

Tracing the Influence of Jean Paul's "Dead Christ" Dream-Vision

Document compiled by
Jacob Siefring, April 2021

The question which we would like to be able to answer is: Did Friedrich Nietzsche ever read Jean Paul's influential "Dead Christ" dream-vision, included in his 1797 novel *Siebenkäs*? And did it influence Friedrich Nietzsche when, circa 1880, he wrote of a madman going to the marketplace to proclaim the death of God? The short answer to both of these questions is: We do not know. Nevertheless, it seems probable either that Nietzsche did read either Jean Paul's text, or that he picked it up indirectly from another writer who may have referred to or summarized it.

For George Steiner, an accomplished scholar of languages and European literature, the influence of Jean Paul's dream-vision on Nietzsche's own formulation was clear enough to posit it without caution or qualification in a 1987 address to The American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In a discussion of the power of "commanding metaphors" and "compelling images" in the arts and in philosophy, Steiner asserts that Nietzsche's madman's proclamation of God's demise originates in Jean Paul's dream-vision. In Steiner's formulation, Nietzsche "take[s] his celebrated announcement" from a particular passage in Jean Paul's dream (p. 17).

However, Steiner offers no evidence in support of the claim that Nietzsche was familiar with the theological dream-vision. He seems to take it as a given. This raises the question: what concrete evidence is there that a line of influence, direct or indirect, extends from Jean Paul to Nietzsche? All that seems certain is that Nietzsche read Jean Paul as a teenager (see Hanshe; Brobjer). We don't know which books. Certainly the death of God is discussed elsewhere in nineteenth century literature, and Nietzsche may have arrived at his formulation without ever reading, or even hearing of, Jean Paul's dream-text.

Chronology

- 1796, Jean Paul publishes first volume of his novel *Siebenkäs*, containing the chapter “Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei”.
- 1807, Hegel publishes *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*The Phenomenology of Spirit*). In this work, Hegel mentions and discusses the death of God. Hegel’s discussion is often cited as an influence on Nietzsche’s “God is dead” formulation.
- 1814, Mme Stael publishes *De l’Allemagne*, includes a translated and abridged version of Jean Paul’s “Dead Christ” dream. It omits the return to waking life and so concludes on a note of despair and annihilation. This abridged, nihilistic version is the one that will be read by a generation of French writers, including Balzac, Sainte-Beuve, Victor Hugo, Alfred de Vigny, Quinet, Gérard de Nerval, and Renan.
- 1859, As a teenager, Nietzsche likely reads works by Jean Paul. It is unclear which books by Jean Paul he may have read. (See Hanshe, p. 4; and Brobjer, p. 167).
- 1882, Nietzsche’s *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*) is published, containing section 108, on Buddhism and the death of God, and the famous section #125 “The Madman.”

Bibliography

Brobjer, Thomas H. *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2008.

Hanshe, Rainer J. "Nietzsche's Library." *Nietzsche Circle*. http://www.nietzschecircle.com/Pdf/NIETZSCHE_S_LIBRARIY.pdf

Jean Paul. "Rede des toten Christus vom Weltgebäude herab, dass kein Gott sei." In *Blumen-, Frucht- und Dornenstücke oder Ehestand, Tod und Hochzeit des Armenadvokaten F. St. Siebenkäs im Reichsmarktflecken Kuhschnappel* (1796-97). [[Link](#)]. Translated into English by Edward Henry Noel, 1845. [[Link](#)].

Libhart, Byron R. "Madame de Staël, Charles de Villers, and the Death of God in Jean Paul's 'Songe'." *Comparative Literature Studies*, June 1972, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 141- 151. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40245991>

Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*. 1882. [[Link](#)]. Translated into English by Dr. Oscar Levy as *The Joyful Wisdom*, 1910. See Section 125 ("The Madman") [[Link](#)].

Steiner, George. "Some Black Holes." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol 41, No. 2 (Nov. 1987). Delivered as an address to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences on April 15, 1987. Pp 12-28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3822663>