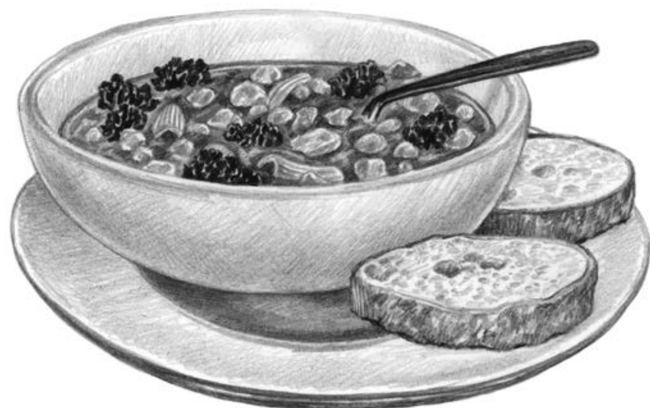
Nietzsche's Last Year in Turin

Bad Nerves and Superb Minestrone

by Trine Riel



In the spring of 1888, Nietzsche arrived in Turin. He wrote to a friend of his excitement: "I have discovered Turin. What a serious city it is! Superbly quiet. From the middle of the city you can see the Alps." A delicate man, prone to fits of migraine, colic and nervous exhaustion, Nietzsche spent much of his mature life in search of the right place to live. In Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, his outrageous autofiction composed in Turin, he warns: "Nobody is free to live everywhere, and whoever has to solve great problems that challenge all his strength, actually has a very restricted choice in this matter." At 43, Nietzsche has finally found a climate suited to his sensitive constitution, with clear skies, ice creams "of superb quality" and the perfect air—"dry, exhilarating, happy." In Turin Nietzsche is at his most productive, and in an almost constant state of euphoria. This city, he exclaims, is "the first place in which I am* possible.*" A perception painfully at odds with reality: within a year, Nietzsche's mind is to become utterly undone. Settling into Turin, Nietzsche, the self-appointed antichrist, takes a room on the third floor of an elegant building on Via Carlo Alberto. "My room, best position in the centre, sunshine from early morning until afternoon, view unto the Palazzo Carignano and across and away to the green mountains—twenty-five francs a month, with service and shoes cleaned," far cheaper than his former residence in Nice and most other large European cities at that time.*

The building is entered through the attractive Galleria Subalpina, with marble floors, cast-iron balustrades and a high glass ceiling. Outside lies "the most wonderful sidewalks in the world," and five minutes' walk down the street, the big Rosenberg and Sellier bookshop ("I have never seen anything like it!") The people, Nietzsche notes, "are very tender to me here." Even his peddler woman, "will not rest until she has found the sweetest of all her grapes for me." The courtesy of the locals suits Nietzsche's own polite nature, and his vanity. To Nietzsche, a sufferer of terrible gastric problems, Piedmontese cuisine is a revelation: "Solid, clean, and sophisticated," the antithesis to the dismal diet of the Germans, which Nietzsche blames for the lame feet and dyspeptic nature of the German spirit—all the beer and overcooked meats, vegetables prepared with fat and flour, and the "degeneration of pastries and puddings into paperweights!" In Turin's trattorias, he is served large helpings of *minestra*, dry or as bouillon, "of immense choice and variety," Italian pastas of the very best quality, "then an excellent portion of tender meats, above all, veal, better than any I have ever tasted, with a vegetable—spinach and so on; three rolls, very delicious here (for the fancier, *grissini*, the very thin little pipes of bread, which Turin people appreciate)." To drink, just water. Turin water is simply "glorious." Nietzsche satisfies his very sweet tooth with a strong hot cocoa and bonbons at his favourite cafe, Al Bicerin, across from the small church at Piazza della Consolata.

"To Nietzsche, a sufferer of terrible gastric problems, Piedmontese cuisine is a revelation: 'Solid, clean, and sophisticated,' the antithesis to the dismal diet of the Germans, which Nietzsche blames for the lame feet and dyspeptic nature of the German spirit. . ."

In spite of his raving about the Torinese diet, which he credits for giving him "the digestion of a demigod," in reality Nietzsche cannot live without the cured pork products of his birth country. As Michel Onfray points out in his small book on philosophers and food, *Appetites for thought*, Nietzsche receives six kilos of *Lachsschinken* in the post from his mother, and supposedly hangs the German sausages, "tender to the touch," from a string in his room.

Having discovered sedentary life to be "a sin against the holy spirit," daily walks—one in the morning and a longer one in the afternoon—become an essential part of Nietzsche's Turin routine. "Dear Friend," he writes, "Yesterday, with your letter in my hand, I took my usual afternoon walk outside Turin. The clearest October light everywhere: the glorious avenue of trees, which led me for about an hour along beside the Po, still hardly touched by autumn." Strolling along the riverbanks, in laced shoes and a light overcoat with blue lining, the foliage of "glowing yellow" and delicate hues of both sky and water give the impression of being immersed in a painting by Lorrain, "such as I never dreamed I would see." On rainy days (around 107 a year), walks are taken under the *grand colonnades* that stretch for over 10,020 metres, easily providing "two good hours of walking." In Turin, the streets seem to run all the way into the Alps, and each day "dawns with the same boundless perfection. . .In every way, life is worth living here."

During the summer months of 1888, Nietzsche intermittently swaps the heat of Turin for the refreshing Alpine air of Lake Sils in the Upper Engadin, Switzerland. This proves to be a disastrous choice. His letters

of July describe an extreme irritability brought on by meteorological influences, and a certain pervasive fatigue. "I am not suffering from headaches and stomach troubles but under the pressure of nervous exhaustion." The deterioration of his overall wellbeing sees the return of a deep sense of isolation, the enduring pain of loneliness which Nietzsche has suffered his whole life. "I involuntarily have no words for anyone, because I have less and less desire to allow anyone to see into the difficulty of my existence. There is indeed a great *emptiness* around me." He returns to Turin.

Back in his rented room at Via Carlo Alberto, Nietzsche finds himself, once again, in excellent form: "I have just seen myself in the mirror—never have I looked so well. In exemplary condition, well nourished and ten years younger than I should be." The weather is mild, even at night, and the difficulty of existence, so overwhelming in Sils, seems to have evaporated. "Everything comes to me easily, everything succeeds," he writes. "I am now the most grateful man in the world—autumnally minded in every good sense of the word; it is my great *harvest time*."

In November 1888, with the surrounding mountains snow-capped in "vestigial wig," Nietzsche purchases "magnificent" English winter gloves, and a stove is ordered from Dresden: "You know, natron-carbon heating—without smoke, consequently without chimney. I am also having my books sent from Nice."

"He is at his most productive and in an almost overwhelming state of exuberance. 'Never before have I known anything remotely like these months from the beginning of September until now. . .my health, like the weather, dawns every day with boundless brilliance and certainty.'"

By December, everything is going "wonderfully well." He is at his most productive and in an almost overwhelming state of exuberance. "Never before have I known anything remotely like these months from the beginning of September until now. . .my health, like the weather, dawns every day with boundless brilliance and certainty. I cannot tell you how much has been finished—*everything*." Nietzsche's optimism ("anything is possible in my life now") swells his sense of self out of proportion. Everywhere, he claims in several letters, he is treated, *comme il faut*, as a person of extreme distinction—people hold doors and tip their hats to him. When he walks into the big shops every face changes immediately, the moment he enters the foremost café, someone "instinctively" brings him the *Journal des Débats* (a journal which, being in French, Nietzsche would likely have difficulty reading). "The remarkable thing here in Turin is the complete fascination which I hold for everyone, although I am the most unassuming person and ask *nothing*."

In a letter to his mother, his self-assumed status becomes astonishing: "Today no other name is treated with so much distinction and reverence as mine. You see, that is the best trick of all: without a name, without rank, without wealth, I am treated here like a little prince by everyone. . .my health is really excellent; the hardest tasks, for which no man was yet strong enough, are easy for me."

Two weeks later, Nietzsche was admitted to a mental asylum in Basel where a debatable diagnosis of general paralysis of the brain (tertiary cerebral syphilis) was made. He never wrote or spoke again. He stayed in the care of his mother and sister until his death 11 years later, in 1900. *TR*