

FADE IN:

SUPER: 1869, PRUSSIA

INT. TRAIN STATION -- PLATFORM -- DAY

A whistle BLOWS. And with it the call: "ALL ABOARD!" ELISABETH Nietzsche, a gorgeous 19 year-old brunette, holds her brother, Friedrich NIETZSCHE, 24, tight, her face full of grief. Nietzsche is distinguished by a heavy, black moustache and thick eyeglasses.

ELISABETH  
I'm going to miss you.

NIETZSCHE  
I'll miss you, too. Take good care of Mama, will you? I promise I'll send money every month.

As they release, a calling card falls to the ground. Nietzsche reaches down to pick it up.

ELISABETH  
Are you really going to meet him?

Nietzsche flips it over, front to back, then front again.

NIETZSCHE  
I don't know.

He tucks it away. Elisabeth suddenly hugs him again even tighter, won't let go. The train begins to pull away. Nietzsche breaks away just as the last car passes by, jumps on board. He looks back, sees his sister sobbing uncontrollably.

EXT. PRUSSIAN COUNTRYSIDE -- DAY

A train winds its way out of the mountains towards the city of Basel, Switzerland.

INT. TRAIN COMPARTMENT -- DAY

Nietzsche, seated by the window, writes into a notebook. He pauses a moment, looks out the window, then turns the page, dips his pen, writes:

NIETZSCHE (V.O.)  
If you stare long enough into the abyss..

He hesitates. Continues.

NIETZSCHE (V.O.)  
...the abyss will stare back at you.

Another hesitation. He scratches the sentence out, sets the notebook

down, goes back to looking out the window.

EXT. BASEL TRAIN STATION -- DAY

The train pulls into its dock.

INT. COMPARTMENT -- DAY

Nietzsche, seated by the window, closes his eyes as the train comes to a stop. Passengers seated across from him collect their belongings, get up to leave. Nietzsche, still seated, fidgets with his notebook -- reluctant, detached.

EXT. TRAIN STATION -- DAY

Nietzsche, suitcase in hand, looks out across the bustling station as he steps down from the train. He goes to take a last step where there is none and falls down on top of FRANZ OVERBECK, 30. Luggage flies everywhere. So do Nietzsche's eyeglasses. He helps Overbeck up.

NIETZSCHE

I'm terribly sorry. Are you all right?

OVERBECK

No, I'm not all right!

Nietzsche reaches down, tries to find his glasses. Overbeck sees the glasses lying on the ground a few feet away, but lets Nietzsche keep on looking.

Nietzsche crawls down under the chassis. Overbeck grabs up the glasses. Nietzsche continues to grope farther and farther under the chassis. Finally,

OVERBECK

Uh, looking for these?

Nietzsche turns, sees Overbeck dangling his glasses, jumps back out, bumps his head on a metal rail as he stands up. Overbeck explodes into LAUGHTER, then tosses the glasses back at Nietzsche, walks away.

INT. CUSTOMS -- DAY

Nietzsche hands his passport to an AGENT. As the agent peruses the passport, Nietzsche's eyes sadden.

AGENT

Prussian?

NIETZSCHE

No. No citizenship. I had to give it up, to come here.

The agent takes another look at the passport, scrutinizes Nietzsche again, a long time, then hands the passport back to him, motions him along.

EXT. BASEL TRAIN STATION -- DAY

Nietzsche "taps" towards the street in very small, very deliberate steps, head down. He totes a large trunk behind him. Attached to the trunk's base are what appear to be homemade wheels. One of the wheels suddenly lodges between two cobblestones. He gets down on his knees, tries to dislodge it, but it won't come free. He tugs and tugs, in futility.

Overbeck, watching from a nearby taxi stand, CHUCKLES. Nietzsche finally frees the wheel, but falls back on his ass in the process. Travelers all around begin to LAUGH. Overbeck can't help himself.

OVERBECK

Hey, student! Need a ride?

Nietzsche gets up, brushes himself off.

NIETZSCHE

No, thank you.

OVERBECK

Come on! Get in!

Nietzsche hesitates. Then smiling like a kid, he races over. Overbeck points.

OVERBECK

Quite a load you've got there.

Nietzsche beams, then loads his trunk into the back of the carriage, hops in. The driver CRACKS his whip on the horse, HARD, three times. Nietzsche flinches hard, three times.

OVERBECK

Where you rooming?

NIETZSCHE

Schutzengraben Strasse.

OVERBECK

Schutzengraben?! That's where I live!

Overbeck extends his hand.

OVERBECK

Franz Overbeck, Professor of Theology.

NIETZSCHE

Friedrich Nietzsche.

Overbeck does a double-take.

OVERBECK

Wait a minute. You're Friedrich Nietzsche?

Nietzsche smiles.

INT. BATHROOM -- NIGHT

Pitch black. A lamp LIGHTS UP. Nietzsche stands in front of a mirror. He combs his hair forward, then back, then forward again. Then side to side. He frowns, tries to look older. Sags his cheeks. Then, just as he's about to turn the lamp off, he gives his moustache one quick happy brush and sets the comb down. The lamp goes OFF.

EXT. BASEL UNIVERSITY -- CAMPUS QUADRANGLE -- DAY

Nietzsche stops in front of a building, marked DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, watches as students and professors hurry inside. A PROFESSOR sees him.

PROFESSOR

You coming?

Nietzsche just stands there. Then reluctantly continues on across the street, towards the steps to another building, marked DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICAL PHILOLOGY. He climbs the steps, opens the door, enters.

INT. HALLWAY -- DAY

Armed with a stack papers, Nietzsche inches his way to the front desk, readjusting his tie as he nears. A YOUNG WOMAN, 23, recognizes him.

YOUNG WOMAN

Professor Nietzsche? Suzanne Sleek.

Nietzsche frowns.

SUZANNE

Your secretary? Follow me, please..

She takes a step forward, looks back, sees him still standing there, LAUGHS.

SUZANNE

...to your office?

He smiles, follows her down a crowded hallway.

INT. OFFICE -- DAY

Nietzsche talks to himself as he meticulously stacks a pile of papers - - corner to corner, edge to edge.

In bursts philology professor, MARTIN BASQUE, 37. The papers in Nietzsche's hand fall to the floor.

LONG SILENCE as Nietzsche grabs the papers off the floor.

BASQUE

So, the prodigy.

Nietzsche carefully sets the papers down on his desk right next to Basque.

NIETZSCHE

May I help you?

BASQUE

Yes. I'm one of the philology professors here. I attended Greifswald University, graduated, with honors, got my doctorate at Bonn, worked as an Associate, twelve years, Berlin, and finally get my tenure here at 37 years of age. How old did you say you were?

NIETZSCHE

Twenty-four.

BASQUE

And appointed full professor, here at the University of Basel, without benefit of dissertation?

He sneers.

BASQUE

Isn't that something?

Enter JULIUS GOTTFRIED, 62, Chairman of Classical Philology.

GOTTFRIED

Professor, welcome.

Nietzsche and Gottfried make eye contact while Gottfried leans back.

GOTTFRIED

So, let's get to the point, shall we? Classical philology, as taught here in Basel... Who, what, when, and where..

BASQUE

You uncover data about the past, using strict linguistic analysis. You then verify said data with rigorous, uncompromising analysis.. cross references, footnotes..

GOTTFRIED

..and then and only then do we announce those results to the world as God-given fact. Understand? All we want!

BASQUE

And no philosophy, either! Got that? We've heard about you!

And just like that, they're gone. Nietzsche plops down into his chair, lets out a deep, deep SIGH. The bell for the first class RINGS.

INT. SECRETARIAL OFFICES -- HALLWAY -- DAY

Laden with papers under both arms, Nietzsche races down the hallway.

INT. CLASSROOM -- DAY

Students file into the classroom and claim their seats. Two in particular, PETER GAST, 25, and ANDRE WIDEMANN, 25, saunter towards the back row, talking.

GAST

Apparently, at one time, his father was Royal Pastor to King Frederick.

WIDEMANN

What?! The Prussian King Frederick?

GAST

Yes! And not only that! Apparently, he was studying to be a pastor, too, but then all of a sudden switched. Two years ago!

WIDEMANN

How do you know all this?

GAST

Friend of mine, up in Leipzig.

The door OPENS. In walks Nietzsche, head bent, nervously adjusting his glasses. He takes a deep breath. All eyes are on him. Another deep breath as he tries to compose himself. Then, voice cracking,

NIETZSCHE

Good morning.

Gast leans into Widemann.

GAST

Where's the teacher?

A few SMIRKS as Nietzsche sets his coat down onto the podium turns into DEAD SILENCE and a room full of expectant faces.

NIETZSCHE

Shall we get started?

Gast gives Widemann a puzzled look. Nietzsche marches to the back of

the room, where Gast and Widemann are sitting, hands each of them two sets of papers. Widemann thumbs through the outline, then checks the second set.

WIDEMANN

Wait! What is this?

He nudges Gast, points. Gast quickly locates his second set. Nietzsche is already passing out more sets to the other students.

GAST

Wait! Wait! Hey, excuse me!  
Professor? What are you doing?

Nietzsche hands out the last set of papers, walks back up to the podium, dries his clammy hands on his leg pants.

NIETZSCHE

You may begin.

The room quickly grows NOISY.

STUDENT

Begin?! We haven't learned  
anything yet!

Nietzsche exits the room.

INT. HALLWAY -- DAY

Nietzsche collapses down into a corner chair, rubs his clammy palms on his pants, drops his head.

The door to his classroom bursts open, and students pour out of it like it's on fire. Nietzsche just keeps sitting there, head buried in his hands.

INT. HALLWAY -- NIGHT

Gottfried meets with two other PHILOLOGY PROFESSORS outside his office door.

PROFESSOR #1

Not ready.

PROFESSOR #2

I agree.

GOTTFRIED

Couple more classes, we'll know.

The two professors walk their separate ways. Gottfried returns to his office.

INT. APARTMENT -- NIGHT

Nietzsche, at his desk, re-writing his lecture notes, stops. He pulls the same calling card from before out of his pocket, examines it front and back, frowns. Then tucks it back away, resumes his writing.

INT. CLASSROOM -- DAY

Nietzsche, roaming the room as he lectures, notices that many of the students are still scrutinizing him. He notices, stops.

NIETZSCHE

I see we have questions?

GAST

Yeah, how come you're not a pastor, like your father?

Nietzsche takes pause.

NIETZSCHE

Well, let's just say there are some things I no longer find believable.

STUDENT

Like what?

Long beat. Nietzsche removes his glasses, rubs his eyes, looks out the window.

GAST

Okay, then how about if you tell us what you do believe in, professor? Anything? Anything at all? Guess not.

A few more SMIRKS. Gast and Widemann start gathering up their gear.

NIETZSCHE

I believe that logic came into existence out of illogic, that the realm of illogic was originally immense, and that innumerable beings who made inferences differently from us must have perished.

Nietzsche walks back to the front of the room, almost glaring now at Gast. Gast and Widemann sit back down.

NIETZSCHE

I believe there are no enduring things, no equal things, in fact, no things at all. Also, no substances, no bodies, no causes, and no effects. That this tendency to treat as equal what is only similar developed out of the need to communicate

and that this is what formed the  
basis for "things" and consciousness  
 and then much later, logic.

Peering through the classroom door window: Julius Gottfried.  
 Gottfried's face disappears, a look of disgust etched across it.

NIETZSCHE

I believe that the Christian god has  
 become unbelievable, that Christianity  
 in fact glorifies those poor in spirit,  
 and that Christianity has outlived its  
 usefulness as the stopgap for society.

He takes a deep breath, stiffens. Then, stoically,

NIETZSCHE

I believe that God is dead and  
 that you and I have killed Him.

The room is completely SILENT. Not a murmur. Utter shock. Then,  
 quietly and quickly several students get up from their seats, gather  
 their things, and one by one, exit the room, dropping their lecture  
 outlines down at Nietzsche's feet on their way out. Not a word said.

Nietzsche just stands there. Then, gathering himself, faces the few  
 stragglers who are left. One in particular, ERICH VON SCHEFFLER, steams  
 as he exits. Nietzsche quickly checks his roster sheet for a name.

NIETZSCHE

Herr... von... Scheffler, is it?

Von Scheffler turns back.

NIETZSCHE

A bit much?

VON SCHEFFLER

A bit?

STUDENT

I thought so, too.

VON SCHEFFLER

Most of us did.

They quickly make their getaway.

INT. HALLWAY -- DAY

Nietzsche quietly closes the classroom door behind him, turns, finds  
 Gottfried parked in his face.

GOTTFRIED

I thought I was clear. As clear

as possible, in fact. You're done.

Nietzsche curls his lip. Gottfried storms away.

EXT. FRONT DOOR -- DAY

Nietzsche approaches the front door, calling card in hand. He takes one last look at the card, KNOCKS on the door. A man-servant, MANFRED, answers.

MANFRED  
May I help you?

NIETZSCHE  
Here to see Richard Wagner?

He shows Manfred the calling card.

MANFRED  
I'm sorry. Maestro cannot be disturbed.

NIETZSCHE  
Oh.. I see. Very well. Thank you.

Manfred closes the door.

EXT. DRIVEWAY -- DAY

As he walks back down the driveway, Nietzsche HEARS a chord being PLAYED on a piano over and over again, first within the context of a particular passage, then alone, back and forth, back and forth, in every possible permutation, always gruesomely dissonant. Nietzsche has to smile.

EXT. DRIVEWAY -- CONTINUOUS

Just as he's about to exit the front gate,

VOICE  
Herr! Herr!

Nietzsche turns, finds Manfred fast approaching.

MANFRED  
Are you the Herr Nietzsche the  
Maestro met in Leipzig?

NIETZSCHE  
I am.

MANFRED  
2 p.m. Don't be late.

And just like that, Manfred runs back up the driveway. Nietzsche beams.