had, and still has, its doubts about this lay diagnosis "for which symptoms

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7 Zukunft 30 (1903): 174, 179.
8 Cohn, Um Nietzsche's Untergang, 150.
10 Volz, Nietzsche, 381.
11 Peters, Zanthusaurus Schwester, 188.
12 Leben, 2: 915.
13 Leben, 2: 923.
14 Leben, 2: 921.
15 Volz, Nietzsche, 394.
16 Leben, 2: 915.
17 Leben, 2: 924.
18 Leben, 2: 897, 923 and elsewhere.
and evidence are lacking."19 "If people would only talk about things they really
know about!"—said Elisabeth about Möbius, not Möbius about Elisabeth.20

Something else is remarkable about Elisabeth’s diagnosis: she gives her blessing
to other diagnoses and has no qualms about having them attributed to her, as long
as they sidestep the embarrassment of syphilitic infection. In the last volume of
her biography (and not until then, when of course she was battling Dr. Möbius),
she introduced a “Javan” sedative about whose identity neither she nor anybody
else has ever found out anything at all.21 Moreover, in the above-mentioned essay
on “Die Krankheit Friedrichs Nietzsche” (1900) in which she claims to pro-
nounce the truth about the causes of her brother’s illness (Chloral poisoning and
“impetuous creativity”) in the face of libellous “charlatans,” she singles out for
praise only one member of the otherwise misguided medical guild: a certain Dr.
Richard Sandberg who had commented on Nietzsche in the 1899 volume of the
journal Zukunft (p. 9). If one looks that up, one finds an article entitled “Aus
Nietzsches Leben und Schaffen,” which is in fact nothing but a (favorable) review
of volumes one and two (pt. 1) of Elisabeth’s biography of Nietzsche, with only
a single concrete reference to Nietzsche’s illness: a remark to the effect that
Elisabeth attributed her brother’s undermined health to “that dysentery,” from
which he suffered during the war of 1870/71 and which had become aggravated
as a result of his “premature return to strenuous activity.”22 Elisabeth, in her own
essay, uses this statement to point out that respectable medical opinion is on her
side, yet she blithely ignores Sandberg’s qualification that “doctors informed
about Nietzsche’s illness will need to contradict this assumption as far as the
symptoms mentioned and the later insanity are concerned.” Was any subterfuge
whatsoever acceptable to Elisabeth simply because the purpose was so sacred?

The suspicion that it was, is aroused when, in the final volume of her biogra-
phy, she goes so far as to cite Nietzsche himself in support of her diagnosis,
“Chloral poisoning.” She claims that he wrote (to her?) in August 1885 that his
metabolism had been ruined through “decades of medicinal poisoning.”23 No
such letter can be found in the authoritative complete Briefwechsel edited by
Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Missing also is a letter that Elisabeth
claimed Nietzsche had sent to her in Paraguay and that her husband had kept her
from seeing until after Nietzsche’s death. This letter supposedly contained the
sentences: “I am taking more and more sleeping tablets to dull the pain, and still
I can’t sleep. Today I’ll take so many I’ll lose my mind.”24 Did these letters get
lost or did they never exist—so that “das böse Lieschen” would, in this crooked
sense, really hold the co-ownership of the copyright of her brother’s writings,
which she had officially confirmed in 1931? That she would not let facts get in
the way of her imagination is documented by her onetime assistant, the later guru

19 Janz, Nietzsche, 3: 9; see also 11 and 40; also Volz, Nietzsche, 158–73.
20 Leben, 2: 898.
21 Leben, 2: 923; Volz, Nietzsche, 166.
22 Zukunft 27 (1899): 236. See also Elisabeth Nietzsche in
   Zukunft 30 (1900): 13.
23 Leben, 2: 906.
24 Leben, 2: 896–897. In his popular book Forgotten
   Fatherland: The Search for Elisabeth Nietzsche (London,
   1992), Ben Macintyre concludes that the letter “almost
certainly never existed” (141). The suspicion is justified,
yet the letter to Binswanger published here for the first
time reveals that Elisabeth sent along the “last letter” her
brother wrote her. It might have been the one in ques-
tion. (Otherwise the last letter would be the one dated
   mid-November, 1888, printed as the final one in the
   complete edition of the Briefwechsel edited by Giorgio
   Colli and Mazzino Montinari [3. Amt., vol. 5 (Berlin and
   New York, 1984), 473–74]).) On the other hand, Elisabeth
   says that in the last letter she is sending to Binswanger
   there is nothing “psychisch Abnormes.” That could not very well refer to the (lost or fabricated)
   letter in which Nietzsche supposedly said that he would
take so many sleeping tablets “I’ll lose my mind.”
of anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner; and when Karl Schlechta confronted her with her falsifications of Nietzsche manuscripts, Elisabeth, then almost ninety years old, threw her oaken cane at him with such force that he feared Nietzsche’s “dear Lama” was determined to kill him.\(^\text{25}\)

Another suspicion about Elisabeth’s diagnosis of her brother’s illness derives from the weird similarity that it has with her diagnosis of the cause of her husband’s death in Paraguay, which she virtually dictated to the local medico who issued the death certificate. Förster had committed suicide, but, as in the case of her brother, the truth would have been embarrassing; so Elisabeth found the cause of death to have been an “ataque nervioso”—a “stroke,” once again.\(^\text{26}\)

But let us return to “Chloral poisoning.” Here is what Elisabeth has to say about it in her biography: “It would have been better if I had published this detailed description earlier; but that was not possible, for everything had to be taken into consideration beforehand and the entire life had to be examined most carefully. That has now been done in the most conscientious manner, and on that basis I venture to give a diagnosis of my brother’s illness. It is lay diagnosis, I want to stress in all modesty, but the diagnosis of a lay person who has spent more time with the patient than anybody else and knew well all his physicians and their pronouncements as well as the pathological conditions themselves” (p. 923).

So she writes in 1904. The most recent and most thorough description of Nietzsche’s illness and its history in the popular mind (Pia Daniela Volz, *Nietzsche im Labyrinth seiner Krankheit: Eine medizinisch-biographische Untersuchung*, 1990) notes, however, that Elisabeth’s highly successful myth of her brother and his illness dates from a much earlier period, from 1895 when Elisabeth began her “biographical essays.”\(^\text{27}\) This can indeed be demonstrated on the basis of her publications. But H. F. Peters, the biographer of *Zarathustra’s Sister* (more accurately, Elisabeth was, of course, Zarathustra’s aunt as Nietzsche was in the habit of calling himself Zarathustra’s father) had quoted in 1977 an unpublished letter from the 1880s preserved in the Nietzsche-Archiv. Written by Elisabeth from “Försterhof” in Nueva Germania, Paraguay, on 24 March 1889, it states regarding her brother’s *descente en abîme*: “The entire illness is nothing but the result of Chloral! He is suffering from Chloral poisoning.”\(^\text{28}\) This is evidently just an occasional remark in an epistolary context not concerned with the Nietzsche image but, rather with Elisabeth herself, whom “fate” had marooned in Deepest South America\(^\text{29}\) and who was now manoeuvring herself into the limelight, pathetically taking herself to task for having to leave her beloved Fritz to himself and protesting her own selflessness (denying herself “literally” everything in the tropical wilderness, except “two pairs of shoes per year”).\(^\text{30}\) This image of Elisabeth’s life in Paraguay, of course, is in stark contrast to the princely life, wild-western style, she lived in her colonial Försterhof in the Paraguayan Chaco, a lifestyle that is well attested to in Julius Klingbeil’s *Enthüllungen über die Dr. Bernhard Förstersche Ansiedlung Neu-Germanien in Paraguay* (Leipzig, 1889).

This stylization of herself as the selfless martyr of the Germanic cause on the edge of the tropical forest primeval was, however, not to be Elisabeth’s principal


\(^{26}\) Volz, *Nietzsche*, 3.

\(^{27}\) Peters, *Zarathustras Schwester*, 159. See note 3 above.

\(^{28}\) Zukunft 30 (1900): 20.

\(^{29}\) Peters, *Zarathustras Schwester*, 158.

mission in her long life. Her real mission was to be her unceasing effort to raise her brother to mythical stature, to make him the icon of lonely prophetic genius, far removed from common, physically caused “insanity,” especially sexually contracted. And this mission originates much earlier than has so far been thought; in fact it originates in Paraguay, virtually at the very moment when Elisabeth hears of her brother’s collapse—not years later, not in November 1893 when she described her own raison d’être as the transfiguration of her brother into the “Lichtgestalt” of universal significance, not in the fall of the same year when she forbade Peter Gast to write Nietzsche’s biography: “His life, my dear Mr. Koeselitz, I shall write myself. Nobody knows it as well as I do.”31 It is not even, as has been thought, after the death of her husband for whom Elisabeth originally had a similar transfiguration in mind, that she plunges into her lifetime mission with her peculiar and not particularly endearing energy. And, to repeat, Elisabeth’s apotheosis of her brother certainly does not start, as is commonly assumed, in the mid-1890s when the first volume of her hagiography appeared, followed by all manner of journalistic efforts in newspapers and journals. No, her monumentalization of Nietzsche into the “Nietzsche-Mythos” begins almost at the very moment, in the spring of 1889, when Elisabeth hears in Nueva Germania that her brother had been committed to Professor Otto Binswanger’s Grandducal asylum, the Irren-Heil- und Pflege-Anstalt in Jena, Thuringia. (“Then they take him to Jena,” as Benn put it in his poem.)

This is revealed in an unpublished letter from Elisabeth to the director of the Jena clinic, Otto Binswanger (though his name is not actually stated). It is dated 23 March 1889, and it has been hitherto unknown, despite Pia Volz’s intensive use of the holdings of the Nietzsche-Archiv and other institutions.32 The reason is no doubt that this letter is not in the Nietzsche-Archiv, where one would expect it to be, given Elisabeth’s self-serving endeavors, but among the papers of the above-mentioned Dr. Richard Sandberg in the Rare Books and Special Collections Department of the Countway Library at Harvard’s Medical School. To be more precise, it is not the letter itself but a copy of the letter, largely in shorthand, in the hand of Sandberg.

Who was this Dr. Sandberg? That he enjoyed Elisabeth’s trust is evident not only from Elisabeth’s reference to his article in Zukunft, cited above, but also from the letters they exchanged.34 After the turn of the century, Sandberg was in charge of the sanitarium Thalheim in Bad Landeck in Silesia (Kur- und Wasserheid-Anstalt Thalheim. Sanatorium für Nervenleiden und chronische Krankheiten, as Sandberg’s stationery had it). Earlier he had been an assistant to Binswanger in his Jena clinic. He was, however, apparently not an assistant at the time of Nietzsche’s stay there,35 for in a letter dated 15 July 1906 to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, preserved in the Nietzsche-Archiv along with all his other letters to the high-priestess of the cult, he writes that his thoughts are returning “to the time when your brother fell ill. I remember that I learned the sad news first from an essay of Professor Mähly’s (in Gegenwart).” That was by now “a decade”

31 17 September 1893, according to Peters, Zarathustras Schwester, 184; unpublished.
32 Macintyre, Forgotten Fatherland, 150.
34 The correspondence (1896-1911) is preserved in the Nietzsche-Archiv and among the Sandberg papers in Harvard University’s Countway Library, Harvard Medical School.
35 Janz, Nietzsche, 3: 346 (letter from Peter Gast to Franz Overbeck, 21 May 1905); Volz, Nietzsche, 317, 385; see also 416.
in the past, actually 17 years, by the way. Apart from that, he identifies himself in this letter on the occasion of Elisabeth’s birthday as an admirer not just of Nietzsche but of his sister as well and of her activities on behalf of her brother. He remembers in this letter that (perhaps while Binswanger’s assistant, perhaps later, in connection with his own Nietzsche studies) he “found in the Jena patient’s journal (Krankenjournal) a letter that Frau Dr. Eli Forster [the doctor’s degree is her husband’s, of course] had written to Prof. Binswanger from Paraguay when she had heard of her brother falling ill, [a letter] in which she endeavored intensively [Harvard’s draft of this letter says “warmly and intensively”] to inform her brother’s physicians about his personal and creative individuality.” “A little while later,” Sandberg goes on to say, he had met Elisabeth personally, in Naumburg, in the “little house by the vineyard,” where Nietzsche had been living since the spring of 1890 in the care of his mother. (Elisabeth was in Naumburg from the middle of December 1890 to June 1892, and again from September 1893 on.) Sandberg no doubt met Nietzsche himself as well on this visit; in her reference to Sandberg in her essay on Nietzsche’s illness, Elisabeth pointed out that Sandberg was “personally acquainted” with her brother. Sandberg himself, in his letter of 15 July 1906, only speaks discreetly of “so much moving tragedy which in that cozy petit-bourgeois world was all the more overpowering.”

Elisabeth’s letter to Binswanger, referred to in Sandberg’s letter of 15 July 1906, can only be the one dated 23 March 1889, published below from Sandberg’s copy. The whereabouts of the original, if it still exists, are unknown. (Volz published the entire Jena Krankenjournal, now in the Nietzsche-Archiv in her book, along with many contemporaneous letters concerning Nietzsche; she clearly did not see this letter.)

The text of this long letter is more than a substitute for Elisabeth’s conversation with Binswanger in 1890 or 1891 when, back from South America for a visit, she “immediately” went to see him in Jena. What she has to say about this conversation in the appendix to Paul Cohn’s little volume on Nietzsche’s Untergang is not much, really not much more than the charge that Binswanger, acting on Nietzsche’s friend Overbeck’s information, had not recognized the philosopher’s significance and had treated him like a “retired [actually she says “emeritus”] little grade school teacher.” And even then, four decades after the fact, she had not gotten over the humiliation of the assignment of a “second-class” room to Nietzsche in Binswanger’s establishment. Elisabeth’s account of her conversation with Binswanger is not important. The letter is.

Elisabeth’s letter of 23 March 1889 to Binswanger is remarkable not only because it contains Elisabeth’s earliest diagnosis (“Chloralvergiftung”) but also because it constitutes her first, quasi-instantaneous and impulsive attempt, on these many pages, to offer a curriculum vitae of her brother, six to fifteen years before her three-volume biography and before her journalistic efforts in memory of Fritz the Great. And beyond that, the letter is important because it develops the Nietzsche-Mythos for the very first time: Nietzsche the utterly healthy genius,
untouched by Lustseuche, as venereal disease was then called by the squeamish. What we see here in statu nascendi is Elisabeth’s lifelong defense and apotheosis of her brother, not a pretty sight, but highly revealing of the project that was to be successful for decades before the Nazis coopted it. The letter runs as follows.39

Dr. B. Förster
Colonie “Neu Germania”
Paraguay

23 March 1889

Dear Sir,

I have heard the terrible news that my dearly loved only brother, Prof. Dr. N., is said to be mentally disturbed and is staying in your institution. The news has saddened and shocked me unspeakably, all the more as I cannot help thinking and, much as I try, cannot reject my conviction that he would never have fallen into this horrible condition if I had been near him. To put it briefly: It is my firm conviction, confirmed by experience, that the cause of my dear brother’s suffering is nothing but Chloral. I implore you to forgive me for offering such a firm judgment in a case of illness, especially to you, an authority, but I have always loved and revered my brother so very much; ever since my youth he has been my educator and my ideal (though only a few years older than I am), in all his illnesses I have taken care of him, so everything that concerns him touches my heart profoundly and the spiritual suffering that has befallen him makes me inconsiderate in my sorrow. Be indulgent about my pain!

But to make my conviction somewhat understandable to you I take the liberty of giving you a curriculum vitae of my beloved brother and I add my decided assurance that only my statements can be of value for your treatment of him. For our dear good mama has never been able to judge anything other than quite subjectively, her memory is poor, she confuses years and experiences in the most surprising manner, which for the three of us, dear mama herself, Fritz and myself, has often been a source of the greatest amusement.

From early on my brother was a very strong, healthy, and unusually gifted boy, that is to say he was never a precocious child prodigy who learned everything as in play, on the contrary, everything new required the effort that children usually make when they learn something; however, as soon as he had mastered the elements of some new knowledge, he made it entirely his own and began to work independently with it, if only, of course, to the extent that a child’s perception permitted it. This delight, this eagerness in independent scholarly [or scientific] or musical productivity quite apart from his homework for school distinguished him very significantly from his schoolmates, but he always tried to draw his friends into his ideas, and successfully most of the time, as he exercised a natural domination over them. He was a serious-minded child, which was in part due to the death of his highly gifted marvellous father.

([Text in parenthesis constitutes Sandberg’s paraphrase of the text of the letter he is copying] Father died at the age of 35 of softening of the brain [Gehirnweichung], died ten months after a fall—until then supposedly in excellent health. Heredity cited by doctors “in order to explain away the failure of their treatment[”]). My brother, too, was always considered to be very strong and healthy. People who remember him in his student years, such as Frau Geheimrat Ritschel, Prof. Windisch in Leipzig or Prof. Erwin Rohde-Tübingen, describe him unisono as beaming with health and talent. Very early, at the age of 24, he became Professor of classical philology in Basel, and though this position, the sudden transition from learning to teaching, cost him a great deal of conscientious work, nobody noticed it, for on the side, that is, in addition to all his new lecture courses and the research connected with them, he was busy with a multitude of other plans, accomplishing all this with his exquisite love of work and

39 Published by permission of Countway Library. The shorthand parts of the text are transcribed in a typescript filed with the letter. The typescript was checked and corrected by Hans Gebhardt, Eckersdorf.
energy, without the slightest disturbance of his health. When now, as an elderly woman who has come to know very many, and very significant people, I look back to that time and visualize my dear brother at the age of 25 and 26 quite objectively: this wealth of the ideas that streamed from his lips, that was enthroned on his forehead [and] radiated from his big eyes, this childlike serenity, combined with so much dignity and polished manners, and all this ability united in the most beautiful harmony through excellent health and measured temperament—when I think of how ennobling and transfiguring his entire being was for those who came into contact with him, then I must say that I never again met such a significant and at the same time endearing person.

(Further history: to France in 1870 as a nurse, etc. Doctors had brought him close to the grave with their medications; he was ruined by his medicines. Spring 1882 use of Chloral discovered [3]. He said it was the only sleeping medication
that did not upset his stomach and did not make him too tired for work the next day, on the contrary, it had a stimulating effect; he had a strong aversion to mor-
phine because he was unable to work for days after the first injection. Winter
82/83 strange letter from Genoa. Spring 83 in Rome. His sister finds out that he
took a lot of Chloral in the winter, and he himself stated [beschrieb] that it was
uncanny [or scary] to himself. I asked him whether it was not followed by
depression. "No," he said, "that's it, one just finds oneself in an elevated mood,
except that angry outbursts take turns with graceful dream visions." (His detailed
description of his state matches the present condition precisely which the writer
[of the letter] with naive self-assurance considers to be Chloral poisoning.
Intention not to take any more; very disturbed by the thought that the medica-
tion might damage his mental abilities. "The worst that could happen to me
would be that I had to go to a mental institution, I would deal the death blow to
my philosophy." Supposedly took no Chloral, but the physician of the Austrian
Embassy in Rome for example spoke of years of Chloral use without negative
effects. In 85 she saw it again on his night-stand. That was when the writer went
to Paraguay; enclosed his last letter in which, she says, no psychic abnormality
was evident.) "Learned friends of my brother's will want to demonstrate mental
disturbance from his books. Do not believe them, they are prejudiced, they con-
fuse genius and insanity. I myself am of course not in agreement with the results
of my brother's philosophy, but what I can recognize clearly is that they are new,
yet completely logical. I want to prove that with my limited female intelligence."
(Implores [Binswanger] to take him off Chloral.) "Does he speak of me? He used
to call me 'Lisbeth' or 'Lama'—a nickname from our childhood. Oh, I am afraid
all my words are too late, this terrible Chloral poisoning is unpredictable in its
consequences. Judging by letters I have received, I know that you are being mis-
informed about my brother from all sides, nobody knows the history of his life
and his suffering as well as I do. It will be very difficult for you to form an opin-
ion about his suffering. Should he get better and become aware of the fact that
he is in a mental institution [Irrenanstalt], he will often be unhappy. Will you
gently refer him to Kant? His being mentally disturbed at the end did no harm
to his philosophy. But my brother is still young, he can still overcome everything
and return to his work with renewed energy. God bless you, dear highly revered
Professor, you are said to be [or: you should be] so loving [lieb] with our dear
patient. In warmest gratitude, yours truly, Eli Förster [."]

Variations of some of the notes struck here are familiar from Elisabeth's much
later writings. The letter's preamble naïvely and arrogantly establishes her unique
authority in all matters Nietzschean, including the diagnosis of "nothing but
Chloral." Above all, she feels constrained to emphasize her incomparable knowl-
dge of the case by undermining the authority of "our dear good mama." That
is a maneuver Elisabeth was to perform again, in closer proximity to Franziska
Nietzsche, indeed coming to the brink of a falling out with her.40 For years she,
Elisabeth, would play the role of her brother's motherly nurse "in all his illness-
es."41 And, of course, her brother's role as her "educator and ideal" was to be
another facet of her self-appointment as high priestess of the Nietzsche cult. A
section in the first volume of her biography is simply entitled "Fritz as educa-
tor"—and deals primarily with Elisabeth. Indeed, in an 1899 letter, published
only recently, she goes so far as to say that Fritz acted as her "father."42 And in
that letter, too, she staked her claim of unique infallibility, saying that she was
fully aware "that nobody else can say what I have to say. Nobody was with him
as much as I was, nobody knows as well as I do the delicate backgrounds of his

40 See Guthke, Erkundungen, esp. 308-9.
41 See Leben, 2: 40, 323.
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writings, of his frequently misunderstood pronouncements, and all those fine lines that connect the discrete phases of his life.”43 In the March 1889 letter from Paraguay she correspondingly lays claim to her special knowledge not only of the history of Nietzsche’s life but particularly of his “suffering.”

This claim of unique qualification serves to lend authority to the “curriculum vitae” (Lebensabriß) that she sends from Nueva Germania. It is in effect her first biography of her brother. Its main themes will subsequently be broadened in her crowning biographical achievement, if that is the word for her more than one-thousand-page hagiography Das Leben Friedrich Nietzsche’s. One such theme is the excellent health of the schoolboy—which a few lines later has already been transformed into the assertion that he was “always very strong and healthy.” It is equally necessary, for someone of Elisabeth’s frame of mind, to make much of Nietzsche’s quality and potential as a leader (his “natural domination over” others). Domination (Herrschaft) is of course what Elisabeth has in mind for Nietzsche’s ideas, which form the superstructure of her cult, even though she confesses disarmingly that she is not in agreement with the “results” of her brother’s philosophy and that her intelligence is “limited” (klein).

Heredity is predictably brought into play immediately following the emphasis on the healthiness of the man who has become a mental patient in the meantime. “On both the paternal and maternal side we come from extremely healthy families,” as she put it in the biography.44 Months after receiving Elisabeth’s letter from Paraguay, Binswanger, in connection with the legal certification proceedings (November 1889), was indeed to specify in his attestation that Nietzsche was suffering from “something inherited.”45 And in the Jena Krankenjournal Nietzsche’s father looms large under the heading Erblichkeit with a reference to his death of “softening of the brain.”46 Elisabeth, intelligent in her way, immediately anticipated something of the sort in far away Paraguay, not just in the newly discovered letter. On 9 April 1889 she urged her mother: “Don’t say strange things about dear papa. If he had not fallen down the stone steps he would probably still be alive today.”47 Medical opinion, on the other hand, saw and still sees indications of mental abnormality in the case history of Nietzsche’s father.48 The very term Gehirnweichung, softening of the brain, used by Elisabeth, by Binswanger and by Nietzsche himself, points to some sort of mental aberration, though the term covered a wide spectrum of symptoms at that time, especially in lay circles, including syphilitic symptoms (which Elisabeth, for her part, could, of course, not have had in mind).49 But quite apart from what Gehirnweichung may have meant to those using the term at the time, the paramount task for Elisabeth was to acquit genius of any but the noblest heredity—she knew, in broad allusion to Lombroso’s Genio e follia, much read at the time, that some, even friends of Nietzsche’s, confused genius and insanity, as she put it in her letter. So the only proper adjectives for Nietzsche’s father must be “highly gifted” and “marvellous” but surely not “strange.” And part of Elisabeth’s strategy is to disqualify her mother from the start as a potential source of any embarrassing information along these lines. She is “dear” but mentally confused—which Elisabeth evidently does not

43 Guthke, Erkundungen, 304.
44 Leben, 2: 899.
45 Völz, Nietzsche, 30.
46 Völz, Nietzsche, 392.
47 Peters, Zarathustra Schweiter, 21.
48 Völz, Nietzsche, 31-36.
49 Völz, Nietzsche, 34.
consider to be hereditary! Near the end of her letter she denies, long-distance, that her brother is mentally disturbed or confused (suffering from *Geistesvenwirung*), and at the outset she had been careful to say that he was only “said to be” *geistestestört*. Still, she inadvertently reveals that the truth is in the back of her mind when she reminds Binswanger of the parallel case of Kant, no less, who “zuletzt geistestestört war.”

Nonetheless, though this intimation of the truth is consistently repressed in this letter, Elisabeth’s account of her brother as the picture of health surreptitiously turns into a chronicle of disease. Naturally, as in the case of the diagnosis of hereditary factors in the Jena clinic, it is the doctors who are at fault: their morphine injections nearly sent the young man to his grave in 1870, and in the 1880s they prescribed Chloral as a sedative. If Nietzsche’s “strange” letter from Genoa, written in the winter of 1882/83 should have been about Chloral and if he had in fact stated (in a letter?) that Chloral had been *unheimlich*, “uncanny” [or scary] to him, as Elisabeth claims in her letter from the Chaco on 23 March 1889, then it has to be said that such a letter or letters cannot be found in the edition of the letters either. At best one might think of a letter from Genoa of 27 April 1883 in which Nietzsche describes the previous winter as his “worst and sickest.” This letter does indeed mention sleeping medication: for four months he had “night after night” taken an unspecified medication “of which I now want to wean myself.”

As for Nietzsche’s supposed statement, reported in Elisabeth’s letter of 23 March 1889, on the effect of the sedative (“graceful dream visions” and “angry outbursts”) and his supposed fear that he “had to go to a mental institution,” one may also doubt that they were ever made. They may have been prompted by Elisabeth’s knowledge of where her brother is while she is writing this. Sandberg rightly hints as much between the lines. That does, of course, not mean that Nietzsche never made any such or similar remarks. What counts is that Elisabeth introduces such sentiments, along with the supposed but undocumentable remark that Chloral was *unheimlich* to Nietzsche himself, in her effort to raise her dear Fritz to mythic stature, well above mundane afflictions such as syphilis.

Mythic stature—a few lines earlier the Nietzsche-Mythos had entered upon the stage in that confused purple passage about the “wealth of ideas” streaming from his lips, lips that had also pronounced his sister a “resentful antisemitic goose.” A wealth of ideas, to repeat, was enthroned on his forehead, and it radiated from his big eyes, “ennobling and transfiguring” the world. The reader is present at the creation of the Nietzsche-Mythos, present at the birth of Nietzsche the prophet, born from the evil spirit of his fascistoid sister—who in the same letter speaks disparagingly of her “limited female intelligence.” The uneasy feeling that creeps up one’s spine is hardly a mixed one.

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51 See also my remarks on Nietzsche’s “last letter” in note 24 above.