

Nico and the Essence of Poetry

Essay by Peter Brooke downloaded from <http://www.peterbrooke.org/poetry/> A shortened version was published in the *Dublin Review of Books*, February 2022.

A GERMAN REQUIEM

My title is taken from an essay by Heidegger - *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry*. I do not want to suggest that Nico is in the same league as Hölderlin but nor have I chosen this title in a spirit of mockery. Far from it. My problem is to explain why Nico deserves to be taken seriously. She has many admirers and much has been written about her. But among those who do take her seriously I'm not sure that there are many who can explain why. There are three book length biographies and two accounts written by musicians who worked with her. There is an impressive documentary film and there is a biopic. These all show a woman who, from her teenage years, was a successful model who fell in with the glitzy crowd of the 1960s - Bob Dylan, Brian Jones, Jim Morrison, Iggy Stooze, Leonard Cohen, Andy Warhol, the Velvet Underground; who played a small but memorable part in Federico Fellini's film *La Dolce vita*, then in films by Warhol and his aide-de-camp Paul Morrissey, and by the French director Philippe Garrel - films that feature long - very long - close-ups of her face as though that is in itself sufficient to hold the viewers' attention. But who subsequently fell prey to a heroin addiction and was reduced to destitution, while producing a handful of mysterious and atmospheric songs which she accompanied on a harmonium. It is certainly an engaging story but it doesn't explain why she, as an artist in her own right, rather than as a phenomenon illustrative of certain characteristics of the age, deserves to be taken seriously.

A first clue lies in the date and place of her birth. She was born (as Christa Päffgen - 'Nico' was the professional name she adopted when she became a model) in Cologne in 1938. Cologne being in the West of Germany, it was an early target of allied bombing and her mother, with her (and with her aunt and cousin) moved to Berlin. When Berlin came under attack they moved to Lübbenau, a town on the railway tracks east of Berlin that was later to be in the line of the Soviet advance. When the war ended they moved back to Berlin, a Berlin in ruins. Her father was killed in the war. According to her aunt Helma, he was killed by his own officers after having been brain damaged in battle. None of that would appear to have much relevance to her career as a model nor to her beginnings as a singer singing songs written by other people (Gordon Lightfoot, Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, Jackson Browne). It becomes immensely relevant once she starts singing songs she wrote herself.

It needs to be borne in mind that though, living in a town on the railway line East of Berlin, she claims childhood memories of the transport of Jews, the major horror she experienced was not atrocities committed by the Nazis but the destruction wrought on Berlin by the allies. She underwent the trauma experienced by so many Germans, expected as they were to feel that the suffering they endured at the hands of their enemy

was their own fault. A view she may have accepted intellectually but I don't think she accepted it emotionally.

At the heart of her life experience is a terrible vision, the vision of the destruction of a great city, but she can't make sense of it. She could make sense of it if she could condemn the perpetrators, but she has to condemn the people who, so far as she personally is concerned, were the victims. The horror, then, is detached from any easily assignable meaning.

Only very rarely are Nico's songs situated in a clearly recognisable realistic context. We are told that *Janitor of Lunacy* is about her former lover Brian Jones after his death and that *The Falconer* is about Andy Warhol after the attempt on his life, but no-one would guess it just on reading the words. Similarly with her own songs on the album *The End*, said to be written in honour of the Baader-Meinhoff Gang. The last track on *The End* is a straightforward rendition of *Deutschland über alles*, all three verses of it (the first two verses are banned in Germany, though the third is still the German national anthem). There is no hint of irony in her version. In live performances she dedicated it to Ulrike Meinhoff. It prompted small riots when she performed it in Berlin and in Rome. It would seem that a political point was being made, but it would be difficult to say what it was.

Nico's feelings about Germany are most obviously expressed in her song *Nibelungen*, written for *The Marble Index*, the first album that was made up of her own material. This song wasn't included when the album was first released on vinyl but it's on the CD marked as 'previously unissued.' It is my own favourite track on *The Marble Index* as presently constituted, largely because she sings it *a capella* - her voice isn't smothered by John Cale's arrangement. The words are full of nostalgia for something that she feels maybe never existed but which in any case doesn't exist any more:

Since the first of you and me, asleep
In a Nibelungen land where we cannot be
Almond trees grow along the mountain trail
From their tongues the words are spelling
The telling numb
I cannot hear it any more

[...]

Shrieking city sun shiver in my veins
In flames I run
In flames I run
Waiting for the sign to come

Will you spell the words for me
Will you spell the words for me to hear
Nibelungen Nibelungen Nibelungen land

'In flames I run' evokes a memory of Nico's Aunt Helma, quoted in both the biographies by Richard Witts and Jennifer Bickerdike¹: 'One night I had to flee through an inferno of flames with my son in my arms. The strength of the flames lifted us up in the air. I had the sensation we were already burning.'

Another song on *The Marble Index* that might suggest Germany is *Frozen Warnings*:

Frozen warnings close to mine
Close to the frozen borderline

Could that be the East/West border imposed on Germany in general and Berlin in particular after the war? Could she be seeing the warning signs round the border on a very cold day? Though *Cible mouvante*, a French publication organised by Nico's son, Ari, that gives texts of her songs together with unpublished writings found after her death, translates 'frozen' as 'figée' (fixed, unmoving) rather than *gelée* (frozen cold).²

Frozen warnings continues:

Over railroad station tracks
Faintly flickers a modest cry.

Nico's grandfather was a signalman in Lübbenau. Witts tells us 'his southern box housed the levers of a pivotal junction. One line led trains from Berlin to Görlitz and Poland, the other to Dresden and Czechoslovakia' - meaning that these were the lines that transported troops and, later, exiled Jews, Eastwards.

The song evokes a friend, or at least an acquaintance, who is with her close to the frozen borderline:

Into numberless reflections
Rises a smile from your eyes into mine

Am I getting carried away if I see here a parallel with Lou Reed's song, *Berlin*:

In Berlin by the wall,
You were five foot, ten inches tall,
It was very nice,
Candlelight and Dubonnet on ice

Nico's height has variously been given as five foot, ten inches and five foot, eleven inches. She and Lou Reed did spend some time together in Berlin and we might imagine that the sort of cafe that serves Dubonnet by candlelight would have mirrors (Nico's 'numberless reflections'). Reed of course was Jewish and had a love/hate relationship with Nico. He resented the fact that Warhol and Morrissey had imposed her on The Velvet Underground to add what they thought was a much needed touch of glamour. But after getting rid of

¹ Richard Witts: *Nico: The Life and lies of an icon*, Virgin Books 1993. I am using the digital version, Virgin digital ,2017, which doesn't give page references. Jennifer Otter Bickerdike: *You are beautiful and you are alone*, Faber and Faber, 2021, p.17.

² Nico: *Cible Mouvante*, Songs, poems, journal translated from the English and German by Daniel Bismuth, Introduction and presentation by Serge Féray, Pauvert, 2001, p.47

her he helped her with three songs on her first solo album, *Chelsea Girl*, including the nearly eponymous song, *Chelsea Girls*, a much harder, more vicious anticipation of his own best known song *Walk on the wild side*.

Perhaps I should explain in parenthesis that the 'Chelsea' in question is the Chelsea Hotel in New York, favoured haunt of down-at-heel writers and Bohemians, and 'Chelsea Girls' is the title of a film by Warhol and Morrissey showing various sordid goings on in different rooms. The film lasts over seven hours but this has been halved by the simple device of dividing it in two parts and showing them simultaneously on a split screen. Nico appears in close-ups of her face, cutting her hair or crying. Her version of the song on the album is ruined, as she complained, by the producer's addition of a flute accompaniment. For a sense of the real power of it I would recommend the version by the French singers Philippe Pascal and Etienne Daho, or Nico's own later version, recorded in the Chelsea Hotel, accompanied on electric guitar by her lover of the time, Lutz Graf-Ulbrich, shortly before she threw him out, calling him a *deutsches schwein*³. Both can be seen and heard on Youtube.

Like many of Nico's songs, *Frozen Warnings* goes into a transcendental mode. After the 'modest cry' rising above the railway tracks we have

From without a thousand cycles
A thousand cycles to come
A thousand times to win
A thousand ways to run the world
In a similar reply.

Which suggests that immense historical events will always be accompanied by the 'modest cry' of the victims.

The documentary film *Nico Icon* ends with a lovely rendition of *Frozen Warnings* by John Cale, accompanying himself solo on the piano.

Nico's Nibelungenland is a Germany that, she feels, doesn't exist. And yet of course it does exist in her mind, and there is nothing unusual in that. The way in which we all imagine the world or the individual countries of the world is in itself a hard reality. Germany in Nico's very young childhood was the defining power of the European mainland, challenged only by Bolshevik Russia (the British challenge had, it seemed, been successfully marginalised). Then, by the time she was seven years old, it collapsed into nothing - a 'frozen borderline'. In her estimation it - at least the Western side of it - was probably worse than nothing. Ludwig Erhard's Germany was irredeemably 'bourgeois' - its success measured in luxury hotels, fur coats, expensive cars. Nico - at least at the time she wrote the songs that interest us - saw herself as a 'Bohemian', an aristocrat of the spirit, who despised all that and yet of course, for a good part of her life, as a model featured in numerous advertising campaigns, appearing on the covers of high quality fashion magazines - sometimes pretending to be Swedish to hide the embarrassment of being German - she was up to her neck in it. Richard Witts makes the interesting observation

³ Lutz Graf-Ulbrich: *Nico - in the shadow of the Moon Goddess*, self published ebook, 2015.

that, while West Berlin was selling itself with glamour and an abundance of consumer goods, East Berlin was selling itself with culture, and the young Christa Päffgen often crossed into East Berlin - at a time when that was possible - to see, especially, operas that were made available very cheaply. Opera of course is itself a fantasy world in which everything is 'larger than life'.

THE LAND OF DREAMS

So far as I can see, *The Marble Index*, was recorded before she began her love affair with heroin, though the first song on it, *Lawns of dawns*, probably the first song she wrote, was written under the tutelage of Jim Morrison, lead singer of The Doors, out in the Californian desert with the aid of some peyote buttons. It may be worth pausing for a moment over the album title - *The Marble Index*. It comes from a passage in Wordsworth's poem *The Prelude*, in which he is remembering his time in St John's College, Cambridge, and, in particular, a statue of Sir Isaac Newton that stood in the college chapel:

And from my pillow, looking forth by light
Of moon or favouring stars I could behold
The antechapel where the statue stood
Of Newton, with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind forever
Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone.

Rather extraordinary, isn't it? We know that later in life Nico, living in England, showed a lively interest in English romantic poetry. Witts points out that one of the songs on *The Marble Index* - *Ari's song* - bears a certain resemblance to William Blake's poem (not one of his best known), *The Land of dreams*. In *Ari's song*, she gives her son, Ari, some very bad advice - to count on the world of dreams as better than the waking world:

Sail away, sail away my little boy
Let the wind fill your heart with light and joy

[...]

Sail away into a dream
Let the wind sing you a fantasy
Of the ancient silver sea

The song has a sinister resonance when we know that later in life mother and son had in common a taste for heroin.

The Blake poem begins:

Awake, awake, my little boy ...'

A father is waking his son from a very delightful dream. They discuss dreams and the son concludes:

Father, O father, what do we here
In this land of unbelief and fear
The Land of Dreams is better far
Above the light of the Morning Star.

The Land of dreams may be relevant to another of Nico's songs, *Mütterlein*, on the second album made up of her own material, *Desertshore*, John Cale's best work with her, largely because of the respect he obviously feels for her own voice and musicianship. In the Blake poem, the boy has been dreaming that he is with his mother who, we suppose, is dead:

Among the lambs clothed in white
She walked with her Thomas in sweet delight
I wept for joy, like a dove I mourn,
O when shall I again return.

Mütterlein is addressed (in German) to Nico's mother:

*Liebes kleines Mütterlein
Nun darf ich endlich bei Dir sein
Die Sehnsucht und die Einsamkeit
Erlösen sich in Seeligkeit*

Dear little mother
Now I can finally be with you
The longing and loneliness
Are redeemed in happiness.

Nico's mother, Grete, had only recently died. She seems to be saying here that her mother's death is the condition of their being able to come together in happiness.

There is no doubt that Nico had loved her mother and no doubt also that she neglected her very badly when her life became difficult. During her glamorous modelling days (when she had been earning and spending very large sums of money) Nico had discovered Ibiza, not yet the popular resort it has since become. In her enthusiasm she bought a house on the island for her mother, doubtless believing she was giving her an idyllic life. But in the end it proved to be anything but idyllic as Grete developed Parkinson's disease and, with no friends and not speaking Spanish, she became increasingly isolated and paranoid. Nico under these circumstances did nothing for her and it was the 'bourgeois' members of the family - Nico's Aunt Helma and her son (Nico's childhood playmate) Ulrich who, according to Witts, paid for Grete to return to Berlin and attend a residential home which is where she died in 1970. Nico neither helped pay for, nor attended, the funeral.

Witts is of the view that Grete's death was a major turning point in Nico's life. It was at this time that she launched a radical attack on her own beauty (becoming in the memorable phrase of her later keyboard player, James Young, 'the baglady of rock'n'roll'⁴) and became seriously committed to heroin. According to Witts: 'She wrote to a friend that "I have

⁴ James Young: *Songs they never play on the radio*, Bloomsbury 1992, Republished with a new introduction 2021, p.28.

found a way to turn my shame about my mother into feelings of pleasure that I can dream I am in paradise with her. I have found a way to turn day into night." Witts is often rather coy about his sources and some of the quotes he gives from Nico seem almost too good to be true but assuming this is genuine it is the explanation of the song. Nico couldn't bear seeing her mother in the degraded state she had reached in Ibiza. She was then ashamed of the way she had neglected her but, like the boy in Blake's poem, now that she was dead, she could delight in her company in dreams and, unlike the boy wondering when he could return to the land where his mother was, Nico had found a means to go there whenever she wished.

A later song, *Saeta*, celebrates heroin as the means by which dreams can be fulfilled:

At the crossing of the line
Everything you need is mine
Everything is a big vision ...
I will give them all they need
Everything they know and read
But they must cross the line

Union with the dead in dreams is also found in the song *Abschied* (Farewell), also sung in German on *Desertshore*, concerning someone who has recently died. Serge Féray⁵ suggests that it is Brian Jones, who died in 1969 and that this, not *Janitor of Lunacy*, is the song on *Desertshore* dedicated to Jones:

*Sein Körper bewegt sich nicht
Im Traume sich endlich sein Zwingen vergisst*

His body does not move
In dreams finally his chains [my perhaps rather liberal interpretation of *Zwingen* - PB] are forgotten.

The sensuality with which she regards the (presumably dead) body confirms the idea that it would be Brian Jones:

*Sein schweigender Mund seine schlafende Brust
Harren zärtlich der süssen Lust*

His silent mouth, his sleeping breast
Tenderly anticipate sweet pleasure.

Another of the songs on *Desertshore* that becomes quite sinister when one knows the background story is *My only child* - more bad advice offered to Ari. Nico had left Ari in the care of Grete, who was quite incapable of looking after him. As Grete was rescued from

⁵ In *Cible mouvante*, p.67 and in Serge Féray: *Nico - Femme fatale*, Le Mot et le reste, 2016, pp.111 and 119. I wrote my article before reading this impressive book which goes into some detail on the meaning of Nico's lyrics and also deals much more than I could hope to do with the films of Philippe Garrel. Most of my comments on Féray's interpretations will be found in footnotes but at some point I might hope to engage in a more thorough discussion.

Ibiza by the 'bourgeois' members of the family, so Ari was rescued by the 'bourgeois' members of Alain Delon's family.

Nico believed that the French film star was Ari's father but Delon, who had sexual relations with a large number of women, refused to acknowledge his paternity. Delon's mother, Edith Boulogne and her daughter, Delon's half-sister, believed he was the father. They rescued Ari from Grete and looked after him, eventually, when he reached the age of fourteen, adopting him. This was necessary to give him a nationality. Nico had gone to some trouble to have him born in France, believing, wrongly as it turned out, that this would automatically give him French citizenship.

My only child seems to be written to warn Ari against his bourgeois surrogate parents (who eventually tried - unsuccessfully - to protect him from her):

My only child be not so blind
See what you hold
There are no words, no ears, no eyes
To show them what you know.

Their hands are old
Their faces cold
Their bodies close to freezing
their feelings find
The morning small
Too small to fill their ways with breathing
The evening tall

That it is Edith and her husband Philippe she has in mind is suggested when she sings:

Man and wife are feasting the time
The time that lies behind
At home in sweetness and delight
Tasting the bitter wine
Their hands are old etc

There is, I think, a third song about Ari - *No-one is there* on *The Marble index*. On at least one occasion Nico, we are told, informed her audience that the song was about Richard Nixon but that seems an obvious piece of obfuscation - and there may be a confusion with a later song, *Procession*, which, according to *Cible mouvant*, she introduced with much the same words - and it is a much more credible candidate: 'As a man of power / Can you dare to be insane?'. In my reading *No-one is there* is a fairly straightforward picture of a child playing with imaginary friends:

He is calling and throwing his arms up in the air
And no one is there
All of them are missing as the game comes to a start
No one is there.

We may wonder if Ari, while he was with his mother or his grandmother, ever had friends of his own age to play with, though a lot of film footage exists of a four year old Ari playing with the strange people who frequented Andy Warhol's factory.

FALLEN EMPIRES

But I maybe haven't yet finished with Blake's *Land of dreams*. In it, the boy says to his father:

O father, I saw my mother there
Among the lilies by waters fair

Perhaps it is farfetched to see a connection with the opening lines of Nico's song *Julius Caesar*, also on *The Marble index*:

Amidst water lily fields, white and green
Grows a tree.

Again we are in a dream land. The song continues:

And from the tree hang apples
Not for you to eat
In a way it matters more
Than it did before
To see the East voyaging through
True hearts of dunes
Mirth, birth, reverie.

The last verse repeats the lily fields and apples 'not for you to eat' and continues

Beneath the heaving sea
Where statues and pillars and stone altars
Rest for all these aching bones
To guide us far from energy
Mirth, birth, reverie.

I said earlier that some of Richard Witts's quotations from Nico seemed almost too good to be true but there is a wonderful quote from Jennifer Bickerdike's book that Witts seems to have missed. She says (p.175) 'When asked where the lyrical content came from, Nico said: "It has to do with my going to Berlin in 1946 when I was a little girl and seeing the entire city destroyed. I like the fallen empire, the image of the fallen empire."' The quote comes when Bickerdike is talking about Danny Fields. Fields as an impresario was responsible for getting The Doors and Nico signed up to Elektra Records (who issued *The Marble index*). He also, among much else, discovered Iggy Stooze and The Ramones, and was an important figure in the development of Punk Rock in the USA. He was one of Nico's most faithful supporters. He may be the source. At any rate *Julius Caesar* is an example - perhaps the archetypical example - of Nico's interest in fallen empires. Depending on how one rates Nico the poem is a very subtle or a very chaotic mixture of images of serenity and

destruction. The central figure, presumably Caesar, appears both as an imperial ruler and as a singer on a stage (Morrison? or Jimi Hendrix, who also greatly impressed Nico?). The words 'harmony', 'calm', 'gentle', recur:

Calm and vast, his voice cascades
From his gentle stage
Calm and vast the city lies
On a horizontal ground
Kind and calm Julius lies
For Octavian to prevail
Mirth, birth, reverie

'Octavian' is Augustus, who finally consolidated the Roman Empire. In all this serenity and harmony, the East is 'voyaging through/True hearts of dunes.' Is there an anticipation here of the later song *The Secret side*, with its virgins waiting 'tied up on the sand' for ships coming into land? Does this not evoke the allied invasion of Germany with its accompanying tide of rapes? They weren't all committed by Soviet troops - Nico claimed that she was raped by an American serviceman at the age of thirteen - but the invasion as experienced in Lübbenau came from the East.

When *The Secret side* continues:

Are you not loyal to your pride
Are you not on the secret side

is that not an appeal to German pride, to feel indignation at what happened, an indignation that has to be kept 'secret', that can't be expressed in modern Germany?

The Secret side is on Nico's third album (if we don't count *Chelsea Girl*), *The End*, the album said to have been inspired by the Baader-Meinhof Gang, the 'Red Army Faction,' the album on which she sings all three verses of *Deutschland über alles*. It is named for the song *The End*, sung by Jim Morrison. It isn't a song I greatly admire. It has the silly 'oedipal' passage ('Father, I want to kill you. Mother, I want to ...') but it's easy to see why Nico might have liked it given that it concerns something coming to an end with a hint ('Lost in a Roman wilderness of pain') that it might be something to do with an ancient empire.

As befits an album reflecting on the activities of the Red Army Faction, the imagery is more violent than the serenity that characterises *Julius Caesar*:

It has not taken long
to feast our naked eye upon
The open blade
The hungry beasts have found her calling
Calling help me help me please.

(*It has not taken long*)

He is a dangerous creator
A master in his mortal cave

I am a savage violator
A valet innocent and vain

(*Innocent and vain*)

Yet the ancient Empire is still present. After the lines

Is there a charge against my fate
Can't I betray my hate
Will I regain my father's gait
Must the killer die?

We have the astonishing lines:

A chariot will take me to
The Valley of the Kings

(The transcriptions read 'carriage' rather than 'chariot' but it is clearly pronounced with three syllables).

I'm assuming that the killer who 'must not die' is a member of the Red Army Faction and in *We've Got the gold* the reference is to someone in prison:

Very proud and very poor
You're walking on your prison floor

Someone with whom she identifies herself, at least in her pride and poverty:

Very proud and very poor
I'm waiting at your prison door

The End was released in 1974 and Ulrike Meinhof had been arrested in 1972 and was being kept in solitary confinement.

But why should Nico have had feelings of sympathy with the Red Army Faction? She wasn't obviously left wing. 'Socialism' is not a word that comes to mind when we think of Nico. But she was in Paris in the fateful year of 1968 (subject of her former lover Philippe Garrel's film *Les Amants réguliers*). Witts says rather wittily if cruelly ('cattily' might be the right word) that she loved Situationism the way tourists love Paris. The Red Army Faction is known now for various kidnappings and murders but these took place mainly in 1977. Meinhof died (apparently suicide but in suspicious circumstances) in 1976. In its earlier phase the RAF had been responsible for the deaths of US service personnel in protest against German support (or US use of Germany) for the Vietnam war but there was also a more general detestation of the unheroic Germany that had emerged after the Nazi period. The wider movement of which the RAF was a part had targeted symbols of consumer culture, notably department stores, including the Ka De We, the Berlin equivalent of Harrods, where Nico had started her career as a model.⁶

⁶ See Alexander Sedlmaier: *Consumption and violence - Radical Protest in Cold-War West Germany*, University of Michigan Press, 2014.

Nico expresses her resentment against the conditions imposed by that earlier period of her life in the song (on *Desertshore*), *Afraid*:

Cease to know or to tell
Or to see or to be
Your own
Have someone else's will as your own
you are beautiful and you are alone⁷

The theme is taken up again in the song *Win a few* (on the 1985 album *Camera obscura*)

They will give you what you need
They will run your life
They will get you where they want to

With a clear indication that the situation hasn't much changed since she became a singer:

They want your face for a magazine
They want my voice for their fears

And there may be a hint of continued identification with Ulrike Meinhof:

The law has made it very clear
Save your breath for the next try
They will try you with fanatic threats
To make you sigh
What a game a fair frame
Consumed into a single flame

THE ESSENCE OF POETRY

But here I have to admit to some embarrassment because I seem to be 'explaining' Nico's lyrics when actually the main interest lies in the fact that they can't be explained - that, at their best, they have an impact that is only loosely connected to their prose meaning. The purpose of what I've written so far has been to show that they are not arbitrary, they are deeply rooted in her life experience. One of the proofs that the words are not arbitrary or indifferent comes in the difficulty she had writing them. This was nowhere so evident as

⁷ Féray gives a completely different interpretation, seeing it as a love song (*Cible mouvante*, p.67). He develops this theme in *Femme Fatale*, pp.120-121, drawing a parallel with the Lou Reed song *I'll be your mirror* that Nico sang with the Velvet Underground. He says: 'This is redemption through love: renounce the self, accept the person loved as the unique possessor (in a magic as well as a legal meaning of the term) of oneself. As with *I'll be your mirror* it is possible to go beyond the simple interpretation as a song about love to see in the text of *Afraid* a sort of poetic treatise on renunciation, of abandonment to God, or to some superior power, as in the great Christian mystics (Nico had read *The Imitation of Christ*) like Meister Eckhart, who wrote in the thirteenth century: "When, released from my own will (*Cease to know or to tell/Or to see or to be your own*) I have placed it in the hands of my superior and I want nothing more for myself, God must will for me (*Have someone else's will as your own*)."' One of Andy Warhol's films featuring Nico is called *The Imitation of Christ* but, much as I'd like to accept this interpretation, I have to admit that it seems to me to be wildly out of character for Nico and doesn't do much to explain the title.

when she was commissioned by her former musical accompanist Lutz Graf-Ulbrich to produce material for a major concert to be held in the Berlin Planetarium in 1988. She managed to produce a grand total of 122 words. One can imagine the dismay of her arranger, James Young, when confronted with the need to make a seven minute piece of music out of the words:

I will be seven
When we meet in Heaven.

Yet these words are not arbitrary. Serge Féray in his commentary on Nico's writings in *Cible mouvante* (p.170) quotes the notes she made for a projected autobiography / diary saying 'one is only once in a lifetime seven times seven years old.' The passage continues 'In sixteen days exactly that will happen to me. In sixteen more days I might be dead twice.' And of course Nico died at the age of forty nine. James Young (p.148) records an exchange with her manager in the 1980s, Alan Wise, who was Jewish, who obviously loved her and whose relationship with her was consequently problematical:

"Give me a child till the age of seven - I quote Ignatius Loyola - and he is mine for life" said Demetrius [Young in the book calls Wise 'Dr Demetrius']. "Hitler also employed that motto, Nico ... when were you born? 1938? Let me see ... forty five minus thirty eight why, that makes seven. Interesting."

1945, of course, was the year the war ended, Germany was defeated and, it could be thought, ceased to exist as a distinct moral entity. There is a suggestion in her song that Nico never really reached the age of seven and that in turn maybe echoes the mysterious lines in *Janitor of lunacy* (nothing to do with Brian Jones, surely⁸):

Janitor of lunacy
Paralyse my infancy
Petrify the empty cradle
Bring hope to them and me

As if to say she wished she had never been born.

The two lines 'I will be seven etc' appear in *Cible mouvante* as part of a longer poem, *On a cross-road in Shanghai*:

It will be a day perhaps in December
For everybody to remember
On a crossroad in Shanghai
You can be the story of my life
And I - I will be seven
When we meet in Heaven

Nico had fantasies about her father and, though he died very young and seems to have been a rather weak character, succumbing to family pressure to divorce Grete soon after

⁸ Féray relates it to Philippe Garrel and a treatment he underwent - including shock therapy - for a mental disorder. Nico rescued him. The incident is treated fictionally in his film *L'enfant secret* (the secret child being fairly clearly based on Ari).

marrying her, she spoke of him as having been a Sufi mystic who had travelled widely in the Orient and knew Gandhi.⁹ Well ... Maybe it is her father she imagines on a crossroad in Shanghai. But there I go again trying to 'explain' what Nico has - obviously deliberately - left obscure.

Which brings me to the problem that caused me to turn to Heidegger. I wanted to find a word that would somehow convey the meaning of 'stupidity' without being pejorative. Because it seems to me that it is almost Nico's 'stupidity' - her limitations, the things that were somehow, deliberately or not, blocked out of her mind¹⁰ - that could constitute her strength. Actually I think I might have found the word I was looking for - 'stupefaction'. Nico strikes me as someone in a manner of speaking 'stunned' by her confrontation with reality. But it still needs some explaining how this will turn into poetry.

In the 1920s, prior to publishing *Being and time*, Heidegger gave a series of lectures on Plato's *Sophist* which began with a discussion of the 'five qualities through which the mind achieves truth' as proposed by Aristotle. These were broadly *techne* (technical skill), *phronesis* (circumspection, prudence), *episteme* (scientific knowledge, study), *sophia* (wisdom) and *nous* - (for which I will here propose the term 'vision', direct perception).¹¹

The first four of these are susceptible to being expressed in words. The fifth - the *nous* - is not. In traditional religious societies, the *nous*, which can be translated as the 'noetic faculty', is the means by which we enter into relations with God, gods, demons, angels and, perhaps, the dead. The *Philokalia*, a compilation of the writings of monks and hermits which plays a central role in the thinking of the Orthodox Church, could be described as a manual, or collection of manuals, for the ascetic discipline necessary to the opening of the noetic faculty. But I think we can usefully think of it, like all the other 'qualities through which the mind achieves truth' listed by Aristotle, as something very varied and even on occasion commonplace. For example, what happens when we find ourselves face to face with the stark beauty of a tree in winter? Something happens, something undoubtedly real, but it would be very difficult to find words for it.

Heidegger says that Aristotle - pre-eminently a man of words - had great difficulty discussing the noetic faculty but that he saw 'wisdom' (*sophia*, the means of achieving truth loved by philosophers) as a combination of the *nous* with *episteme* (scientific knowledge, study), recognising in wisdom the part of intuition or 'inspiration', the gift of the gods, in the philosopher's work. But it would seem obvious that the natural terrain for the exercise of the noetic faculty is in the domain of the arts, with poetry particularly challenged to

⁹ The Pääfgen family were brewers based in Cologne. Witts says that Wilhelm had 'voyaged as a student to distant lands on ventures of a soul-searching nature; he followed the bourgeois German traditions of the *Wanderjahr*, the year of wandering. That may explain the stories Nico built round him. Bickerdike, however, tells us (p.9) that Wilhelm was Grete's second husband. She had previously been married to a painter called Rodolf Paul Emil Schulz ('Schulz' was also Grete's family name). I know nothing about him but wonder if he might not have been behind some of the ideas Nico had about her father.

¹⁰ The song *Purple Lips* has the lines: 'Sometimes we must keep from bringing/Certain thoughts up to the light.'

¹¹ I discuss this in my essay 'Heidegger and the "Latinisation" of Greek Culture', *Church and State*, No 138, Oct-Dec 2019, accessible in the 'Politics and Theology' section of the present website.

convey in words perceptions that lie outside language. I believe that trying to make sense of this, to bring it to the centre of our idea of what it is to be human, lies at the heart of Heidegger's whole life-long endeavour, including the very early period when he still hoped to be a theologian. And I would add that the attempt to open Marxism up to this dimension is perhaps also how we can understand the endeavour of Herbert Marcuse who, unintentionally I suppose, provided a theoretical justification for the actions of the Red Army Faction and related groups. It would be difficult to justify Ulrike Meinhof's hatred of consumerism on the basis of a pure application of the canons of dialectical materialism (a problem of which she was herself aware).

A great poet, one imagines, would exercise all the means of attaining truth listed by Aristotle. Nico was not a great poet. Her technique (*techne*) as a singer and player of the harmonium was perfectly adapted to what she wanted to do but, considered purely as a matter of skill, what she wanted to do was modest when compared to what any classical or jazz musician would want to do. Her conduct of her life could hardly be regarded as a great example of prudence (*phronesis*) nor would we turn to her for thoughts that could adequately be expressed in words (as *episteme*, knowledge acquired through study, or *sophia*, wisdom). Her life, her reflections on her life, the retreat into the world of dreams, with or without the use of drugs (but without the crippling theoretical self-consciousness of Surrealism) were chaotic. But it is precisely this 'stupidity' or, better, 'stupefaction' that opens the way for the exercise of the noetic faculty, and that is the essence of poetry - the element that distinguishes poetry from prose, a confrontation with words that has an effect similar to the confrontation with a naked tree, stripped of its leaves, in Winter.

That is how, I believe, Heidegger understands it in his essay on Hölderlin, when he says "'To dwell poetically" means to stand in the presence of the gods and to be struck by the essential nearness of things.'¹² But Heidegger, though respecting Hölderlin's descent into madness, would still be looking for the exercise of the other means of attaining truth. Nico was taught by Jim Morrison who would certainly have known Rimbaud's famous formula: 'The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, rational and immense disordering of all the senses.' Nico of course was infinitely better at it than Morrison.

My overall thesis, then, is that Nico's songs are rooted in an emotional world that would have been deeply felt by many Germans after the war but which couldn't be expressed openly. I'm not suggesting - the suggestion has been made by others - that she was a Nazi sympathiser. But the collapse of something that had been immensely powerful into a state of endless cringing apology necessarily leaves an emotional scar (I'm tempted to refer to the title of the film she made with Philippe Garrel - *La Cicatrice intérieure*). The need to express something that couldn't be expressed projected her into an inner life full of images of loss that have a power that goes beyond any prose meaning that could be assigned to them.

Three examples, chosen more or less at random, each of which I could discuss at greater length in prose but what would be the point:

¹² Martin Heidegger: *Elucidations of Hölderlin's poetry*, translated by Keith Hoeller, Humanity Books, 2000, p. 60.

1) From the song *Purple Lips (Drama of Exile, 1981)*

I have been looking out for him
From over a broken bridge
The safest place it seems to be
To ever reach his purple lips

2) from *The Hanging Gardens of Semiramis (Fata Morgana, 1994, the Berlin Planetarium concert, recorded in 1988)*

Who of all the faces could it be
Where of all the places could it be
Laughing and coughing
Coughing and laughing
In the hanging gardens of
Semiramis

3) Maybe the greatest of them all, from *You forget to answer (The End, 1974)*

You seem not to be listening
You seem not to be listening
The high tide has taken everything
And you forget to answer

Well. If you're not convinced, just go to Youtube and hear her singing them.

Peter Brooke
Brecon
January 2022