

## Great Comedians and Poisonous Flies. Nietzsche and the Marketplace

Dr. Paolo Scolari<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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The marketplace represents for Nietzsche a human place in which he observes with attention the collective rationale of the modern age. It's a plebeian place, symbol of a depersonalised life: its noisy social living is synonym for pettiness and mediocrity, insincerity and hypocrisy. In short, a milieu to be kept as far as possible. In Nietzsche's philosophy "marketplace" becomes a true human category: it even changes the common language, inflecting into a verbal predicate which is a sign of a small and degenerated humanity, able to give value only to material reality. So far removed from the *Übermensch* preached by Zarathustra, but at once so close to us citizens of the twenty-first century. Helpful to make us reflect on our everyday living together and, from time to time, to call it into question.

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### 1. Introduction. Zarathustra at the Marketplace

In the labyrinth of the Nietzschean interpretations, what is missing is a chapter which investigates Nietzsche's critique of the marketplace. This is what the following research sets out to do: to reconstruct – through first-hand reading of the Nietzschean texts and the little bibliography on the topic – Nietzsche's reflections on the everyday rationale of marketplace life. A posthumous note dating back to his early years suggests that Nietzsche had planned a work dedicated to the metropolis as part of the incomplete project of the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*. Although the content of this never-realised work is left to speculation, precious hints on the theme of the city are scattered around his published works and the posthumous fragments. What we are certain of is that Nietzsche observes city life with great care and reflects on living together in a very sensitive way, providing a rich and lively "phenomenological cross section" of the public dimension of modern people.

*Also sprach Zarathustra* is the reference text. The reason is that Zarathustra's narrative is set in those very places which become the protagonists of the Nietzschean reflections: the square, the market. In one word: the city. Public spaces which are no longer in the background but rather reflect the thoughts of the people who inhabit them, thus becoming genuine "philosophical places". Human places which manifest the decadence of nineteenth-century people. The square is thus synonymous with conformism and mystification, the marketplace becomes the mouthpiece of a hypocritical and petty public life. Nietzsche seems to be well aware that the experience of modernity fully corresponds to the experience of the marketplace. The marketplace is the fascinating stage for the mise-en-scene of modern mankind. A mediocre and vice-ridden mankind, from which one might want to escape altogether. So far removed from the *Übermensch* preached by Zarathustra, but at once so close to us citizens of the twenty-first century. Helpful to make us reflect on our everyday living together and, from time to time, to call it into question.

### 2. Marketplace/human place

When Zarathustra arrives in town, men are all gathered in its square. But, Nietzsche uses a shade which makes his reflection even more interesting and rich: people are not simply crowded "in the square", but it's «gathered in the market place». A really concrete imagery, quite recurring in Nietzsche's works, surely not accidental: the episode of the «madman» announcing God's death is also set in the same urban scenery, at the «marketplace». Along with the town's depictions, the marketplace represents a typical city place, a theatre of collectively and human daily coexistence.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant professor, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano (Italy) – [paolo.scolari@unicatt.it](mailto:paolo.scolari@unicatt.it)

Located in the square, it's a symbol for public life, one of the places in which the citizens have always gathered and spent life moments. It's precisely in this place of incubation for Western philosophy, that the symbolic values of town and coexistence *per se* summarise for Nietzsche. In his original observation, the marketplace doesn't depict money and economy only, but real daily life: private life "becomes a market", turning public thanks to the men who display their life experience. Zarathustra has the chance to become fully human on this social stage only. The marketplace is the daily coexistence's resonating chamber: its public dimension is necessary to him, to meet men and announce his message. It's exactly here that the plebeian rationale comes out and can be uncovered: it's not fortuitous that, to «learn what plebs is and its noise», Nietzsche and Zarathustra put themselves precisely «on the market».

### 3. End of the solitude = marketplace

The marketplace, a human place which can only be negative for that Nietzsche disdaining the collective rationale. It's the plebeian place, symbol of a depersonalised life: its noisy social living is synonym for pettiness and mediocrity, insincerity and hypocrisy. In short, a milieu to be kept as far as possible. In Nietzsche's lexicon, "marketplace" becomes a true human category: it even changes the common language, inflecting into a verbal predicate which is a sign of a small and degenerated humanity, able to give value only to material reality. Men of modernity «offered for sale the spirit itself, they poisoned their blood in trading»: unable to appreciate all isn't negotiable, and handling everything in a commercial, utilitarian and profitable way (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>1</sup>, Vorrede § 3; NIETZSCHE, 1973<sup>1</sup>, § 125; NIETZSCHE, 1974-1977, 13 [1], 29 [56]; RESCHKE, 2000, pp. 40-41; GASSER, 1993, p. 17; PIEPER, 1990, p. 231; NAUMANN, 1899-1901, I, p. 169; VIVARELLI, 1987, p. 244; FORNARI, 2006, p. 292; TÜRCKE, 1989, pp. 16-25; MARTI, 1993, p. 202).

It's clear that Nietzsche doesn't appreciate the marketplace from a chapter in the first book of *Also sprach Zarathustra – Von den Fliegen des Marktes*–, entirely about this location. Already in the first lines, Nietzsche begins with a peremptory affirmation: «Where solitude ends, there begins the market place».

A judgment which, with its concision's strength, suddenly opens two totally opposite ways to view life: alone, or with the others. The marketplace so depicts a way of living, opposing its daily life noises to silence and quietness of the forest and mountains. If these locations, with their peace, represent the places of solitude, the market is, instead, the expression of co-existence: actually, saying "marketplace" is saying "solitude's ending", "human relationships", "town". But, in its fragmented nature, this judgment reveals a disturbing setting, projecting the common living on a background of duplicity. The marketplace loses its neutrality as harmless figure of speech to turn totally negative: it is indeed a symbol of coexistence, but a degenerated one by now. To confirm it, with a full pathos crescendo, Nietzsche closes the same judgment: «and where the market place begins, there begins too the noise of the great actors and the buzzing of poisonous flies» (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>1</sup>, Von den Fliegen des Marktes; NAUMANN, 1899-1901, I, p. 169).

The marketplace represents the middle term of this odd syllogism, which seems to condemn man to an impasse and no alternatives at all. If the human being leaves solitude, he is thrown into a coexistence made of «great actors» and «poison-flies»: a daily living together whose protagonists are on one side the «great men», with their rumbling «noise» and their hypocrisy, on the other side the «little men», with the poisonous «sting» of envy and resentment. *Tertium non datur*: between the individual's life and the public existence, there's nothing intermediate. No escape, then: where man isn't alone anymore, where the encounter between human and human begins, there inevitably a marketplace lifestyle is created. It's a real totalitarian horizon: the social life – the daily being together – coincides with the marketplace. For Nietzsche, it's the public sphere as such to represent both an issue and a danger for the individual. The only way out is escaping in the individual sphere: besides, according to him a redemption of "public" is impossible, since it's meant to remain "market" forever (PIEPER, 1990, pp. 231-232).

### 4. Great comedians. The degeneration of public life

Nietzsche's critique goes straight to those people who daily enliven the marketplace. This doesn't remain only a place of the town, but it really shows a human side: if in *Zarathustras Vorred* it's only a setting where Zarathustra meets an anonymous crowd, and now Nietzsche makes clear who the components of this mob are and sketches out their appearance. First, «the marketplace is full of great men», public figures who arrive on the scene of daily coexistence. But their greatness is only illusory. Immediately, Nietzsche reveals the deceit behind it: what the multitude consider great and worthy of admiration, for Zarathustra is only a farce. Those who are called great men by people, are for him «comedians», «actors» and «clattering buffoons». Then, to find «the greatest actors», it's not necessary to go to the «theatre»: the marketplace is enough.

Around these forgers all is charlatany and propaganda, advertising and publicity: actors want to get «glory» and approval, recognition and popularity at any cost, thus contributing to create a society where only hypocrisy and dissemblance succeed, where one person's greatness doesn't depend on what they are, but on what they seem to be. To «make believe in themselves» they have to change roles quickly according to the situation, opportunistically adapting to people: «Tomorrow he hath a new belief, and the day after, one still newer. Sharp perceptions hath he, like the people, and changeable humours». Nothing is real in this fluctuating comedy of the roles: in these characters «too much» is «foreground». In addition to insincerity, it's language that characterizes these great men.

The marketplace itself is the place of language: with its peculiar hubbub, it contrasts with those quiet places as the mountains or the «sea», where, «being able to leave the city behind», one is «seized with an immense inability to speak». While «admirably do forest and rock know how to be silent», at the marketplace the man won't «still sit quietly». By extension, the urban coexistence on its square becomes a huge chance to speak: a plurality of signs, a privileged field of action for the use of language. But, it's a degenerated speech of which Nietzsche underlines duplicity and contradictions. It's a speech bringing the human being to the extreme limits of coexistence: both in «great» and «small cities», «a thinker is forced to find his place in the interval between two noises – or, he's not going to find it and he will cease being a thinker » –. For Nietzsche, moreover, where there are «more than two or three people» – root of the public dimension – there «is always noise and crowd»: he lives in a «loud age wanting publicity and that dramatic din, that big boom-boom corresponding to its exhibition taste».

People's language at the marketplace is a real «noise», a «ramshackle bass-drum of great words». Making a «big fair ruckus», in this «city» corner, men are only «street-trumpeters» who grumble and rumble constantly. This place is the realm of chaos and deafening «noise», where every voice, if not grossly shouted, is lost in a murmur: «everything among them talked, announcing their wisdom with bells. Everybody cackled and everything is out-talked». Among the «shopmen in the market-place that out-jingle it with pennies», the marketplace's regulars swell with great and impressive words, they scream, chatter, talk about the others and «are talked – indeed shouted – about». Public life lives continuously off its contrary, private life. In this «marketplace hubbub» there's no «secret» anymore, every «secrecy» is vanished. Lost are confidentiality, privacy, mystery, and «everything is betrayed»: everything is «trumpeted» by great actors with draining words and «futuristic sirens». In this frantic, loud «daily life» made of «advertising» and «close-up policy», every chance of dialogue and communication is lost. At the marketplace «no one know any longer how to understand», they «misheard» and don't listen: if «the big news» – as God's death – «need plenty of time to be understood», on the contrary are «the little daily news to speak loud and to possess the instant understandability». Fiercely yelled and self-referentially sounded, speech damages human relations and, disengaging from «truth», loses its original meaning: here, it isn't used anymore to communicate, but only to appear and glorify itself. At the marketplace, then, no encounter with the other takes place: the noise is so massive that men can only hear themselves. Everything is covered by a constant bawl: no ears are left for what is extraneous.

In the marketplace's hubbub, what counts isn't speaking to be heard, but speaking to say something, as well as to seduce and convince. Speech becomes a medium, a means: it is not spoken anymore, but rather utilised. Great men scream and produce big noise to get noticed, they «upset», they want «to drive others mad» and «to convince» the uneducated masses: thus «little, do the people understand what is great, and the people glory in their great men» and will consider them «the masters of the hour». They are demagogues who don't do anything else but enjoy their consideration, interested only in the most wide and reverent audience consensus: for this reason they «press» people «wanting a Yes or No, demanding a Yes or No».

It's thus clear that, for Nietzsche, true greatness and marketplace can't definitely coexist: actually, «away from the market-place and from fame taketh place all that is great». In a world which is only able to yell, the only lifeline against «the danger to die by headache» is running away from this collective lethal infection to find a salutary rest on «silent mountains» (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>1</sup>, Von den Fliegen des Marktes, Das Kind mitdem Spiegel, Die Heimkehr; NIETZSCHE, 1971, § 423; NIETZSCHE, 1973<sup>1</sup>, §§ 331, 377; NIETZSCHE, 1974-1977, 4 [13]. 4 [84], 18 [30]; 37 [14]; NIETZSCHE, 1973<sup>2</sup>, 14 [12], 14 [25]; NIETZSCHE, 1970-1974, 2 [183]; NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>2</sup>, III, § 26; NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>3</sup>, § 282; NIETZSCHE, 1975, 3 November 1874; FORNARI, 2006, p. 294; PASQUALOTTO, 1985, pp. 422-423; ARCELLA, 2010, p. 129; MARTI, 1993, p. 204; PESTLIN, 1994, p. 79; LAMPERT, 1986, pp. 56-57; WHITLOCK, 1990, pp. 83-84; PIEPER, 1990, pp. 232-235; WEICHEL, 1922, pp. 32-34; NAUMANN, 1899-1901, I, pp. 169-172).

## 5. Poisonous flies. The revenge of petty people

The marketplace isn't populated only by «great actors», but also infested by «poison-flies». Little men, «small and pitiable»: «petty people» who, «to-day» have «become masters», are for Zarathustra «the greatest danger for the *Übermensch*». In their case the relationship with greatness changes: contrary to the actors, greatness isn't blatantly flaunted, but subtly dreaded and hypocritically opposed.

For small men «blamable is all great existence», and «a truth which only glideth into fine ears» is called «falsehood and trumpery»: «what is great must make them more poisonous, and always more fly-like», making their baseness «gleam» «in invisible vengeance» of resentment. Their typical noise isn't a resounding din, but a «buzzing», much more persistent and fastidious than a deafening but discontinuous noise. If, «to take effect», the great actor breaks loudly into the marketplace scene and, «exploding like a bomb», causes a loud noise among the crowd, the poison-fly rationale is more subtle and pettier, slimy and duplicitous. It's lethal because, even with no appearance, it's able to «take root everywhere inadvertently», just as the «small vegetation». Placing its deep «roots» into society, it causes «small wounds» and kills «without knowing it», «sucking blood from veins every hour, every day». It slowly breaks into, as «numerous wicked drops which break and burn», and silently, «of many a proud structure, rain-drops and weeds have been the ruin». A two-faced sham: little men's «finest, subtlest and richest vengeance» can «hide behind praise» – and, in the case of «priests», behind «meekness», of which «nothing is more revengeful» –. These «cowardly» are «shrewd» men who, as «swarms of gnats of far too obtrusive admirers», «impudently buzz around with their praise, flattering and whimpering, and often showing themselves as the amiable ones». It's exactly this «praise» which turns into a «scratching girdle of spines», a «praise» that would «persuade» Zarathustra's «foot» «to the ticktack of small happiness»: a «fly-happiness», «buzzing around sunny window-panes» of their small homes. «Especially those who call themselves "the good," are the most poisonous flies»: a devious way of acting, perfectly hidden behind daily coexistence, behind good feelings. Tougher to uncover, and most of all harder to get rid of: just like the annoying buzzing of a «gnat» persistently flying around ears.

## 6. Farewell to the Marketplace

Zarathustra's eye is keen and clever: it undermines these despicable ones' rationale, offering two practical and beneficial suggestions to the man «stung all over by the poisonous flies». The first one is «to be on guard against the small ones and flee into solitude!»: no other antidote exist against their poison apart from fleeing. The second one is «to raise no longer an arm against them!»: «innumerable are they» and the man's «lot» isn't surely to be a «fly-flap against the small daily annoyances». No more time wasting among men: no heroic sacrifice for the city is necessary, but only a drastic and sudden abandon of human coexistence, an immediate distancing from «the marketplace's odour». Also the despise towards great men increases the need to escape, converging in a warm and friendly advice «Flee, my friend, into your solitude! I see you dazed by the noise of the great men and stung by the stings of the little» (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>1</sup>, Von den Fliegen des Marktes, Von den Priestern, Die Heimkehr, Von der verkleinernden Tugend § 2, Vom höheren Menschen §3; NIETZSCHE, 1967, § 368; NIETZSCHE, 1971, §§ 228, 435, 506; NIETZSCHE 1973<sup>1</sup>, § 218; NIETZSCHE, 1974-1977, 4 [234], 5 [1] 260; NEGRI, 2001, pp. 65-76; PIEPER, 1990, pp. 235-244; WEICHEL, 1922, pp. 34-36; NAUMANN, 1899-1901, I, pp. 172-174). A really paradoxical warning, almost contradictory, thinking about Zarathustra's eagerness and enthusiasm in descending the mountain and reaching the square in the city of men.

A change of course is confirmed by the fourth and last part of *Als sprach Zarathustra* in which, through a sort of flashback, Zarathustra mentally retraces his urban experience. The initial fire towards the metropolis and the love for humanity turn into a new awareness, without regret: now he is sure that when he «came unto men for the first time, and appeared on the market-place» he «did commit» a real «folly», risking, «in the evening», to be «almost a corpse». When he «spoke unto all», it was like he «spoke unto none»: moreover, «on the market-place no one believeth in higher men». Now, Zarathustra has learnt to say: «Of what account to me are market-place and populace and populace-noise and long populace-ears». For this reason the first and new commandment which the «higher men» must «learn from him» is to go «away from the market place» (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>1</sup>, Vom höheren Menschen, § 1).

## 7. Away from the market. Re-thinking to the human?

Zarathustra goes then back to live in «his cave», among «his animals», claiming: «More dangerous have I found it among men than among animals». A real nice paradox: descended to meet human, he ends up preferring animals to it. Interhuman coexistence, the essential requirement for his message's spreading, has become an insidious reality to escape from.

He has realized how much «it is difficult to live among men»: if «in loneliness, the lonely one eats himself; in a crowd, the many eat him» (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>1</sup>, Von den Mitleidigen, Vorrede § 10, Von den Abtrünnigen § 2; NIETZSCHE, 1967, § 348).

Actually, swinging between «the flight of the sick one» and «the flight from the sick ones» (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>1</sup>, Auf dem Oelbergen). Zarathustra/Nietzsche's solitude unbalances mostly on the second: if the desire to stay alone can seem imposed by sickness only, most of the time it represents a real life choice, originated from the refusal of human coexistence. Even if, very often in the Nietzschean parabola, both conceptions tend to get close and interpenetrate themselves, until corresponding. In addition to being sick, it's the same social reality to make sick he whom lives into it: it's the reason why that «solitude» is now named «healing» (NIETZSCHE, 1969<sup>1</sup>, § 8). In Nietzsche's phenomenology the pair solitude/coexistence doesn't represent a static relationship, but rather dynamic: Zarathustra's isolation never ends in itself, but it's in perpetual tension with its opposite – men's coexistence –, polemically, continuously recalling it. Solitude can't limit itself to a narcissistic satisfaction of «distance pathos» and aristocratic «cleanliness instinct» before the «human filth», and least of all it can't be the ultimate solution to the eternal coexistence drama. It doesn't represent only a resentful opposition to the city and an indiscriminate contempt for public life, but rather another way to think about humanity and its endless contradictions and paradoxes.

The radical decision to say farewell to the metropolis enlightens the human: running away from its inhabitants, Zarathustra takes with him something of the coexistence, anyway. «Living aside» is a marked condemnation of coexistence as such and a critique to all human social dimension (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>3</sup>, §§ 257, 271, 284; NIETZSCHE, 1969<sup>2</sup>, § 1). Zarathustra's behaviour already enshrines a completely negative judgment about coexistence itself and puts common life in a bad light, ringing as an alarm bell: if he prefers to live alone, it means that in the city something really doesn't work. If, far from men, Zarathustra «again breathes mountain-freedom», and his nose is «freed at last from the smell of all human hubbub», this reveals that for him the city was a prison and a sewer. If, back to the mountains, he rests as «convalescent» waiting to fully recover his «great health», it's clear that it was society coexistence to make him ill (NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>1</sup>, Die Heimkehr, Der Genesende § 2; NIETZSCHE, 1968<sup>2</sup>, II, § 24).

However, in spite of his emphatic tone, the apology of solitude is never final. The «*nausea* towards man» is Nietzsche's «greatest danger»: a risky, maybe sudden and unexpected destabilisation of their own individual and solitary Self. Isolation generates longing for its opposite: its glorification is always combined with the desire to get out from Self and to regain a connection with the other, even if it means a new failure. It's not a mere loathing towards the men of the town, which can be pacified saying farewell to it, but a continuous getting back – just like the *nausea* – to perceive humanity. In the solitary mountains Nietzsche can't forget the inhabitants of the plain: this allows him not to block that communication path between his cave and the square in the city of men, and to retry, once in a while, to think about human daily life (NIETZSCHE, 1969<sup>1</sup>, § 8; ESCOBAR, 1980, pp. 72-73).

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